I Know That Face
by nevertothethird

Summary

Veronica and Wallace are roommates in Chicago and heading back to Neptune for the holidays. On her first day back she encounters an old friend and she knows he's keeping a few secrets from her. That's cool because she will figure out what he's hiding. The bigger issue, though, is the mystery she's brought back with her to Neptune to try and solve. Now that will take some fine maneuvering.

Notes

This was/is my first ever "Veronica Mars" story, originally started in June 2013 and still not finished. Remember those days, dear friends, when I posted every 10 days. Remember?!?!

Posted here at the constant encouragement (and semi-needling) of one ghostcat.

Thanks for taking the time to read, whether it be here or over on that other site.

This chapter was written beta-less. Still beta-less a full year later, although I made some edits while peeking between my fingers.
Almost

Veronica slowly opened her eyes and looked around at the serene atmosphere of the pool. She was on a lounge chair in the center of the pool completely alone as hundreds of flowers lazily floated around her. The sun was warm but she wasn’t sweating and she knew that she could lie out there all day and never get thirsty. Looking down she saw she was wearing a strapless red satin cocktail dress. She blinked her eyes in confusion.

Why am I wearing this dress? How did I get here? Where is Lilly? Lilly is always here. Why isn’t she here?

All of these questions rushed through her brain in a flash, but she was too tired to focus on figuring out the answers. In fact, the more she tried to make sense of the dress, and where Lilly was, and whose pool she was in, the more tired she became. So she closed her eyes again trying to get a few more minutes of sleep.

A voice interrupted her doze and before she opened her eyes she smiled. That voice was unmistakable.

"Veronica Mars, truth or dare."

She opened her eyes and looked at Lilly Kane in her barely there red bikini, mischief in her eyes. Veronica would know that look anywhere. Regardless of whether she selects truth or dare, she’s sunk because Lilly has a plan. Veronica took a breath and answered, "Truth."

"When is my birthday?"

Veronica propped herself up on her elbows to get a better look at Lilly. She wasn't expecting that. "Lilly, what kind of a question is that?"

Lilly blew off Veronica's criticism and responded, "It's my question. So, answer please. Unless you don’t remember when my birthday is."

"Of course I do, it's…it's…um…" Again, the harder Veronica focused, the harder it was for her to recall this seemingly small but oh so significant detail.

"Okay, follow up question. How did you and I meet?"

Veronica looked at Lilly panic stricken as Lilly lay her head back down with a satisfied grin on her face. "That's what I thought. So much for a promise."

"I haven't forgotten you, Lilly. Really, I haven't."

"Actions speak louder than words Veronica Mars. We used to be important to each other Veronica. We all used to be important to you. But I'm dead, Donut's MIA, and Logan…"

Veronica looked down at her dress again and it saw it had turned into a knee length, a-line yellow cotton sun dress. Although the fabric looked like it should be light weight, it was becoming increasingly heavy and Veronica could feel it sinking her lounge chair. The water from the pool started to come up on her chair, and the more she pulled at the fabric of the dress to get it off of her, the heavier it became.

She looked to Lilly and pleaded, "Lilly, what should I do?" She panicked, knowing that if she didn't
get this dress off of her, she was going to drown.

"I can't tell you anymore Veronica. You have to decide for yourself. What do you want to do?"

Veronica knew she didn't want to wear this dress. She ripped it off of her in one fail swoop, revealing a red bikini identical to Lilly's. Lilly grinned at Veronica, but she wasn't finished.

"I don't want to be here anymore, Lilly. I can't keep coming back here." And without letting her best friend say a word, Veronica jumped off the lounge chair and into the pool.

Veronica woke up with a start and instinctively looked down at what she was wearing. Grey sweat pants. Black tank top. The back of her neck was wet, but she was certain it was a result of the cold sweat she broke into from the dream and not from having gone swimming. Rolling over onto her side she turned on her bedside lamp and looked at her alarm clock. 2:15 AM.

Well, as good as time as any to start studying.

She sat up, took a long drink of water from the full glass on her night stand and stood up, giving her eyes time to adjust to the light.

Veronica had dreamt countless variations of the same dream over the past few years. It was always her and Lilly together floating in a pool of flowers. Usually she was content to stay in the pool floating alongside her best friend forever. She'd never jumped off the raft before. That was new.

As Veronica searched her room for her books, she tried to make sense of it all.

It's been eight years since Lilly died, six years since Duncan fled the country, four years since Logan and I dated, and yet somehow I always end up back in Neptune in my dreams.

Having found her cardiovascular physiology text book and her medical ethics case studies, Veronica slid her feet into her Stewie Griffin slippers, and she plodded her way into the living room, turning on the tall living room lamp as she went.

Half of her study supplies were still splayed out on the coffee table: pencils, highlighters, 100 different colors of post-it notes and post-it flags. She'd developed a complicated series of mnemonic devises and methods that only made sense to her. She sat her text books down on the coffee table before heading into the kitchen to make a cup of tea, being extra careful not to wake up her roommate.

She waited as the water began to boil and mused that perhaps one of the reasons she was one of the top students in her class is because few of her classmates routinely study between the hours of 2am-5am.

Turning off the stove top before the kettle began to whistle, she poured the steaming water into her mug, and practiced in a quiet whisper, "Veronica Mars, M.D."

She almost burst out laughing at how absurd that sounded. But, medical school was a means to an end. At times, the hundreds of dollars in text books on her bookshelf were the only proof she had that this was actually the career path she had chosen.

She assumed her standard study position: couch cushions properly stacked up against the arm of the couch, which allowed her to remain upright while extending her legs out in front of her. Cup of tea placed on the corner of the coffee table closest to her, and her post-it flags and three highlighters poised over her text book. Her study process was slow and tedious, but worth it.
If her time as a PI had taught her anything, it was that slow and seemingly tedious actions were often the most significant.

Her living room study set up was perfect, but it had taken her several months her first year of medical school to get it just right. She discovered several things over the course over those first months:

1) while 2am-5am was prime Veronica Mars study time, without fail she'd fall asleep between 5am-5:30am. Propping herself up against the arm of the couch prevented her from waking up with a crick in her neck.

2) Switching highlighters, colors of flags, colors of notecards, and colors of pens she used to write on notecards forced her to stay on high alert which made sure she didn't lose focus while studying.

3) The tea had to go on the corner of the coffee table lest she spill the full cup on herself (which she had done approximately three times), or kick it over forgetting she had placed it on the floor (which she had done more times than she could count.)

Currently in her second year of medical school, she realized that if med school had taught her anything, it was that systems had a place, and were in fact necessary to succeed. Veronica yawned and looked at her watch, realizing she only had a few more minutes before she drifted off to sleep.

She focused her eyes on her case studies as she moved her lips along with the words, reading silently to herself. *Should lifestyle factors be considered in the allocation of scarce lifesaving medical resources?*

She lost focus for a second as her mind jumped to her mother, the poster child for poor lifestyle factors if there ever was one.

*If Lianne Mars, noted alcoholic, needed a liver transplant, would I recommend that she be on the donor list?*

It was hard to say whether it was the weight of the question or the weight of her thoughts, but without her conscious knowledge, her blue highlighter slipped out of her grasp and her head softly touched the pillows propped up behind her just as the analog clock on her stove turned to 5:12 AM.

She was woken up by a hand extending a cup of coffee under her nose and a low "Tsk, tsk, tsk." Veronica opened one eye with a groan and looked at the person quietly scolding her. She propped herself up, took the cup of coffee and inhaled before closing her eyes once more.

"Seriously, Veronica, this is getting out of hand."

"What time is it?"

"7:00am. How much sleep did you get?"

"More than most nights. Maybe four hours total?"

"Come on, get up. You have to get out the door in 30 minutes or you'll be late to class."

"But…coffee?" she said, sticking her lip out and giving her best pathetic whimper.

"I'll get you a straw and you can drink it in the shower."

Veronica glared at her best friend and gave a groan, melodramatically standing up and taking one step towards the bathroom before reeling around and fixing Wallace with a stare. "8:00am classes…"
"Are the root of all evil. And just a way for the power hungry administration to break down the week willed students," Wallace finished for her.

Veronica smirked and tilted her chin up communicating that she had yet to begin her tirade. "Exactly, but…"

"But, you are Veronica Mars. And you're stronger than them and you will not be thwarted by their attempts to crush your spirit. Come on, it's the home stretch. One more final and you're done."

Veronica looked both a combination of impressed and bemused. "So, you've heard this speech of mine before?"

"Every day for the past two years. You need some new material."

"I'll think of some when I get some sleep."

"Mush! Mush!" Wallace shouted, pretending to crack a whip in Veronica's direction.

Veronica immediately jumped and turned around making noises like a young pup that had just gotten caught chewing up her mom's shoe.

She closed the door behind her, took a large gulp of her coffee, marveling for the approximately two-hundredth time that year at how Wallace was able to prepare it perfectly, and then sat her mug on the bathroom counter beside the sink.

Pointing at the coffee she said, "I'll be back for you in a minute," challenging the mug to disagree with her. Looking in the mirror, she moved her head a little closer to get a better look at her reflection as she pulled the skin under her eyes taught, noticing that the dark circles under her eyes were getting a little out of control.

"Get it together Veronica Mars" she muttered to herself, pulling back from the mirror. As she pulled back, her eyes immediately shot to the bottom right corner of her mirror where Lilly Kane was staring back at her. She was perched lazily on the edge of Veronica's bathtub and shaking her head, almost perfectly replicating the same "tsk, tsk, tsk" sound Wallace had made just moments earlier.

"So if you can't keep going back there, where will you go, Veronica Mars?"

At the sound of Lilly's voice, Veronica whipped her head around and stared at the edge of the tub, now Lilly-less. She turned back towards the mirror. No Lilly in sight, but if possible, the circles under her eyes managed to look even more pronounced.

She pulled the shower curtain back, turning on the water to heat up. She turned back towards the mirror and this time it she was shaking her head in disapproval. "Hello, my name is Veronica Mars and I'll be your doctor today. Yes, I recently spent some time in a psychiatric facility, but I hope that doesn't cause you to believe that I am ill qualified to handle your care."

Veronica was snapped back to reality by a voice on the other side of the door. "Stop talking to yourself, you crack pot. This train must leave the station in 25 minutes."

"You don't have to be rude about it!"

Less than an hour later, Veronica sat in Room 204 of Slavin Hall for the last time that semester. She
looked around and grinned at her classmates, marveling at how all of them handled the stress of medical school in vastly different ways. Some definitely better than others.

You had the front row students, sitting with stacks of notecards, quizzing themselves just one more time before the professor arrived. You had the back row students who subsisted on mostly of caffeine and over the counter products combined in potentially dangerous ways.

*My lord, medical students have got to be some of the most self-destructive people in the entire world.*

Veronica was a third row student, meaning that she was one of the most well-adjusted in the bunch. Sure she drank more coffee than Howard Schultz himself, and she consistently got four hours of sleep a night, but looking around her she couldn't but help think, *I showered, my socks match, and I'm wearing clean underwear.*

Dr. Jeffers entered the lecture hall, and the already quiet room became deathly silent. "Is that fear I smell? So early in the morning?"

He grabbed the stack of exams out of his brief case and sat it on the desk before stopping at the front row and smirking at all the students putting away their flash cards. "If you don't know the material by now, there's really no hope for you."

He then proceeded to the end of each row handing the first person sitting there a stack of exams, indicating he wanted them to pass the exam to the next student in their row. As the slow and methodical rhythm of a much less exciting version of "ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall" transpired, Dr. Jeffers gave his final pieces of instruction.

"You have two hours to complete the final. I trust you've all brought a blue book. If you haven't, you have approximately forty-five seconds to beg, borrow, or steal one from one of your classmates. The exam is made up of four different essay questions. The final essay requires you to develop your own credo for medical ethics and defend it using examples from readings and course lecture. You must support your work, anecdotal evidence is not sufficient. Any questions?"

Dr. Jeffers paused for approximately five seconds and four hands shot into the air. "No questions? Well then, you may begin…now."

Veronica's neighbor, a pretty red-haired girl that she had talked to once or twice while having drinks with classmates, turned to her as she passed the stack of exams. "You ready for this?"

Veronica gave a glib chuckle, and continued to pass the stack answering, "We'll see. Good luck!"

"You too." Veronica paused for just a moment to take a look at her.

*Becca, right? For crying out loud Veronica, you've had eight classes with her. You have GOT to work on your people skills.*

Veronica turned her attention to the exam and for at least the fiftieth time that semester chided herself for thinking medical school was a good choice.

*What am I doing? Medical ethics? If I had known becoming a medical examiner would actually require me to, you know, go to medical school I would have seriously reconsidered my options.*

With one final sigh, a part of her wishing that all of medical school had been an elaborate dream she was about to wake up from, she read the first essay question.

"In light of developments in 21st century medicine, how would you revise or modify the Hippocratic
Oath? Support your conclusions referencing at least three different ethical studies."

Veronica read all four essay questions, and all promised to be challenging in their own right. She had no choice but to dive in, but she was having a hard time focusing. She shook her head as if to clear the cobwebs and, looking at the clock, realized that she had wasted seven minutes of the two hours. Two precious minutes had been spent trying to remember the name of the girl sitting next to her.

Bethany. It was definitely Bethany. Or maybe Brittany?

For another three minutes she had mentally prepared a satisfactory argument for her dad as to why medical school was not going to work out, and she had spent the past two minutes rubbing her tongue over her teeth trying to remember if she had flossed.

Figuring that zone out time was over, she picked up her pencil, flicked her nose with her thumb like a boxer about to enter the ring, and set to work.

After putting the period on her final sentence, Veronica looked up to see she had thirty minutes remaining. She put her pencil down and read over her work, making a few corrections here and there, but overall she was satisfied with what she had accomplished.

She looked around her classroom and saw that about two-thirds of her classmates were still working. All the back row kids had turned in their exams and undoubtedly gone to Costco to buy cases of Five Hour Energy in preparation for next semester. The front row kids were still there, and she knew they’d use every last second to complete their work. Third row Veronica Mars, on the other hand, knew she had aced this exam, and had no problem leaving class 15 minutes before her time was up.

Veronica put her pencil in her messenger bag, placed the exam in the middle of her blue book, and gave a half wave to Bailey? It starts with a B and ends with a Y, I am certain, before heading up to turn in her final.

The one thing about medical school that she still couldn't get over was how proud she was of the work she was accomplishing. She had never worked harder in her life, but each time she got an exam returned to her with the wonderful and amazing "A" it gave her a shot of motivation to keep going.

She knew some of her friends questioned her sudden change in plans. Transferring to UCLA before her sophomore year and then moving to Chicago for medical school seemed impulsive and undoubtedly a plan for failure, but Veronica was more motivated to make this work than anything else she had ever put her mind to.

After her internship with the FBI the summer after her freshman year of college she went back to Neptune to stay with her dad for a few weeks before the fall term at Hearst began. She figured she'd earn a little extra cash and selected a file for an open and shut cheating husband case. Get the money shot, show the money shot to the wife, get the cash. Unfortunately, this was not your typical cheating husband case.

She was run off the side of the road having been made taking photos of the sleazy interlude at the Camelot, and then had a gun held to her head by the mistress herself. Veronica had decided enough was enough. While this event was a relatively light piece of straw, the proverbial camel had been beaten down, left for dead, and violated so many times that it didn't have the strength to put up a fight.

The straw won.
So, yes the initial decision to move to LA for a fresh start was impulsive. But the decision to pursue being a medical examiner was not. Veronica figured it would help satisfy the scratch she had to work towards a greater good without putting her own life on the line on a daily basis.

Her dad was dubious, but she explained it would help them both sleep better at night. She never completely closed the door on the investigative path, always making sure she renewed her PI license and occasionally offering to help a classmate track down a random guy they met at a party or run a background check for anyone who swore up and down one of their professors was a psychopath.

Maybe she could end up being like that chick in *Crossing Jordan*? A badass M.E. slash detective with a smokin’ hot partner. Jerry O’Connell alone seemed like a sufficient reason for the change in career path.

Veronica walked down the few stairs to the front of the classroom and placed her blue book on the stack on Dr. Jeffers' desk.

"How'd it go, Veronica?"

Most of her classmates hated Dr. Jeffers. They had decided early on that he was, *What was the phrase my classmates often use? Giant tool box?*, but Veronica had liked him from almost day one.

"I think okay."

Dr. Jeffers laughed at her modesty. "Aced it didn't you?"

Veronica responded by shrugging her shoulders and giving him a small smirk.

"Well, enjoy your break. You deserve it."

Veronica turned to leave, but paused to ask Dr. Jeffers a question before she did. "The red headed girl in the third row who I was sitting next to? What is her name?"

Dr. Jeffers smirked, "Bonny. With a Y."

"Hah! I knew it!"

Veronica turned away and this time actually left the classroom, pulling her cell phone out of her backpack to see if anyone had called or texted over the past two hours.

One text from Wallace: "Find it ironic that the girl who repeatedly broke into her principal's office is now taking an ethics exam. Get it girl!"

She laughed to herself and almost didn't notice the guy taking long strides to catch up with her as she walked down the hallway. When she finally noticed who it was, she knew what she was in for and did her best to steel herself. No one likes to be a bitch.

"Hey Veronica, how'd it go?"

"Hey, Devon. I think pretty well. How’d it go for you?"

"As well as can be expected I suppose."

Veronica stopped walking and turned to look at him. "Devon, I saw you turn in your exam 20 minutes ago. Were you waiting for me?"

Her straight forward question clearly caught him off guard. "Yeah, I just wanted to make sure to
wish you a Merry Christmas."

"Well, Merry Christmas to you, too." Knowing that Devon most certainly did not want to simply wish her a Merry Christmas but having no desire to hear his actual reason, Veronica turned away quickly, cursing her 28 inch inseam preventing her from taking as long of strides as she wish she could.

*Three…two…one.*

Veronica heard the footsteps and groaned inwardly as Devon ran ahead of her and stopped her from walking any further down the hall.

"I also wanted to ask you if you wanted to go and get a cup of coffee, now that we're both done with finals." He looked down at her hopefully.

*Shit, not again. What am I? The cuddly boy version of cat-nip?*

Veronica was just thankful she actually had somewhere to be and didn't have to tell a bald faced lie to this soft and friendly boy who was essentially her medical school class' equivalent of Winnie the Pooh. If Winnie the Pooh was 5'11", had hazel green eyes, and dark hair. "Thanks for the invite, Devon, but I'm helping a friend with a project and a rolling stone gathers no moss."

"I don't know if that phrase means what you think it means. You don't have an hour for coffee?"

"My flight leaves early tomorrow, so I don't." Totally content to leave it there, but unable to be the source of Pooh's misery, she threw him a bone. "But, maybe when I get back?"

Devon knew it was a pity offer, and simply put his hands in the front pockets of his jeans, nodded his head once or twice and said, "Of course. Yeah. Sounds great."

"Merry Christmas."

"You too, Veronica." Giving her a small wave he headed back down the hallway as Veronica looked after him.

*Holy hell! Is he actually walking with his head hanging?*

Veronica continued her path down the hallway and pressed play on the self-flagellation track all cued up in her head.

*Nice, handsome, kind pediatric student asks me on a date and I don't even seriously consider it? I may not be a doctor yet, but I know enough to know I need my head examined. Maybe when I get life sorted out, I'll ask him out for a cup of coffee?*

Veronica looked back over her shoulder and saw Devon round the corner.

*My life will probably be sorted out…hmmm…three years after never?*

She turned back around and left the building, out into the sunshine, where she knew a case was waiting for her.
Standing outside of The Pawn X-Change, Veronica ran her hand over the front of her blazer, smoothed out a few wrinkles and then adjusted the collar. It was a mere 48 degrees outside, but the sun was still shining. Veronica put on her sunglasses and took a piece of gum out of her purse, popping it into her mouth. She closed her eyes for a brief moment trying to remember the exact posture of her supervisor from her FBI internship.

No one did badass quite like Agent Baxter.

Now it was time to do some work of her own. Might not be as high stakes as the FBI, but it helped pay the bills. Veronica took a deep breath and then walked through the door of the relatively seedy establishment, hearing the bell ring as the door opened and then closed.

A man approximately 30 years of age walked to the counter from the back room and Veronica rolled her eyes, hidden by the dark glasses.

Could this dude be any more of a cliché?

He wore a black and red plaid flannel shirt unbuttoned with the sleeves rolled up, a faded black t-shirt, and a pair of carpenter jeans that had either been well loved or absolutely hated by their owner given the number of rips and tears present. His trucker hat, the kind worn by actual truckers and not Ashton Kutcher once upon a time, would have benefited from a trip through the wash cycle.

If I hear the words 'little lady', I may break his nose.

Veronica walked toward the clerk, took off her sunglasses, and loudly smacked her gum. She purposefully kept him in her sights indicating that she was there for a reason, and it was not to purchase ten VHS tapes for $1. "Are you the owner of this establishment?" she asked, leaning one elbow on the glass display case as she looked around.

The man smirked, "Who's asking?"

"I believe I just did" she replied. Veronica turned back around to face him and reached into her blazer pulling out her credentials. "I'm Agent Kelly Marshall with the DEA. We have reason to suspect that this business has been involved with smuggling drugs in the greater Chicago area." Leaning in a little bit, she let her upper lip curl as if she couldn't bear the sight of the main before her. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about that. Would you?"

The smirk immediately left the man's face as he took a closer look at the badge being shown to him by this 5' 1" force of nature. Her stare was making him a little queasy. It was too focused. Too intense. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course you don't," Veronica said, putting her badge back into her blazer. "Your name is Walter, right?"

"How did you know that?"

"Walter, I'm going to have to ask you to come with me to answer some questions."
"Seriously lady. You definitely have the wrong guy. I just work here."

"First off, my name isn't 'lady.' It's Agent Marshall and I'd appreciate it if you would take the time to address me appropriately. Got it, Wally?"

"Yes ma'am."

"That's better. Second, we've been observing the ins and outs of this place for the past two years, and we know that it's the people working here who are smuggling the drugs. So, unfortunately for you, 'I just work here' isn't going to cut it as a defense."

"I'm so sorry, Agent Marshall. I'll answer any questions you want."

"You're awfully jumpy, Wally." Veronica began pacing back and forth in front of the counter, her arms crossed strongly in front of her chest, staring Walter down, barely even blinking. "We know that more than $10,000 is deposited every Monday by an employee who works at this store. Each week the money is deposited to a different account. We know that your shop is off the radar of the Chicago PD because one of those accounts belongs to one of their officers. So, please explain to me given the fact that we already know all that and you have heretofore proven to be wildly unhelpful, why I would give you even an additional thirty seconds of my time?"

Walter gulped. This girl looked so small that a strong breeze could blow her over but her presence was making him feel unsteady. Like maybe she in fact was the strong breeze. And if he got in her way, the best he could hope for would be if she simply knocked him over.

Veronica stopped pacing and put both of her arms on the counter leaning in close to Walter, as if they were the best of friends and she was getting ready to tell him a secret. "This is what we're going to do, Walter. You're going to come with me to my office, we're going to get you a bottle of water, sit you in a nice comfy chair, and then you are going to tell me everything I don't already know. And if you don't, you're going to be brought up on possession charges so fast it'll make your head spin."

"Agent Marshall, you have to believe me. I'm just a grunt worker. The owner comes in on the weekends to take the money out of the safe and make the deposits. I never thought it was that much money! The most we get are three, maybe four customers a day."

"Okay, Walter, just come with me, I'll give the owner a call and we can get this all sorted out."

Veronica could feel the tension in the air build as Walter got increasingly more agitated. She was the face of calm as he paced back and forth, put his hands to his head, took his trucker cap off and wiped away the sweat that had accumulated on his forehead. Veronica's stomach dropped for a second. Did I miscalculate things? Is this guy dangerous?

She reached her hand into her pants pocket, feeling for her phone and dialed '9-1-1', before locking her phone, poised at any moment to make the call if need be. She was crafty. She wasn't dumb. When Veronica continued to stare at Walter without saying a word he looked at her panic stricken. "Please!" He yelled. "I don't know who has told you what, but I'm not involved with anything related to drugs. I've only been working here for six months."

"Walter, you seem distressed. This doesn't have anything to do with your own past indiscretions, does it? I know all about the fact you've been arrested twice for possession. You know what they say about old habits, don't you Walter?"

"That was more than ten years ago! I was a dumb college kid, and I'm not involved with anything
like that anymore. Please, if you take me in, it's my third strike."

Veronica allowed his desperation to hang in the air between them. Although her entire body had tensed up, she slowly let out an exhale, knowing that everything was going to be fine. Any anger or aggression she felt coming from Walter was merely because her interrogation had taken him by surprise. Understandably.

Fixing him with a huge smile, Veronica shook her head as if to say, "I can't believe I'm doing this for you" and uncrossed her arms. "I don't know why, Walter, but I believe you. You have an honest face. I'm gonna give you one shot to help me, but so help me god, Walter, if you tip off your owner or anyone else I'm coming for you, your third strike will come so hard your children's children will be telling stories of how your ass got handed to you. Got it?"

"Got it. I'll do anything!"

"Our sources tell us that some of the drugs are being smuggled hidden in antique jewelry. The largest shipment we could trace came back in March 2010. You get me the receipts for all bought and sold jewelry transactions for that month, and I won't bring you in."

"Shouldn't I ask to see a warrant or something?"

"You ask and you shall receive, Walter, but if I were to ask you to provide me with license, registration, and title for that vehicle sitting outside would you be able to? Or would I find serial numbers filed off and a hood filled with stolen parts?"

Walter immediately turned to go into the back room. "Give me 20 minutes."

"Take your time. I've got all day." Veronica went behind the counter and sat on the stool, keeping her eyes glued to the back room. She pulled out her cell phone, '9-1-1' still locked on the screen. It had been a while since she had found herself in a precarious situation, but you know what they say about old habits.

Several hours later, dressed now in a pair of jeans and a zip up hoodie, she walked down the hallway of a campus apartment building and stopped in front of apartment 302, knocking decisively. A woman a few years younger than Veronica opened the door, wearing sweat pants, a tank top, and a look of genuine surprise to see Veronica standing there.

Trying to put her at ease, Veronica spoke first. "Julie Thomas! One singing telegram at your service! Sorry it's not a stripper gram."

Giving a genuine laugh, Julie now looked amused rather than surprised. "Veronica, what are you doing here? I thought you were leaving for vacation?"

"I leave tomorrow morning. Can I come in?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Sorry." Julie stepped back, opening the door wider and allowed Veronica to step into the front hallway. "Sorry my place is such a mess. My roomies and I have yet to clean up from the obligatory carb and coffee binge that accompanies finals week. Can I get you something to drink? I have water…and water?"

"No thank you, I have to get home, but I didn't want to leave for break without giving you this first." Veronica pulled a ring box out from her bag and handed it to Julie who gasped and then stared at Veronica with a look of bewilderment. Julie opened the box and seeing the ring it held inside, a yellow gold band, with a small white diamond flanked by a blue sapphire on either side, immediately
started crying. "How...how did you?"

Surprised by the depth of emotion Julie felt about the ring, Veronica casually tried to play off what she had done. "I went to the pawn shop that was located a few blocks away from your high school, got the bills of sale for all rings pawned and sold for the month you said the ring was stolen, and started tracking people down. You're lucky, the guy who bought it was jilted all the altar, so he was all too happy to sell it back to me."

Julie's eyes hadn't left the ring, and she slowly sat down, reaching behind her to ensure herself the couch was actually where she thought it was.

"So, it'll be a pretty good present for your mom, then?" Veronica asked.

Looking up at Veronica, she closed the ring box and placed it gently on the coffee table. "You have no idea." Julie rubbed her hands up and down her thighs, as if she was trying to both keep herself warm and steel herself for what she was about to admit. "I'm the one who stole it."

Veronica gaped at her. "So, you're a secondary education student by day and petty thief by night?"

Julie grimaced, and then answered, a little tearfully. "I was a bit rebellious in high school. Hated my mom, hated my younger sister and brother, hated everything. Two days before my senior prom, my mom and I had a huge blow out. I wanted her to rent my friends and me a limo and she refused. She said that it was a frivolous expense, and I couldn't get both my dream dress and a limo. I screamed and cried, and told her she was ruining my life. She tried to explain, and I cut her off without letting her speak. I didn't know this, but she had arranged for my uncle and a few of his buddies to pick my friends up and drop us off at the prom in classic muscle cars. It was supposed to be a surprise."

"What happened? Did you figure it out?"

"Not exactly. I packed a bag and ran away to a friend's house, but not before I stole that ring from my mom's jewelry box and pawned it so I could rent a limo. It was my grandma's engagement ring, and she gave it to my mom before she passed away. I knew how much my mom loved it and I wanted to make her pay. Nice, right?"

Veronica smiled tightly at her, surprised that this seemingly innocent undergrad student could have done something so intentionally hurtful. But then Veronica remembered what she and the people she knew at Neptune High had done to each other, and her surprise quickly subsided.

Maybe we weren't as special as I thought. Maybe all high school students are just dumb asses.

Julie continued speaking. "Anyway, I've grown up a lot the past two years, my mom's forgiven me, and I'm working really hard to rebuild her trust. She's met this incredible guy who wants to marry her, but I knew she'd want this ring. When I asked you to find it, I didn't think you actually could. People said you were good, but, I thought it was gone forever."

"Hey, it was a great way to celebrate getting through finals week."

"Veronica, don't sell yourself short. This is a very big deal and it means the world to me."

Never comfortable with authentic praise, Veronica could feel her cheeks redden slightly, and she dismissed Julie's comment with a slight head nod and smile.

"How much do I owe you? It's $200/day, right? Plus whatever you had to pay to get the ring back."

"Actually, it didn't take much time, so just reimburse me for the ring, and we're square."
"Are you sure?" Veronica gave a quick head nod to assure her that she was. "Okay, will $300 cover it?"

Julie walked to her room to get her check book and missed the look that flitted across Veronica's face. Veronica opened her mouth to object and then closed it again, clearly having resolved to do something.

"It was $400 actually."

"Great. I'll add $50 as a thank you. I wish I could do more." Julie finished signing the check and tore it out of her book, handing it to Veronica.

Veronica took the check from her and quipped in response. "Just name your first born daughter Veronica and we'll be even. Tell your mom best wishes for me."

"I will. Merry Christmas, Veronica."

"Merry Christmas, Julie. Now, go call your mom's fella! You have some good news to pass on."

Julie smiled brightly and looked after Veronica as she left the living room, turned down the hall, and left the apartment. Standing in the hallway, Veronica looked at the check for $450.00 and laughed at herself.

So the ring actually cost me $600, but what does that matter, right? Ho, ho, ho, Chicago.

Veronica placed the check in her pocket and turned to walk out of the apartment building, humming the lyrics to "Santa Claus is Coming to Town", but inwardly changing the lyrics to "Santa Mars is coming to town."

Early the next morning, Veronica was running around her and Wallace's apartment frantically throwing things into her suitcase. Normally well organized and methodical, it was as if her type-a rubber band had snapped back hard and fast in light of the come down that always came after finals week. Which meant when she got home from Julie's house the night before she told Wallace that she was going to pack and get to bed early. Instead she curled up in her bed watching episodes from the final season of Dawson's Creek on Netflix.

It all seemed like a good idea at the time, but now she was sleep deprived and they were running late. Wallace stood in the kitchen, his suit case beside him, arms crossed over his chest, clearly not amused.

"If we miss this flight, you're paying for us to exchange our tickets."

"We won't miss our flight."

"I thought you said you were packing last night?"

"I had things to do."

"Of course you did. Things."

Wallace left his post in the kitchen and stood in the doorway of Veronica's room, amused at the site before him, of Veronica Mars struggling to pack both quickly and efficiently.

"You staring at me is not going to cause me to pack any quicker."
"We were officially supposed to leave 10 minutes ago"

"Hassling me won't work either."

"What about singing?" To the tune of the William Tell Overture, Wallace began drumming on his legs and signing loudly. "Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up up up. Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up up up."

Veronica groaned, and throwing her toiletries bag on top of a Northwestern sweatshirt, closed the lid and zipped the suitcase. "Are you finished?" she asked, glowering at Wallace.

"Are you?"

"Give me 45 seconds. Could you please put some coffee in a commuter mug for me? Please! I'll let you have the aisle seat."

"If we miss this flight, you're paying for the exchange, I get the aisle seat, and you're buying me a $20 fruit and cheese plate."

"Fine, but we're not going to miss the flight. Please, coffee, now."

Wallace stalked out of the doorway counting down loudly. "45…44…43…42…41…"

"Not helping!" Veronica peered out of her doorway to ensure that Wallace was in fact getting her coffee, and then ran back to her desk, opening the bottom drawer and pulling out a stack of more than twenty letters, all in plain manila envelopes. She slipped them into one of the compartments on her suitcase as she heard Wallace continue his count down. "19…18…17…16…15…"

Veronica looked at her room one last time, grabbed a post card from her bulletin board that featured Hercule Poirot, and pulled up the handle of her suitcase as she heard Wallace finish, "4…3…2…1."

Veronica ran towards the front door, wheeling her suitcase behind her, and took the cup of coffee from Wallace. "Come on, Wallace, let's go. Sheesh, we were supposed to leave 15 minutes ago!"

"Make as many jokes as you want. It's not going to get you out of buying me a cheese plate."

One hour later, Wallace and Veronica were running through the airport to their gate. Wallace managed to get by with just a carry on, but Veronica had to check a bag which took much longer than she was expecting due to the flood of students heading home for holiday break. Security had fast tracked them through as their plane was already boarding. Wallace's longer legs meant he had pulled in front of Veronica.

Wallace yelled at her, over his shoulder. "I told you we should have taken a cab."

Yelling right back, she picked up the pace a little, "Total rip off, and there's nothing wrong with public transportation."

"If we miss this flight, you're also renting me one of those little DVD players."

"We're not going to miss this flight."

As if in response to her over confident tone, Wallace and Veronica heard a voice announce over the intercom, "This is the final boarding call for flight 514 to Los Angeles, CA."

Up to that point both Veronica and Wallace thought they were running as fast as they could, but with that announcement they both found a well of untapped energy as they took longer strides and crashed into people, ignoring angry stares and even angrier expletives. Wallace reached the flight
attendant managing the gate first and gasped out his thanks as Veronica arrived a few seconds after him. They both got onto the plane, avoiding the judgmental stares of those on the plane who were all thinking, "How hard is it to arrive at the airport on time?", and found their seats quickly. Almost immediately after they walked on the plane, the flight attendant closed the door, and the captain called to ready the cabin for take-off.

"See, Wallace. Piece of cake. Told you we'd make the flight."

Wallace shook his head at her. "You're never boring, Veronica Mars." He wrapped one arm around her shoulder and gave it a slight squeeze.

"Hey, Fennell, you trying to get fresh with me?"

At the front of the plane the flight attendants had begun their safety demonstration, but Wallace and Veronica ignored them, instead talking softly amongst themselves. Wallace looked at her with a look of concern that Veronica didn't appreciate. "How you feeling about heading home?"

"I'll be fine. I mean, it's only been a year. Not like I'm the prodigal daughter or anything."

"I'm just saying that somehow I managed to visit my mom three times in the past year, and this is your first time back."

"Are you saying you're a better son than I'm a daughter?"

"I didn't say that. Did you hear me say that?"

"Shut it, Fennell." She threw his travel pillow forcefully into his chest. "And take your travel pillow."

"See, this is why you have to sleep. Otherwise you get all cranky." Wallace smirked at her, but could see that she actually looked upset at the thought that she had stayed away for so long.

Veronica sighed and turned to look at Wallace. "I would say that it was because I was so busy with school, but you're in grad school too. It's not like I'm the only one."

"Hey, I was just giving you a hard time. Everyone knows how much you love your dad. And you're not just in grad school, you're in medical school. It's a whole different ball game. Mechanical engineering is tough, but it's not life and death. You did the right thing by focusing as hard as you have on what you're there to do."

Veronica smiled. "For the record, I'm not cranky. You're just sensitive."

Knowing that this was the best he was going to get from her, Wallace removed his arm from around Veronica's shoulder and settled the travel pillow behind his head. Veronica did the same with her own pillow.

After the flight attendants completed their demonstration, "please make sure your seatbelt is fastened, you seat back and tray tables are in their full upright and lock position, and all carry-on items are stored properly," the pilot came over the intercom and gave his customary greeting and superfluous smarm-tastic comments. "It's a beautiful winter morning here in the Windy City. We're expected to touch down in Los Angeles in four hours. So sit back and enjoy the flight."

"Shall we do as our captain asks us, Miss Mars?"

"I think we shall, Mr. Fennel." Veronica put her fist up, and Wallace promptly bumped it. They both
closed their eyes and sank as far as they could back into their seats without being able to lean them back yet. Veronica sighed. No case studies to write. No need to study the anatomy of the heart. No cases to solve. For the next four hours she chose to be blissfully ignorant, knowing that despite the belief of Wallace and her other friends, the only part of her time away from medical school that would actually be a break were these four hours on the plane. The moment the tires touched the tarmac, it was time to get back to work. Better enjoy them while you can, Veronica Mars.

Veronica slept for almost the entire flight and didn't wake up until she heard the voice of the pilot entreat the flight attendants to prepare the cabin for landing. She raised her seat so it was upright and stored her pillow in her bag before smoothing her hair down and reapplying her chapstick. Wallace was still asleep and she felt it was her duty to protect him for the censure of an unkind flight attendant. She did what any good friend would do and plugged his nose so he had a difficult time breathing and woke up with a start.

"Geez, Veronica! How old are you?"

"I'm 24, turning 25 this August. How old are you?"

"Cute, real cute."

"I thought so. Come on Wally-F. You know you can't stay made at this face! Besides, we have to take Neptune by storm this break, and Mac isn't going to be here for another week, so if you're mad at me I am a posse of one. Which is just sad."

"I can think of a few other people in Neptune, one in particular, who would like to be in your posse."

"Unfortunately the application deadline to join the V-Mars posse has lapsed and we're no longer accepting applications."

"Well, as much as I would like to spend the next three weeks walking down memory lane with you..."

Veronica interrupts and claps her hands together in excitement. "Okay, first I'll tape you to a flag pole, then I'll hire a bunch of plastic surgery bimbos to throw my clothes in the toilet, then..."

Wallace gave as good as he got and interrupted her this time, holding up his thumb, index finger, and middle finger, pinching them together asking her to be quiet. "Buh, buh, buh. There will be no trips down memory lane, no journeys down Christmases of Neptune past."

"What about jaunts among times that were?"

"That is not a thing."

"Could be. Maybe."

"Regardless, I promised my mom that I would spend an ample amount of time at home, and I'm sure your dad will want the same for you. And if he happens to be too busy, like I said, I'm sure there's someone who is bound to want to occupy your time."

Veronica turned to Wallace with a deadly serious look on her face and grabbed his hand clutching it tightly. Wallace rolled his eyes knowing that despite her expression she was being incredibly insincere. "But what happens if I go to Dick Casablancas to declare my love, and he's moved on? What then Wallace? What then!" Veronica dramatically yelled her final entreaties and more than a few passengers turned their heads to look at the tiny blonde with the big voice.
"Happy now?" Wallace asked her, easily hiding his amusement.

"Thrilled." Veronica pointed out the window. "Ugh, I hate this part." Veronica leaned back and gripped the arm rests as the tires hit the landing strip. Once I step foot off this plane, it'll be time to face reality. Not my favorite past time. Maybe I can just sleep here tonight?

Despite her inner resolve to become at one with the airplane, Veronica found herself standing in the line of people clamoring to get off the plane, walked through the vestibule, and into the terminal of LAX. Wallace was a few feet behind her, so she stepped off to the side and waited for him to catch up only to spot her dad running towards her. Before she could fully process he had swept her up in a huge bear hug.

"There's my girl! Have you shrunk?"

Returning the hug and fiercely gripping his shoulders, she responded, "No, you've just gotten taller. What are you doing here? Security didn't really let you through, did they?"

Keith broke the hug, but kept one arm wrapped around her. He bent his head down conspiratorially. "Shhh. I told them I was following a bail jumper and had to stop him from getting on a plane."

Having caught up to them, and hearing the tail end of the conversation, Wallace piped in. "Keith Mars, breaking hearts and laws, and taking names."

"Some things never change, Wallace. Here, let me take your guys' bags. If security asks, you two are the famed wanted couple Sheldon and Shirley Meyers. We need to go to baggage claim?"

Veronica answered. "Yeah, I had to check a bag. What's on the agenda for the night, father of mine?"

"Just a quick stop at the office to deliver something to a client, and then…"

"Cheeseburgers!"

"Veronica," her dad said disapprovingly, "It's only 9 AM."

"9 AM California time. Besides by the time we get to Neptune it'll be after 11 o'clock. That's a perfectly acceptable time for bovine consumption."

"Wow, honey. Grad school had made you smarter."

"Mr. Mars, you think you could drop me off at my mom's house first? I know she was planning on having lunch ready."

"Only if you tip me very well, Wallace."

Keith gave Veronica a side-hug as they walked side by side and kissed her on the forehead. "Welcome home, kiddo." Veronica leaned into his side slightly and put an arm around his waist, as they headed towards baggage claim.

Chapter End Notes

The person (most) everyone wants to see will be in the next chapter.
Originally this chapter was entitled "Save the Cat" as a reference to the screenwriting book of the same name. Modified for these purposes to be a little less hand holdy.

I apologize for the rapidly shifting POVs. I learned my lesson around chapter four.
At the Mars Investigations office, Veronica sat in her former chair at her former desk, now being used as transitional storage for a large number of file folders haphazardly strewn about. She had draped herself over half of the desk, and although her eyes were closed, her face clearly read annoyed. Keith sat at his own desk, taking a few additional notes as he flipped through a manila file folder, filled to the brim with papers.

Veronica raised her head up just slightly and shouted at her dad's barely ajar door. "Dad, I'm starving! I was promised burgers and fries and all you've given me is an expired granola bar and decaf coffee. This place has gone to pot."

"It's because I'm doing the work of one grown man and a little lady. Give me 10 more minutes."

"If I'm still alive in 10 minutes."

"Melodrama is not your genre, sweetie."

Veronica laid her head back down on the desk and began to go over her vacation do list. She started to get overwhelmed by the mental exercise, so pulled out a pad of paper from her desk and began making a list, starting with the easiest tasks first.

1. Catch up with Mac.
2. Bake snickerdoodles for Alicia and the family.
3. Logan

She scratched number three off the list, frowned, and put the edge of her pen to her lip, deep in thought before trying again. What she wanted to do to Logan changed practically every minute. In that particular moment she didn't know if wanted to kill him, scream at him, kiss him, or take him down to the farmer's market and see if she could get a good price for a guy with muscular arms and a great head of hair. Okay, now she wanted to kiss him. Her pen met the page again.

3. Determine if I want to see Logan

She scratched out the words for a second time. Third time's a charm?

3. Closure

She sighed loudly. Good enough.

Veronica continued to work on her list, biting the cap of her pen, and didn't look up as she heard the front door open. "I'm sorry, we're closed on Saturdays."

"Actually, I think Mr. Mars is expecting me." Veronica froze and then quickly threw her notepad into a desk drawer as she heard the familiar voice.

Thank you universe for the kick in the pants. But, the closure thing could have waited until my second day back.

Logan grinned as he saw he had taken Veronica by surprise and looked in the direction of the drawer.
where Veronica had not so subtly thrown the legal pad. "Doodling my name in the margin of your
trapper keeper?"

Veronica stood up and shook her head at how easily they fell into old habits. "Actually I was
arranging my conjugal visit with my prison pen pal."

"Still going for the bad boys I see."

Veronica broke out in a grin to match Logan's as they walked towards one another. He easily folded
her into a hug, resting his chin on top of her head. Veronica softly sighed and mused at how normal
hugging Logan felt. She had assumed that seeing him again would be painful. That his Loganness
coupled with the memory of how close they had gotten to making it work would make hugging him
torture, but knowing all of that just made her grateful she got to do it one more time.

 Closure. Soon.

Veronica pulled back slightly from the hug and Logan let her go, putting his hands into his front
pockets. She took a few steps back and gestured for him to sit down on the couch. He waved his
hand to decline and instead took a few steps back as well, putting a more socially acceptable distance
between the two of them.

"The prodigal daughter returns? When did you get into town?"

"Only a couple hours ago. What are you doing here?"

"Your dad is helping me with a project."

Veronica raised her eyebrows at Logan and called out to her dad. "Loving father, Logan Echolls is
here to see you."

You know, the only person who I have simultaneously loved and hated with every fiber of my being.

Keith came out from the office and greeted Logan, the two of them firmly shaking hands. "Logan,
good to see you again. Sorry for the delay, I am almost ready for you. Veronica, entertain Logan for
a minute." Keith turned back into his office and closed the door behind him.

Veronica stared after her father, wrinkled her brow, and tried to make sense of what was happening.

"Did you hear that, Veronica? Your dad wants you to entertain me for a minute." Just in case she
didn't catch onto his double meaning, Logan raised an eyebrow.

"But what would you do with the other 30 seconds?"

"Ouch. Is that any way to talk to an old friend?"

"Only way I know how." Veronica cleared her throat, trying to redirect the conversation away from
anything sexual. "So, is this project my dad's helping you with a scrapbooking or a coin collecting
thing?"

"Neither, I'm kind of a client."

"So you're the reason I'm faint with hunger!"

"A million apologies."

"I thought we had already discovered all the skeletons in your closet."
Logan’s lip raised slightly in a smirk. "You of all people should know how deep and dark the Echolls family closet is."

Over their many years of friendship, Veronica had learned and memorized all of the variations of Logan's smirks. This was her least favorite and the one that in high school, both when they were enemies and when they were exes, she had fought the hardest to ignore. It was the patented, ‘could my life GET any more fucked up?’ smirk. Veronica's heart clenched that after all these years his family could still cause his face to look like that.

She came out from behind the desk and sat on the edge facing Logan so her feet dangled as she spoke. "So, what, you and my dad are friends, or something?"

"Definitely an 'or something.'" Logan took a step towards her and leaned down to whisper into her ear. "I don't think your dad will ever forgive me for devirginizing his little girl."

Veronica pushed him back with one hand to his chest and felt a slight heat forming on the apples of her cheeks. "But, you didn't…"

"I know that, and you know that, but let's do a brief roll call of your high school and college relationships. There was Duncan, Deputy Leo, me, Duncan again, me again, Piz, and then you left Neptune and it all gets a little foggy. Your dad either thinks that a) you're a virgin, or b) he thinks I deflowered you. And while he no doubt finds you to be virtuous, he has absolutely no such qualms about me." Logan trailed off and then laughed at the expression on Veronica's face as she shook her head.

She held his gaze, a smirk of her own on her lips, and responded with words that she had uttered countless times over the years. "You are such an ass."

"Some things never change."

Veronica felt her breath leave her, and she had to bite her lip to stop herself from asking: What other things never change? She was there to close doors and seal them shut, not to jiggle the handle and see if she could soundlessly open them. "Alright", she ceremoniously declared, "I'm done with this conversation."

"Fair enough. It's good to see you."

"You too."

Logan rocked slightly on the balls of his feet and then looked around, gesturing with his thumb to the coffee pot. As his back was turned Veronica took a few deep breaths and wiped a tear that had formed without explanation in her left tear duct. She loved that there was no tension between the two of them, but it also made the fact that Logan had made no effort to get in touch with her over the past sixteen months exponentially more painful. If he didn't hate her guts, then why the freeze out? She watched as Logan mixed two packets of raw sugar into his coffee cup, took a drink and grimaced.

"What is this? It's not coffee."

Humor. Veronica could do humor. "I sent a sample to the lab and should hear back in a few weeks."

Logan looked down into his coffee which he inexplicably continued to drink and Veronica turned around to mindlessly sort some of the files stacked on her dad's desk. She didn't know what they were for, but she began alphabetizing as if these files were her tether. She ignored the fact that she knew Logan was standing three feet behind her and most likely staring at her. She fought her instinct to bend over the desk slightly to show her butt off to slightly greater advantage. She tried to mentally
force the tingle running down her spine to recede. And she grappled to remember whether the letter N followed M or if it came before.

*Follows, it definitely follows the letter M. M as in masochistic tendencies. M as in mellifluous. Mellifluous as in Logan's voice. Especially before he kisses me or when…*

Veronica heard Logan clear his throat and she startled slightly.

"So," he began. "Who are you calling home these days?"

*Son of a bitch! Veronica wiped the expression of shock off her face and turned to look at Logan who was still staring at his coffee cup. "Excuse me?"

"I asked where you're calling home these days." He looked up at her, his face a picture of innocence.

*Damn you Logan. What the hell are you doing?*

Veronica agreed to play along with his game. "Well, I don't know if I'd consider it home, but I'll be in Chicago for two more years, and then I have to start applying for residency programs. That could really take me anywhere."

"Have you thought about where you'd like to go?"

"Definitely won't stay in Chicago. Do you have any idea how hard it is to leave your house when the high is 11 degrees?" Logan laughed again, and Veronica let herself ease into the conversation a little more.

"So, where would you go then?"

She pursed her lips and cocked her head to the side. "It's still a ways away, but I'd like to come back to California if I can. I miss the beach. And the ocean. But I don't want to give up my roommate."

"Wallace is planning to leave Chicgao?" He drummed his fingers along the outside of the cup, and Veronica watched as little droplets spilled over the edge.

"He has another year before he graduates and is really considering making the move out to Seattle. Boeing already offered him a job."

"Would you follow him?"

As if trying to see that as a possibility, she squinted her eyes. "U-Dub does have one of the best medical programs in the country."

He nodded and gave her a small smile of acknowledgment. "And there is beach in Washington."

"But it's not warm beach! It's more like a sand box on the playground on a cold rainy day."

"Being separated would definitely test the tensile strength of that tether between the two of you."

"Yeah, but the magical incantation we spoke over our best friends forever charms will ward off any evil spirits trying to mess with the bonds of friendship."

"So California it is then," Logan declared as if it was final and the decision had already been made. Veronica couldn't help but smile at him as she answered, "I guess we'll see in two years."
"Veronica Mars, M.D. Who would have thunk it?"

"Means to an end." Veronica looked at Logan as he took another sip of his coffee and saw him grimace once more, this time adding a groan of displeasure for emphasis.

"Logan, if it's that bad why do you keep drinking it?"

"Glutton for punishment I guess." Veronica walked towards him, took the cup from him, and threw it away.

"Well, stop it."

Logan fixed Veronica with a stare and refused to let his eyes disconnect from hers. She wanted to look away from that glint in his eye that was simultaneously disarming and alarming, but she couldn't.

_I guess he's not the only glutton for punishment around here._

All of a sudden, the tension that Veronica had dreaded rolled into the Mars Investigation office with a vengeance. It filled every open space and came in through every crack and crevice. It swirled around their feet and then wound around them both so that they were bound together by their mutual discomfort and awareness of the other person. Then it expanded and simply hovered between the two of them before it became too much for Logan and he looked away.

Logan began rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet and drumming his right fingers on his leg in a quick sequence, over and over again. Veronica shook her head to clear herself of the residual tension fog and then laughed at Logan's familiar mannerisms.

"Some things really do never change. Seriously, you're just as twitchy as ever."

Logan smirked, this time with genuine amusement, and rubbed the back of his neck with his left hand as his right hand continued its cadence.

"Actually," Veronica said. "I got you something to help with that."

She walked over to the desk, and picked up her messenger bag, rifling down to the bottom. With an "ah ha" of triumph, she pulled out a purple and white koosh ball and tossed it to Logan. He caught it easily with his right hand and looked up at her with a raised eyebrow.

"A koosh ball? What is this, 1988?"

"Hey, it's a very thoughtful gift. First of all, it's Northwestern colors. Go Wildcats. And second, it's something to keep your hands busy when you're in all of your big important meetings. Nondescript, and a lot more quiet then tapping your foot or drumming your fingers."

Logan smiled at both her reasoning and how well she knew him. "It's purple."

"And white."

"And white," he conceded.

Veronica assumed he'd put the ball in his pocket, but he began to gently roll it between his two hands as they continued their conversation. She couldn't quite account for the feeling of relief that swept over her as he accepted rather than dismissed the gift.

"Sorry my dad is taking so long. I can check to see what's keeping him?"
All of his intention focused on the toy in his hand, he asked, "Are you really concerned for me, or are you concerned for your stomach?"

"Some combination of the two."

"It's okay. I was a little early anyway." Logan stopped fiddling with the koosh ball and began looking at it closely, noticing the part of the ball where the rubber filaments were sewn into a loop. He slipped his index finger into one of the loops and began to bounce it quickly up and down. "This may be the coolest present I've ever gotten."

"Glad you like it." Veronica looked back in her bag and grabbed her chapstick and a water bottle she had purchased at the airport. After applying her lip balm, she went back to the front of the desk and resumed her prior position perched on the edge and took a drink of water. While her mind was reeling at Logan's proximity, she was proud of her limbs for acting in a way that might even pass for casual.

Logan stilled his hands, this time actually putting the ball in his pocket, and looked at Veronica for a moment before speaking. "Can I ask you a question?" At the look on Veronica's face, Logan interrupted and put his hand up. "I know, I just did. Let me ask you another question."

She shrugged, a little wary of where this would lead. "Okay."

"Rumor has it that Piz moved to Chicago a year or so ago."

"That's not a question." Veronica took another sip of water.

Ah, I know where this is going.

"No, that was a warm up statement. Did you and Piz...are you and Piz...dating again?"

Veronica's eyes went wide and she hard gulped the water in her mouth. "Um...how do I put this. No, no no, no no, no no. We are not dating again. No."

Logan tried to keep his expression neutral but Veronica could see the relief wash over his face. And Veronica had to internally recite the motto that she had adapted a long time ago with Logan Echolls. Things don't mean anything until you're told that they mean something. She would not assume that the fact his eyes lit up when she denied dating Piz had anything to do with her. It simply meant he was a competitive boy and the person who he felt had "won her" at one time was no longer the victor.

"Why would you think we were dating again?"

"I figured you move to Chicago, he moves to Chicago. Seemed inevitable. I called Wallace once to ask, but as soon as I said your name he refused to let me speak."

"And that's why he's my BFF. But Piz and I are not...the thing about Piz is...well Piz is..."

Veronica trailed off as she decided the best phrase to use to complete that sentence. One that wouldn't betray the way Piz didn't quite measure up to the man standing in front of her.

"Boring? Non-threatening? Potentially a woman? Stop me when I get it right."

Veronica snorted, and then smoothed her face down, not wanting to encourage Logan's Piz slight. "I was going to say, great guy."

"That was my next guess. But?"
"I think he thought I was someone different. And I think I thought so, too. But eventually we both stopped thinking we thought we knew who I was and I just was who I was and it wasn't someone he wanted to be with. Make sense?"

"Not in the least."

In reality, she suspected it made perfect sense to him. For the longest time, she couldn't figure out why her relationship with Logan was so volatile while her other boyfriends seemed steady and solid. It wasn't for a lack of feeling.

Somewhere down the road she realized it was because much of her relationships with men besides Logan were a farce. There was no tension because both they were delusional enough to design a Veronica in their own image. A Veronica smoothed out with only a few rough edges to keep her interesting, and as long as they maintained their illusions, everything was fine.

Logan on the other hand fiercely loved every single part of who she was, even the parts that drove him insane, and the parts she would never admit that she hated about herself.

"Also," she continued, "there's the whole good guy thing."

"What good guy thing?"

"I'm sick and tired of meeting these guys who start off all warm and cuddly and then use their kindness as a way to manipulate me." Veronica's expression went dark and she pursed her lips. She could see the pieces click into place in Logan's mind as he figured out that there was a story there. "It's like they're attracted to the unpredictable side of me, but as soon as they have me, they don't want that part to be there anymore."

At that analysis, Logan burst out laughing, Veronica frowned at his response. "What about that is funny to you?"

And why does it hurt a little that he's laughing at me?

"Only that you've just described the plight of every bad boy since James Dean."

Now it was Veronica's turn to laugh. "So, I'm the bad boy of the relationship? Fantastic."

"If the shoe fits, Mars."

"When Piz first moved to Chicago he slept on our couch for a couple days, and I could tell he was hoping we would start dating again. But, no. Wallace still sees him pretty regularly, but I don't."

"Look out your bedroom window at night, and I'm sure you'll see him curled up outside pining away for you. A good girl never gives up on redeeming their bad boy."

"I've missed these moments." She pressed her lips together, concerned that she had unintentionally been a little too vulnerable.

"Haven't you?"

What the hell? Let's go for broke.

Veronica paused for a beat before answering sincerely. "Yeah. I have. Really."

Logan looked at her intently and opened his mouth to speak just as Keith opened the door to his office and popped his head out.
"Okay, Logan. Sorry to keep you waiting." He opened the door a little wider to allow Logan to join him.

Logan gave Veronica a little half smile as he walked into the office and Keith closed the door behind them.

She immediately jumped off of the desk and quietly walked over to the door, trying to get just close enough to gather snippets of conversation.

She heard her dad apologize to Logan for not having more to tell him at this point and Logan respond that he trusted Mr. Mars. She heard her dad guarantee he'd have more to report the following week. And then both of them stood up and began moving towards the door. Veronica moved as quickly as she could back to the desk chair and propped her feet up, grabbing the first file she could reach and flipped through it intently. The door to her dad's office opened and she stood up, her eyes immediately drawn to the large manila envelope that Logan was holding.

"Meeting over already?" She threw the folder she was holding back onto the desk and then pointed at it. "That dude is totally guilty by the way."

Her dad went over to the desk and picked up the folder. It contained a year's worth of electricity bills. "You're not fooling anyone, honey." He put the folder back down and then patted Logan softly on the shoulder. "See you soon, Logan."

"Thanks, Mr. Mars. See you soon."

Veronica walked over to stand in front of Logan. "We're about to step out and get cheeseburgers. I'd love to hear what's…ya know…'up' as the cool kids say."

"Thanks, but I have somewhere I need to be. When do you leave?"

"Day after Christmas."

"So we have time then?" Logan's tone of voice was both emotionally strained and hopeful, and Veronica wiggled her fingers against her leg to prevent herself from calming him with a touch to his arm.

Instead, she mustered up her most encouraging smile. "Yeah, we have time."

Removing his hands from his pockets, he took a half step towards her. She thought he might make an attempt to kiss her forehead like he had done so many times before, but then he caught himself. His movements stuttered for a second, and stepped around Veronica to exit the office.

Not how this was supposed to go. I need to spend some time on the Merriam-Webster website and reacquaint myself with the definition of closure.

A sharp spurt of laughter made her aware that her dad witnessed the entire exchange. She scowled at him as he bit his lip, presumably to keep himself from laughing again.

I'm well aware that we're dancing around one another like we're at a junior high social. Thanks dad.

He wiped his hand over his face in an effort to firm up his expression, but the mirth in his eyes betrayed how amusing he found the whole situation. Something to come back to after she finished interrogating him. "So, what was that about?"
"You don't work for me anymore. That is exclusively PI, client privilege." Keith turned around and went back into his office, Veronica following him closely.

Not to be deterred, Veronica tried again. "Hey dad, I'm a little strapped for cash. Want to hire me back for the next two weeks? Now that I'm an employee again, what's up with Logan coming to visit you?"

"You're a big city girl, now. I can't afford to hire you. And it's not for me to tell you what Logan is doing. Maybe when the two of you catch up he'll fill you in." Keith sat down and stared at his daughter. He was having a hard time keeping the amusement out of his eyes.

"Wipe that look of your face," she spat out at him.

"What look? I don't know what look you're talking about."

Veronica placed her hands on the edge of the desk and leaned forward. "You like him now?"

Figures the moment she prepares herself to truly walk away, her dad goes and develops kind feelings towards Logan.

Her father leaned back, gave a soft sigh and was silent for a moment before speaking. "I think I understand him now."

"Care to clue me in?"

"Now, now, honey. You always understood him better than anyone. Which should work to your advantage when you try and convince him to fess up."

She rubbed her hands together, a sharp glint in her eye. "Oh, there is no try. Only do, or not do."

_Logan's never been able to hide anything from me before. No point in letting him think he can get away with it now._

"In this case, my money is on 'not do.' No offense."

"Offense taken."

Keith stood up and walked over to her side of the desk, kissing her on the forehead, mirroring the gesture that she had thought Logan was about to enact. "I'm sorry, honey, but I've got a little more work to be done. Rain check on the cheeseburgers?"

"Rain check for you, but for me there will be beef."

_With a side of investigation. Just for kicks._

"Save me some cold fries."

"I make no promises."

She gave her dad a quick hug and exited his office, closing the door behind her. Standing in the middle of the reception area, she took a breath to look around. She swore Logan's cologne was still lingering in the air and she resisted putting her tongue out to see if she could taste it.

He had only rattled her once in their brief encounter, and thankfully it was while her back was turned and he couldn't read her expression. His question continued to ring in her ears: _Who are you calling home these days?_
Had he really forgotten? Or was he just being a total jackass and trying to get a rise out of her? Knowing Logan it was the latter, but she had no idea what his end game was. What did he gain by rattling her? Veronica felt her knees wobble slightly and she sat at the desk.

Veronica had returned from her FBI internship on August 18, she was run off the road on August 22, and by August 29 she had cancelled her enrollment at Hearst and called every admissions counselor at UCLA, begging them to allow her to start in the fall. Her tenacity, coupled with her high GPA and test scores, and the fact that she would pay her entire tuition outright won them over, and on September 1 she registered for classes. The term didn't start until September 24, so she spent the next few weeks preparing to leave and spending as much time as possible with her dad, Wallace, and Mac.

Piz was in New York until the 15th, and she hadn't yet gotten around to telling him she wouldn't be joining him for their sophomore year. Before the summer she had thought that the whole long distance relationship thing would be a challenge, but discovered quickly that it was a relatively perfect set up for her. It allowed her to maintain the level of intimacy that she desired, took her off the market so she could easily blow off undesirables, and gave her a flirting buddy, albeit one over the phone. She figured the whole switching schools thing would be much easier to explain in person, so in their intermittent phone calls she never brought it up.

What she had a hard time admitting to herself was that it felt wrong to have Piz know something so important about her before Logan did. He still wasn't back from his summer away, and she had no idea when he would return, or if she even had a right to that information.

When Piz got back their conversation went about as well as she had expected. He seemingly went through the five stages of grief at her news: Denial that it was actually happening, anger that she had waited so long to tell him, bargaining with her to allow him to transfer too, depression in the form of ignoring her calls for a couple of days (there hadn't been many), and finally acceptance because he didn't really have any other option.

Veronica had made her decision, and she intended to stick with it.

Her plan was to leave for LA the Sunday before classes started, and her dad wanted to throw a small party for her and her friends, but she convinced him that what she really wanted was a large scale BBQ and beach blow out. He was understandably skeptical, never before having heard his daughter use the words "blow out" in a completely sincere manner, and tried to convince her to keep it simple. Veronica insisted it was what she wanted and recruited Parker to help her invite every person who she had even spoken to while at Hearst and managed to not piss off. It was a relatively small group, so she gave Parker carte blanche to invite anyone else.

She provided Wallace, Mac, and her dad with a different answer every time they asked her what was going on. In reality, she couldn't handle the small group gathering because the small group gathering necessitated heartfelt speeches, and she didn't think she'd be able to stomach Piz grabbing her hand and whispering his declarations that he really thought they could make the long distance thing work.

The night before the party, Veronica was hanging out with Mac at her parent's house flipping through an old copy of Psychology Today and began to read one of the cover articles, "Unnatural Selection: Picking the Perfect Jury". Mac looked up from her book and said unceremoniously, "I invited Logan and Dick to the party."

Veronica didn't look up, but kept flipping through the magazine. "Good" she replied.
She tried to keep her expression neutral, but there was a slight twitch at the corner of her mouth as she fought to stop herself from smiling.

Mac must have known it wasn't Dick who warranted that smile, as she looked back down at her book and simply said, "Yeah. Good."

The following night, the party was in full swing. Approximately 80 people had gathered at Dog Beach and Veronica only recognized about 20% of them. Her dad lasted about 45 minutes before heading home, knowing that the two of them would spend the following morning and early afternoon together before she left. At close to 9:30 Veronica saw Mac and Max walking towards her. Mac was holding a rather large box with a red bow on it, and Veronica's eyes lit up at the prospect of presents. She ran towards the couple and gave Mac a quick hug.

"You are very late, but you brought me a present, so you are very forgiven."

Mac shifted her feet in the sand and looked at Veronica. "Actually it's not from me. It's from Logan. He's sorry, but he can't make it tonight."

"Oh." She responded, taking the gift from Mac. "Nice of him to send a present."

Her disappointment was apparent to both Mac and Max. It had overwhelmed her so quickly that she hadn't put in the effort to hide how the news disarmed her. Veronica looked to both Mac and Max before speaking again, "So...is he..." And then she stopped, her mask of disinterest slipping up once again. "I'm just going to go run this out to my car. See you two in a minute?"

"Yeah, see you in a minute."

She turned around to watch Mac take Max's hand and walk towards the bonfire, where she joined Wallace, Piz, and Parker roasting marshmallows.

When Veronica and her friends left the, it had grown to close to 100 people. She knew it was time to leave when someone turned to her and asked, "So, who is this Victoria girl we're all celebrating?"

Veronica simply shrugged her shoulders and put an arm around Wallace letting him know it was time to leave if he wanted a ride back home.

That night she sat on her bed with the box from Logan in her lap, her legs crossed under her. A part of her knew that no good could come from opening the present, but she couldn't help herself. She first opened the small 2' x 3' envelope and pulled out the card. On one side there was a picture of a car with the words "UCLA or Bust" on the back of the windshield. On the other side she saw Logan's scrawling print: "In case you get homesick. – Logan"

Veronica slipped the bow and ribbon off from around the box and took the top of the box off easily. Inside was a grey hooded sweatshirt, which she immediately recognized as one of Logan's. She held the sweatshirt up to her nose and could smell the faint scent of his cologne. Without a moment's hesitation she picked up her cell phone and called him.

He answered after the second ring, and she could hear the smile in his voice. "Did you like your present?"

Veronica bit her lip to try and keep some of the smile from her own voice, but was amused by his disregard for normal social conventions. She also realized this was the first time she had heard his voice in three months. That thought made her unbelievably sad, and then angry both at Logan for his actions which had caused her to draw the line in the sand, and herself for having drawn it.

"Veronica?"
Her words stuck in her throat, and she swallowed thickly. "Yes, thank you. It was really thoughtful."

"You really leaving tomorrow?"

"Hard to believe, but yeah."

"Will I get to hear the full story one day?"

"Yeah. One day." Veronica laid back on her pillow, her legs still crossed under her, and found she didn't know what to say. Good bye? I'm sorry? Have a nice life? She wondered where Logan was while they were having this conversation. She closed her eyes and could imagined him sitting on the couch in his suite at the Grand, his shoes off, and legs extended on the coffee table.

"Sorry I missed the party. Dick said it was fun."

She couldn't help the eye roll at his words. The only reason he got a second hand account was because he didn't show. "A good time was had by all. I think."

"Not your usual sort of shindig."

"No."

"Will I get to hear the full story one day?"

"One day."

There was silence on both ends of the phone line as Veronica carefully weighed and measured her next words. "Why weren't you there?"

"Veronica…"

"Dick was there, that girl Beatrice from my criminology class with the bad breath was there, hell even Jeff Ratner put in an appearance." What she really wanted to know, was if her words before she had left for the summer had really driven a definitive wedge between the two of them.

"I couldn't, Veronica."

She could hear that there was more that he wanted to say, and she also knew that she'd have to force it out of him. "Mac told me she invited you."

"Yes, she did."

"So, you could have." If she had heard another girl speaking in such a beseeching tone, she would have told her to get a grip and calm down, but she couldn't follow her own advice. She needed to hear his actual reason.

"No, Veronica. I couldn't. For once I was trying to do the right thing."

Veronica sat up, hugging her knees to her chest, looking at the sweatshirt lying on her bed. Her eyes drifted to the stack of suitcases gathered by her door, and then over to her nightstand where Piz’s present from New York stood, a framed Band of Horses poster which he had gotten signed at the radio station. In a flash all the pieces clicked together.

"Piz asked you not to come, didn't he?"

Logan paused for a moment and took a breath before answering. "Veronica. Can you blame him?"
"No. I guess not." But inside her head, Veronica had answered that question differently. Yes. She could blame him, and she had every intention of doing so.

"I'm sorry, Veronica. I'm just really sorry."

Veronica knew he was apologizing for more than just missing her party, but she didn't have the guts to ask him everything his sorry was supposed to cover.

"Good night, Veronica."

"Good night, Logan."

"And, Veronica?"

"Yeah, Logan."

"Don't go changing." Veronica could feel the tears well up in her eyes and she choked out a, "You neither," before hanging up the phone and falling back on her bed. She squeezed her eyes shut and imagined that Logan was doing the same thing. She thought about calling him back again but she didn't think there was anything she could say to fix this all, so instead she called Piz.

There was lots of yelling, tears on both of their parts, and more than a few harsh words exchanged. She asked Piz to accept the fact that she was someone who hated having decisions made for her or having her hand forced. She wanted a partner in crime not a protector. Piz protested again and again, not convinced that he had done anything wrong.

"He beat me up, Veronica! You told me you cut him out of your life, and now you're pissed at me for asking him to stay that way? Jesus. Why does he have such a hold over you?"

"Enough, Piz. Enough. He is my oldest friend and I wanted the opportunity to say goodbye. That's all."

The conversation spiraled out of control. The ultimate conclusion was that Piz didn't trust Logan, and by extension Veronica, and Veronica had no intention of stopping something, anything, simply because Piz asked her to. The "because I'm your boyfriend" excuse didn't work for her.

"Veronica, I'm tired, can we finish this conversation another time?"

"No, Piz. I'd like to finish it now. Answer me something honestly, if you could change anything about me, what would it be?"

Piz was hesitant to answer, but once she poked and prodded he mentioned her propensity to investigate dangerous circumstances, her friendship with Logan, the way she didn't ask him before making decisions, the fact that she rarely volunteered information about herself; the way she was hesitant to call him her boyfriend, and about a half dozen other offenses. Veronica was exhausted.

"Piz, what the hell are we doing?"

"I don't know."

"I was the first girl at Hearst you met. You think I'm funny and cute. That's not enough."

"Yeah. We're breaking up, aren't we?"

"Yeah."
"Damn."

"Yeah."

The two of them stayed on the phone for a full minute, neither one saying a word. Veronica was giving Piz a chance to say anything else he felt he needed to, and she imagined that Piz was hoping she'd change her mind. When he obviously realized she wouldn't, he spoke up.

"Take care of yourself, Veronica."

"You too, Piz."

Veronica hung up her phone and glanced at the clock which now read 12:45 AM. She forced herself to get out of bed and brush her teeth. Turning off the light to her bedroom, she clutched Logan's sweatshirt to her chest as she lay in bed. Then the tears came. She fell asleep that night with Logan's sweatshirt pressed up to her nose and Piz's present put away in her nightstand.

Her breakup with Piz had been her favorite break up. Not that it had been easy. But it was her favorite because it was for the right reasons. There was no potential incest, murder accusations, threat of death by a local gang, evasion of the FBI, or the memory of a drunken encounter darkening the door of their relationship. Rather she was standing up for herself, in all of her busted up and bruised glory. She knew who she was, what she wanted, and didn't want to sacrifice. She wasn't opposed to growing and maturing, but she wasn't about to get rid of her Veronica-ness. Piz wasn't the guy who was going to give her the freedom she needed and also call her on her shit.

Veronica's mind flashed to the hallway of her ethics classroom when Devon had asked her out for coffee. She closed her eyes and remembered his cuddly boy expression frowning in disappointment, and then she saw Logan's smirk, and there was no contest about which face she preferred.

Her eyes scrunched up as she turned all of these thoughts over, and she heard her dad open his office door again.

"I thought you were getting food?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I got a little distracted." Keith watched her, and before he could comment on the slightly dazed look in her eye, she screwed her expression into one of pure resolve.

Still, her dad wasn't one to let things go. Not anymore, at least. "Honey, you okay?"

"I'm always okay." She stood up from the chair, grabbed her purse, and went over to her dad, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. "Alicia and the boys still coming over for dinner tonight?"

Her dad gave a quick nod.

"Great. I'll be home by 5:30."

"That gives me about an hour to get some answers."

She walked to the front door and her dad's voice caused her to pause again. "Honey, are you really okay?"

Veronica looked like she was about to say something and instead just shrugged her shoulders. Without another word she turned back towards the exit, a plan already forming in her mind.
Logan sat at the wheel of his black Lexus LX, parked four blocks away from the Mars Investigation office. He knew Mr. Mars had said he would call him, but his eyes kept drifting back to the rear view mirror just to check. For a moment he doubted his presupposition that he knew Veronica better than most people. He thought for certain that waving the envelope under her nose and making a vague excuse about why he wasn't able to join them for lunch would be enough incentive for her to track his cell phone and figure out where he was going. He had been waiting for 10 minutes, and she hadn't left.

Logan flopped his head back onto his head rest and let out a strained groan.

*What the hell are you doing, Logan?*

He was playing with fire and everyone knew it. He knew it, hell Mr. Mars knew it. But he couldn't stop himself.

The previous night, Mr. Mars had called Logan to give him an update on his case and let him know he had some documents that Logan could come and pick up. Logan asked if he could pick them up Saturday morning and Keith had paused for a moment before letting him know he was picking Veronica up from the airport then. Logan didn't say anything and neither did Keith.

He was well aware that Keith was giving him the opportunity to either see Veronica for himself or back out gracefully and pick a different day to come visit the office. Hesitating only for a split-second, he insisted on meeting Keith on Saturday.

Logan didn't know why he put himself through shit like this. For the past year, while she would return his email if he sent one, or answer her phone if he called, she had stopped initiating any part of their friendship. He knew that should have pissed him off more than it did. After all he was the one who had put it all on the line their senior year of college, and she had been the one who couldn't even dignify his gesture with a response. Yet here he was sitting on the street waiting for her.

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Logan's sophomore year at Hearst had started off miserably. He got back from his summer trip well-tanned and rested only to hear the moment he arrived that Veronica was transferring to UCLA. Dick couldn't have been happier. Not so much because he hated Veronica, but because he was sick and tired of the Logan and Veronica rollercoaster and he thought that finally both of them could get over it. But Logan didn't want closure. So while he affected disinterest at missing her party and pretended he wasn't playing the "what is Veronica doing right now game", he had secretly put a piece of electrical tape over the door latch of his emotions so that he could silently open and close it and no one would be the wiser.

The first few months he swore he was going to get back the girl, but he had no idea what to do. He made small steps. No drunken sorority party hook ups, and even applied himself to his classes, simply because he kept telling himself Veronica would be back and he didn't want to see the look of disappointment in her eyes. He declared himself an English major with a minor in linguistics, always having loved the way language was used and crafted.

He didn't mention Veronica, still surfed any chance he could get, and was never opposed to going to a party although he rarely had more than two drinks on any given night. Dick started to call him Logan 2.0, and was told that while he wasn't as much fun, the showering helped.

Logan had picked up the phone more times than he could count to call her to see how she was doing. Although it was only 2 hours away from Neptune, he was aware that this was the first time Veronica was flying without a safety net, and he worried about her. He still had her number in his speed dial and would press the button to call her, watch all 10 digits of her number dance across his
cell phone screen, and then right before the call connected, he would hang up.

He told himself to man up. To stop being a little bitch boy about the whole thing and just call her. He’d almost listen to himself, and then he’d remember the last words she spoke to him at the Grand: “This is the moment, where it’s just done. You're out of my life forever,” and he'd give up, knowing that Veronica was prone to hyperbole when she was upset, but not willing to chance it that this time she actually meant it.

Logan thought he might have the wherewithal to go through the rest of his college days abstinent in the hopes that one day Veronica would return and crook her finger at him, but then he met Sarah. The two of them had a meet cute in the dining area at Hearst when their orders had gotten switched unintentionally, but Logan hadn't noticed and eaten half of her meal by the time she had gotten her wrong order. He agreed to pay for her lunch, and the two of them ended up eating lunch together every day that week. She was funny, beautiful, and laughed easily. They started dating, like really dating, quickly thereafter. Two months into their relationship, no sex had been had, and something in Logan began to spark again.

The most challenging part was trying to keep Sarah from Dick, who had discovered early on that Sarah's last name was Wood. Dick had managed to come up with an endless amount of pairings of his first name and her last name and the joke never seemed to get old for him.

When Sarah and Logan celebrated their four month anniversary, Logan realized it was the least dramatic relationship he had ever been in. They had been together every day of those four months, he hadn’t beaten up a single person, and he figured this was the type of relationship most people had. Hell, it was the kind of relationship Veronica had had with everyone except him. It worked perfectly. Until it didn't.

Logan had given Sarah a key to his room at the Grand, primarily so she could use it to come and study whenever she needed to. That day had been a particularly hard one for him. His phone had reminded him that it was the third anniversary of the first time he and Veronica had kissed. God he was a sap.

So that's why Sarah found Logan on his couch with an expensive bottle of whiskey staring into space with his Veronica box on his lap. Letters, movie ticket stubs, pictures, a dirty crossword of sexual positions Veronica had made Logan while waiting for him to pick her up for a date. Sarah took one look at him and spoke a series of words that would eventually be spoken so many times by women he was dating that it could have become a drinking game in its own right.

“You're still in love with her, aren't you?”

Logan had managed to keep the vast majority of the tumult of his relationship with Veronica from Sarah, but at the pained look in her eye, Logan allowed everything to spill out and over. He told her honestly that he really cared about her, but he just needed more time.

Sarah was understanding and listened patiently, but with tears in her eyes told him she had been waiting for close to five months, and it didn't look like anything was going to change.

"Logan, be honest with me. If she came back tomorrow and told you she was sorry and that she forgave you and wanted to be with you, what would you say?"

Logan didn’t say anything, but Sarah saw the look of hope flash in his eyes before it gave way to dread that that would never happen.

"Okay, well, we're not going to be dramatic about this.” She took his room key out of her wallet, put
it on his coffee table, and kissed him on the cheek before standing up to leave his suite. "I'm not going to put all your stuff in a box and return it to you. I figure I put up with your smart assery for five months, I deserve some parting gifts."

*Her tone was light, but Logan could hear the way her words were tight at the end of her sentence. He looked at her as she turned to leave and stood up. "Sarah, I'm sorry." He wasn't sure if she heard his words before the door closed.*

*In that moment Logan hated himself, and he came as close as he ever did to also hating Veronica. How dare she walk out on him without even so much as allowing him to explain himself and then continue to haunt and mess up every aspect of his life. He grabbed his bottle of whiskey and Veronica box and threw the box in the garbage before retiring to his bedroom.*

*At 3:00 AM he woke up, went out to the living room of his suite, and took the box out of the garbage. He placed it reverently at the top of his closet, and then went back to bed, easily slipping into sleep.*

Cut to four years later and he felt like he was still in the same spot, waiting for Veronica to crook her finger at him. The hardest part was that he still hadn't decided what he wanted. Actually, he knew exactly what he wanted. He had yet to figure out what he needed and whether both wants and needs could be satisfied at the same time. He wanted Veronica, but he needed to not be reduced to a shell of a man if it didn't go his way. He wanted to be happy, but he needed to know that the happiness he acquired was sustainable.

Logan's eyes flicked to the rearview mirror again, and still not seeing any sign of Veronica, turned the key in the ignition to leave. He pulled away from the curb as his phone started to ring. He grabbed it from the cup holder and looked at the display seeing that it was Keith, undoubtedly telling him to give up and go home.

"This is Logan."

"Hey Logan. Look, I don't know what you have planned, but she just left."

Rolling up to a stop sign, Logan looked in the rear view mirror again and sure enough saw Veronica walking out to her Saturn and get into the driver's seat. An honest to goodness smile spread across his face, and that pinch of disappoint he had felt receded.

"Logan?"

"Yes Mr. Mars?"

"Do you have any idea what you're doing?"

Logan laughed a little and shook his head. "Mr. Mars, I plan to woo her."

He heard Keith sigh before responding. "Yeah, I had a feeling. Good luck, Logan."

Both men clicked off, and Logan continued driving heading, confident that Veronica Mars would be closely behind.
This chapter is about two times as long as the first two, so it'll take a little more time to read. If we follow the mathematical principles, then it's going to take you...twice...as long.
Veronica took a right onto N Belhaven Street, her eyes searching the road for Logan's car. "I have somewhere I need to be." His words had been vague, but Veronica was certain that Logan's destination was connected to whatever it was he and her dad were working on. He had never turned down lunch with her before.

The cell phone tracker was on the passenger seat, but she had thus far avoided using it. If she were Logan, where oh where would she go, manila envelope in hand? She had already been to three of his favorite beach hang outs, the shake shack that served seasonal milkshakes (strawberry rhubarb in the summer), the park under the freeway colonnade, and the tapas restaurant he enjoyed purely for the windows. In addition, she had driven by a few locations in the '02 zip code famous for their seedy underbelly.

No black Range Rover. No Logan.

A few more turns and she heard and felt her stomach grumble. With a slightly defeated sigh, she turned into the parking lot of a sandwich shop and ordered a turkey and avocado sandwich to go, resolving as she stood in line to turn on the cell phone tracker and eat the sandwich as she drove.

Truth be told, she had no desire to track Logan's phone. If he ever found out, and she didn't know how but he would certainly find out, she didn't want to rehash their old arguments, especially since she was only going to be in town for a couple of weeks. She took a large bite of her sandwich, a few sips of her soda, and turned on the tracker.

She watched the map and saw the little dot marked "L.E." pop up on her screen. He was only 30 blocks away from her, and she realized that she had been circling his actual location for the past 20 minutes. She immediately pulled out of the parking lot and drove towards the address.

Thoughts had been flooding her subconscious since the moment she left her dad's office, but there had been so many that she hadn't had time to dwell on any one thought for longer than a few seconds. Some of the more simple ones were along the lines of:

*So, this is what classifies as moving on these days?*
*He's not your boyfriend.*
*Give it up, Veronica.* (That one was always said in Wallace's voice.)

The more complicated ones focused less on facts and more on the potential ramifications of her actions:

*What is it going to do to him when he discovers you're tracking him again?*
*Isn't this all just a distraction to avoid what you came to Neptune to do?*
*He doesn't want you, so why are you inserting yourself where you don't belong?*

It was the final thought that she had the hardest time pushing away. Things had obviously changed. He had gone to her dad rather than her for help. He had been warm, open, and friendly, but had kept his distance. And that look, the one that she saw in his eye each time they broke up, the desperation to reunite, was absent.

She felt selfish wishing it was still there, because she knew how miserable it had made him. But she
excused herself because while she had been better at masking it, it had always been in her eye as well.

Their freshman year at Hearst, Logan had changed his message on his voicemail in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day: "We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope." When Logan visited her for spring break in Los Angeles three years later, Veronica had been foolish enough to hope that they had reached a turning point. New paths would be forged, old patterns would die, and the two of them could start over. But then they didn’t.

She couldn’t help but disagree with MLK. Some disappointments felt infinite.

The display on the tracker started beeping loudly signaling she had arrived at her destination: a run of the mill neighborhood drug store. She pulled into the far corner of the parking lot, and pulled out her camera with the zoom lens, her eyes peeled for Logan's car. She couldn't see the Range Rover and realized that while Logan's cell phone was in that location, he certainly was not.

*Whatever he's messing around with, he's obviously scared enough to switch vehicles to escape detection. Where is he?*

After snapping a few more pictures, the obvious solution slapped Veronica in the face, and she in turn slapped her hand to her forehead, accidentally smearing a dab of mayonnaise on her skin. She groaned, leaned over to her glove department, and pulled out a napkin to wipe away the condiment from her face. Throwing her napkin onto the floorboard of her car, she pulled out her cell phone.

In high school and college, while she always eventually figured out the true culprit of whatever crime she was investigating, she often jumped to some pretty hasty conclusions in the process. Whatever was happening with Logan was no exception.

Veronica called her dad, putting the call on speaker phone and placed the phone on her dashboard.

"Hey sweetie. Miss me already?"

"Like a fat kid on a diet misses cake. Dad, I'm about to ask you a question and I'd like you to refrain from asking me any questions in light of the question that I am about to ask you."

"That doesn't seem fair."

Veronica continued to look through the lens of her camera, but she wasn’t at the correct angle to get a clean shot into the drug store. "Daddy, please?"

"You realize your head tilt doesn't work over the phone, right?"

"You underestimate me."

"Alright, fine. Ask your weird question."

"What kind of car does Logan drive?"

Her dad gave a little grunt of laughter. "Are you following him?"

"Ah, ah, ah, dad" she scolded him, "that wasn't the deal."

*And it's scary how well he knows me.*

"I don't know if I should encourage this kind of behavior."
"Says the man who ran a background check on my date for the sixth grade social." As hard as she tried to sound annoyed, even now it amused her.

"Point Mars. He drives a black SUV, a Lexus I'm pretty sure."

"Thanks dad, you're the best."

"We've been reduced to flattery? Any chance you're going to tell me what's going on?"

"None whatsoever." She gave off a loud kiss noise into the phone and hung up.

She picked her camera back up and scanned the parking lot, this time looking for a black Lexus instead of a Range Rover. She found it easily, and was thankful to see it wasn't parked in front of the large store windows. She opened her car door and looking both to the left and the right to ensure no one in the parking lot was watching her, made her way over to Logan's vehicle.

Sitting on the front passenger seat was the manila envelope Logan had received from her dad. She tried to open the driver's side door, but of course it was locked.

Okay, so we have to go to phase 2.

If she felt bad about tracking Logan's phone (and she did), she felt even worse about what she was going to do next, but she found herself being swept up into a familiar compulsion.

I believe the word for this is, 'obsession.'

Ducking down by the driver's side door, she placed a tracker under the front tire wheel well, and then scurried to the back, holding onto the bumper to peer around the vehicle to see if Logan was inside. She could have picked Logan's silhouette from a lineup, and currently that profile was standing in aisle 7. Veronica made her way back to her car, and pulled around the corner so Logan wouldn't see her when he left.

On the same screen which she had used to monitor Logan's cell phone, there was another set of L.E. initials, these ones in red indicating that they were for the vehicle tracker. Veronica knew that if Logan was meeting with the wrong kind of people, they would most likely insist that he turn over his phone, and she didn't want to risk losing track of him.

No, let's go with dedication. Dedication sounds so much better.

Hunched low in her seat she only had to wait five minutes for both sets of the L.E. initials on her screen to move and indicate that Logan had left the drug store. Veronica turned her car back into the parking lot, smoothed down her hair, and put on lip gloss. She didn't have time to access the security footage from the store if she was going to try catch Logan before he left for his next destination. Some old fashioned lying would have to do the trick.

Veronica entered the drug store and saw that only one checkout lane was open. The cashier himself was a rather gangly twenty-something guy who she figured was working his way through community college and would easily give her the information she wanted for $20. She observed his reaction as he saw her stand in line. He gave her the oh-so-typical head to toe once over.

I might get to keep that twenty bucks after all.

She stood in line behind an elderly man paying for his organic peanut butter and raisin bran, both coupon items that week, popped her hip slightly, and crossed her arms firmly across her chest, hoping the combination of the gesture itself and her v-neck t-shirt would provide some cleavage. As
she got closer to the front of the line she saw the boy's name tag: Zach.

*Let operation "Fan Girl" commence.*

Veronica looked behind her and saw she was the only person in line. As she got closer to Zach she tilted her chin down, tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, and then impishly looked back up at him.

"Hi, I'm Genevieve." Veronica stuck her hand out to shake his hand. She saw Zach try to imperceptibly check her out again, stare at her chest, and then bring his eyes back up to her.

Zach pointed both of his thumbs to his chest in an, 'I'm the big man on campus' type gesture and responded with his first name only.

"Well, Zach, this is really embarrassing, but I noticed that Logan Echolls was just in here. You know the son of Aaron Echolls. And you see Logan has been my celebrity crush since I was like 10 years old, and I was just wondering if you could tell me what he bought while he was here because it'd make a totally awesome entry for my Logan Echolls fan blog."

"Logan Echolls is a lucky man."

Veronica played dumb and asked, "Why do you say that?"

"I'd do anything to have a pretty girl like you follow me around."

Veronica placed a hand on her chest and exclaimed, "Zach, did you just pay me a compliment? Ohmigod. This is the greatest day ever. I'll get to learn what kind of deodorant Logan Echolls uses, and the totally hot babe at the Rite Aid things I'm cute."

Zach burst into a wide grin, and Veronica placed a hand to her mouth feigning embarrassment. "Oh my gosh. Did I just say that out loud? Awkward."

"No, it's sweet, but I should tell you I have a girlfriend."

"Damn, all the good ones are taken."

"But, I can help you with Echoll's information. He was my second to last customer, so his transaction will be pretty easy to pull up. But if anyone asks, this information did not come from me."

"I'll just write on my blog that I was standing behind him in line or something." Veronica waited for the receipt to print out and she bounced from side to side as if her excitement could not be contained. "Zach, can I ask you a question about Logan Echolls?" She gave a dreamy sigh as she finished the question.

Zach noticeably grimaced and nodded his head, signaling her to ask away. "Okay, what was he like? I mean, on TV and in the magazines he always seems to like, ya know, ooze charisma. Did you get that impression?"

He ripped off the receipt and handed it to her. "Honestly, not really. He was pretty dodgy, and just kept wandering the aisles for about 15. At one point he came to the front of the store and just stared out into the parking lot like he was waiting for someone. I thought he was a shoplifter and was going to alert my assistant manager, but then I recognized him, and figured he was just being an eccentric millionaire."

Veronica gave a squeal of delight and kissed him on the cheek. "Ohmigod, Zach. You have no idea. You just totally made my decade." Veronica ran towards the door but turned around when she heard
"Hey Genevieve, you know, sometimes it's pretty easy for me to forget I have a girlfriend."

Veronica assumed the look on his face was supposed to be lust filled and lecherous, but he just looked constipated. She swallowed a laugh, but played it off like he had made her nervous at the show of attention, gave a little half wave and headed straight for her Saturn without another look back. When she got into the driver's seat she turned the tracker back on and saw that Logan's car had stopped approximately 2 miles from where she currently was.

Looking over the receipt she frowned. Candles, toothpaste, toothbrush, shave gel, q-tips, trail mix, and a bottle of water.

Veronica started her car, pulled out of the parking lot, and realized two things. First, she had no idea what was going on. Clearly Logan had come to the drug store to meet someone but she couldn't make sense of his purchases in light of that information. Maybe they were a code? Maybe he was killing time until the person he was waiting for arrived? So then why did he leave? Did the person stand him up? Or was he following a complex list of tasks to assure he wasn't being followed?

She rolled up to a stoplight and looked at the receipt again and scrunched up her nose.

The second thing she realized was that she missed the person Logan Echolls. She had missed Logan a lot over the years, but it was always for relatively intangible and emotional reasons: the way he made her feel, the way he looked at her, the way he challenged her. But today she missed Logan Echolls as a real person in her life.

She hated that her dad knew what kind of car Logan drove and she didn't. She hated that apparently he had switched his brand of toothpaste and shave gel and she wasn't around to hear his asinine defense of his new found acceptance for Crest ProHealth. She hated that she didn't know if the reason he had bought a lemon verbena candle was because he was dating someone or he was about to be dating someone or he simply liked the smell.

Most of all, she hated that she kept following the little blip, blip, blip, on her tracker screen and that for one of the first times in her life she was ignoring her old instincts to run, run, run. She knew Logan didn't want her to actively be in his life, but she was intentionally inserting herself into her dad's investigation, hoping she could at least be useful if not wanted.

When she told Joanna about this, and she had long before committed to telling Joanna everything, she was going to have a field day.

Veronica Googled the address on the tracker screen and discovered that Logan was currently at The Copper Cart, a relatively seedy bar that sat comfortably between the line dividing the 02 zip code from the 05 zip code.

A bar at 2pm? That's early even for Logan. Just who is he meeting here?

Veronica parked in an alleyway adjacent to the bar that gave her a good view of the front entrance as well as Logan's Lexus, parked on the street in front of The Copper Cart. She picked up her camera and zoomed to focus on the driver's seat of Logan's car, assuring herself that he wasn't inside. As she sat in the car waiting for some sort of clue as to what Logan was doing there, she had an unexpected insight into what was motivating her to act this way.

I'm having fun. Oh God, I have issues.

Interrupting her thoughts was a knock on the passenger side window. She jumped slightly and turned
to see Logan's face smiling back at her. Their eyes remained locked as he circled the front of the car to stand by Veronica's door. Taking a few deep breaths, she opened the door and got out, now stuck standing in between Logan and her car door.

"Fancy meeting you here. Care for a drink? This place apparently makes a great whiskey sour."

Veronica relaxed when she saw that Logan wasn't mad at her. She opted to play along. "I was just here taking some pictures of the well renowned 02 architecture. Pretty great stuff."

"You know I heard rumors that the use of neon along this strip in Neptune was being featured in architectural digest."

"Well, I got what I came for, so I better be off." Veronica turned around and opened the door of her car, only to feel Logan come up behind her, place his right hand above her head and gently close the door. She gulped at how close he was standing to her and slowly turned around. He wasn't moving away and continued to stand there, one hand on her car, leaning forward slightly, looking down at her.

This isn't fair. This isn't fair. Why is he doing this?

"Can't have you leave yet, Veronica. I have to give you your Christmas present."

Veronica raised her eyebrows in disbelief. "Now?"

"No time like the present. Pun intended." Logan reached into his jacket pocket with his free hand and pulled out the tracker Veronica had placed under his wheel well. "If memory serves you use these, right? And I weirdly found one on my car just now and thought, 'I know the perfect person to give this to.' Imagine my luck when you're already here."

"Truly serendipitous." She took the tracker from him, and looked down, her cheeks aflame with shame, more at getting caught than for what she had done.

"You don't date Veronica Mars for close to a year and not pick up on a few of her tricks. Now that we've settled that, I think I'll be on my way." Logan removed his hand from her door frame, and turned around taking long strides towards his car.

Hesitating for only a few seconds, she ran to catch up with him. "Logan, wait."

He continued to walk but when he reached his car turned around and looked down at her expectantly. "Yes, Veronica?"

"My dad wouldn't tell me why you hired him. I guess I could have just asked you, but…I wave a hand in the air, she gestured both to Logan's car and her own, as if that was a sufficient explanation.

"But this seemed like more fun?"

Veronica dropped her head in embarrassment and then looked back up to see Logan staring at her. She was certain that she would see his disappointment that she was still up to her old tricks. Maybe annoyance that she preferred a tracker to a tough conversation. But he surprised her by smiling down at her with clear admiration. His expression unnerved her and she furrowed her brow at him.

"I'm sorry, Logan?"

"Was that a question? Veronica, you don't have to apologize. Look, I'll make you a deal. You tell me what you're doing in Neptune, and I'll tell you what's in that envelope sitting on my passenger seat."
Veronica hadn't expected that and chose denial as her first line of defense. "I already told you, I'm visiting my dad for Christmas."

"Funny story. The other day I was in your dad's office when he paused our meeting to take a call from you. You remember the call I'm talking about?"

Veronica crossed her arms in front of her chest and looked up at him.

*My B-cup served as a distraction once today. Maybe the girls have it in them to go 2 for 2?*

Logan looked down quickly and back up again, a smirk on his lips. "Cleavage as a distraction method? A little low concept, but often ultimately effective."

She dropped her arms.

"Let me refresh your memory. That was the phone call where you told your dad to cancel his plans to visit you in Chicago for Christmas because you were coming to Neptune. Now, why would Veronica Mars ask her dad to cancel his vacation plans so that she could come back to Neptune for the holidays, a place she never really liked all that much?" Logan took his eyes from Veronica's face and stared up and to the right, tapping his chin as if he was contemplating the answer.

"I don't mind Neptune."

"Let me pose a little theory here. You're up to something. Doing something, investigating something, I'm not sure yet, but you needed your dad distracted and you knew that if he was in Chicago with you for two weeks, staying at your apartment that you wouldn't get a moment to yourself. But if you came back to Neptune, the old Keith Mars work ethic would kick in and you'd be relatively free to do anything you needed to whilst he was at work. How am I doing?"

Veronica's expression gave nothing away. "That's a very colorful theory. You should get one of the burnout authors you represent to tease that idea out a little more. I'm smelling Pulitzer."

"All of my clients already have a Pulitzer. So what's it going to be? Let's just sign the peace treaty and have an equitable distribution of information."

Veronica mimicked Logan's earlier posture, staring off into the distance and tapping her chin with her index finger. She stopped, grinned, and crossed her arms across her chest again. "Like I said, interesting theory but I'm just here visiting my dad."

"Fine, have it your way. But I would like the record to state that I attempted to play nice." Logan moved as if he was going to get into the car and then stopped abruptly, turning around and slapping one hand to his forehead. "Oh, I forgot, just one more thing."

"Yeah?"

She watched as went to the back of his car, crouched down and felt underneath his back bumper with his right hand. After a few seconds, he stood up, holding a second tracker in his hand.

Her arms left her chest and were now on her hips. Logan casually tossed the tracker from one hand to the other as he walked back towards Veronica. He held it out to her and she moved to take it from him, but he held her hand in his for just a second, preventing her from pulling away immediately.

"So," he started, "I'll see you soon?"

Veronica looked at him and nodded her head slightly. "Yeah, see you soon."
He gave her fingers a slight squeeze and then released the tracker into her hand. Veronica took a step back as he got into his car, started the ignition, and pulled away from the curb, waving at her as he drove off. She stood there staring at Logan's car as it rounded the corner, and then down at the tracker she held in her hand.

*How the hell did he know I put a second tracker on his car? Did he see me? Or does he really just know me that well? Logan Echolls, 1, Veronica Mars, 0.*

In every possible way, her interaction with Logan had surprised her. She had expected annoyance at being tracked, anger at her mistrust, and frustration that she didn't cop to her true motives. His obvious delight and amusement at their little tête-à-tête had been completely unexpected.

Driving forward out of the alley a fleeting thought entered her mind: The snooping, the spying, the surveillance, all things which had seemed to frustrate Logan to no end while they were dating now seemed to almost charm him.

Rolling her eyes at her own assessment, she groaned.

*You're not being fair, Veronica. Way to rewrite history.*

Logan had always loved her sneaky ways. It was her propensity to run toward situations carelessly that raised his ire. She maintained he was being over protective and his vocal concern was simply a way to control her but he always defended himself, citing love as the reason he did and said the things he did.

Her internal defense had always been, "My dad loves me more than anyone and he doesn't act the way Logan acts about my work." It wasn't until the summer of her internship that her mental rolodex flipped through all of the dangerous circumstances she had been in the past two years. She realized just how many of those circumstances Logan had been around for and how few she had actually confided in her dad about.

Her epiphany was triggered by a sleepless night in Virginia wherein she got up at 2:00 AM and mindlessly channel flipped finally landing on the E! Network and a rerun of the *Aaron Echolls Tinseltown Diaries*. She had never watched it all the way through before, but she missed Logan and allowed herself to indulge for a few minutes. Before she knew it she had watched the entire 90 minute episode and had discovered a newfound shame for how her reckless behavior had impacted Logan.

Her mind flashed over every shitty card that had been dealt to him all before he had graduated from high school. He wasn't trying to control her; he was utterly terrified and the way Veronica lived her life just made him more afraid.

The epiphany from several years ago was in the forefront of Veronica's mind as she drove. What did it mean that Logan now found himself amused by her antics? Did he no longer care about her, or did he simply trust that she'd take care of herself? Or was he still terrified but used a well-placed smirk to cover his fear?

She glanced at the clock, and decided to head to her dad's house to take a nap before he got home. Her eyes fell to the passenger seat to where the tracker screen, turned off, and the two vehicle trackers now sat. She thought of her poorly executed game of cat and mouse and broke out into a grin.

Logan Echolls. The guy was never boring.
Later that night, after her third bowl of Alicia's famous chicken and dumplings, Veronica exited to the kitchen to slice up the Ghiradelli brownies she had made earlier that evening. She had just gotten out a stack of bowls from the cupboard when Alicia joined her.

"I figured you made the brownies, so I can help scoop ice cream."

"But you made dinner, so aren't you supposed to now just sit back and be doted upon?"

"Single mother. Not super comfortable with the whole being 'doted on' thing. I do much better when I have something to do."

Together they sliced and scooped servings of brownies and ice cream for Keith, Darrell and Wallace. Veronica picked up the three bowls and headed for the dining room.

"I'll be there in a minute with yours and mine," Alicia said.

Veronica turned around and looked at Alicia, now slicing up the largest of the brownies, presumably for her, and smiled. "Actually, Alicia, would you be willing to have yours with me in the kitchen? I wanted to ask your advice about something."

"Do I get any sort of hint as to what this something is?"

"I can tell you it's girly."

"How girly?"

"More girly than Rosie O'Donnell and less girly than Zooey Deschanel."

"I don't know what that means."

*I won't hold that against her. There aren't many people who get my references on the first go.*

She smiled at Alicia with genuine affection. "I'll explain in just a minute."

Veronica turned back around to bring the boys their ice cream and smiled as she heard the three of them talking heatedly. She figured out they were talking about some sort of fantasy sports league, but whether it was soccer, football, baseball, or ping pong she couldn't say. She liked seeing her dad this way and in this house. He looked comfortable, and content, and she knew that was something he hadn't always been able to claim.

After he lost the election for sheriff the second time, Keith had poured himself into his work at Mars Investigations, and vowed that unlike when Lamb was sheriff, this time he would mind his own business. If the town didn't want him, he didn't want the town. His plan was to keep his head down and build his business.

Unbeknownst to him, Vinnie Van Lowe learned relatively quickly that the sheriff's department was a logistical nightmare he was not well prepared for.

Three months after the election Vinnie was bogged down in the drudgery of kissing babies and shaking hands, and was floored by the ineptitude of most of his deputies. He was drowning in the sheriff's department, and something had to give or he'd sink. That was what prompted him to ask Keith for his assistance.

Keith Mars would be hired as a consultant, earning a stipend of $3,000 a month to help do two things: 1) train the deputies in best practices for the department, and 2) assist on any cases that had
stumped him. Vinnie agreed to give him relatively free reign to do the job as he saw fit. While not ideal, it connected Keith to the work he loved in the town he finally admitted he loved to serve, but it also kept him away from the political mire of the job. And so went Keith Mars' resolve to mind his own business.

In addition to Keith's work as a consultant, he continued his work as a PI. With Veronica out of the house, he didn't mind having to work 60-70 hours a week and he began to make and save more money than he had when he was sheriff. He kept from Veronica his plans to move, but Christmas her junior year of college, he gave her a framed picture of himself standing in front of a "For Sale" sign taken only a couple days prior.

Keith, and Veronica when she was home, now lived in a simple three bedroom, two bathroom house with a small den on the lower level that Keith had converted into an at home office. His dining room was now separate from his kitchen, which was separate from his living room, and he was proud of the work he had done pressure washing the exterior and repainting the trim, tearing out the landscaping and planting rose bushes, replacing the carpet in the living room and restoring the hardwood floors in the kitchen.

Seeing her dad sitting with Darrell and Wallace, laughing and debating and arguing, he seemed at peace. He wasn't the sheriff, but half of the town knew he might as well be. She wouldn't be surprised if the town rallied to have him win by write in vote during the next election. He wasn't married, but he and Alicia had found their way back to one another again. He wasn't wealthy, but he could afford to visit her twice a year and even occasionally surprised Veronica with a ticket of her own.

She placed a bowl of dessert in front of each of the men sitting at the table and kissed her dad on the forehead.

Her dad looked up at her kindly, "Don't tell me you already ate yours and you're going back for seconds?"

"Alicia and I are having ours in the kitchen. We needed to escape all the testosterone." She held up a finger and pointed it at her dad, Wallace, and Darrell in kind. "And no boys allowed in the kitchen. We're having girl talk."

"Do you even know what girl talk is, Veronica?" Darrell asked.

"Wallace, what did you do to your sweet little brother who used to think I was the coolest girl around?"

"Can't help it, V. He's 14. They got to grow up some time."

Veronica leaned down and held Darrell's hand in her chin, talking in a faux baby voice. "Well, you may be 14, but I still think you are the cutest little Darrell ever. Yes I do." She stood back up and pinched his nose lightly. "Ooops! I got your nose!" Without another word she turned and went back into the kitchen.

_PROBABLY NOT WHAT THEY MEAN WHEN REFERRING TO THE ART OF 'LEAVING THEM WANTING MORE'._

"She is so weird," Darrell remarked, loud enough for Veronica to hear.

"Yeah, but I like her," her dad responded.

"She's alright," Wallace smiled and agreed, taking a large bite of his ice cream and returning to their previous conversation.
Veronica walked into the kitchen and saw that in addition to a very large brownie and an ample amount of ice cream, Alicia had added whipped cream and a drizzle of fudge sauce. She lifted up the bowl to show off her handiwork as Veronica stepped towards her.

"I figured if we're going to do girl talk, we're going to do it right."

"You are a saint." Alicia took a seat at the island in the center of the kitchen, and Veronica remained standing, leaning over onto her forearms, taking a scoop of ice cream, putting it in her mouth, turning the spoon over and repeating. They ate their dessert in amicable silence, Alicia knowing that Veronica would start talking when she felt ready.

Having finished her dessert, Veronica pushed the bowl a few inches away from her. "Tea?" she asked.

"Please." The silence became decidedly less amicable.

Veronica knew the tension in her posture as she turned away to put water in the kettle was obvious. While she wanted to have this conversation, she was still hesitant to bring it up.

"Your dad tells me you've been keeping your PI license up to date to make a little cash when you have time. Any interesting cases?"

_Well played, Alicia. Throw me a softball of a question to ease into talking. Okay, I'll bite._

Veronica turned around, placing a steaming mug in front of Alicia. "Not really. Chamomile lavender okay?"

"Perfect." She took a sip, her eyes never leaving Veronica.

"Actually, I just closed a case last night before coming here."

"You're in the top ten in your class and you still manage to find time to solve cases? Your dad is right. You really are a superhero."

Veronica glowed at the compliment. For someone so outwardly confident, it still surprised her when people found things about her to be praiseworthy. "It was a pretty simple case, but the person who hired me was wholly unexpected."

"How so?"

Veronica knew exactly what Alicia was trying to do, getting her talking about a subject she felt comfortable with so she'd be more open to discuss the topic she was clearly avoiding. And she was thankful for it. Both for the way it demonstrated Alicia's patience, as well as her care for Veronica.

She laid out the facts of the case, how she put the pieces together, and ultimately recovered Julie's mother's ring with relative ease. "Alicia, this girl looked about as threatening as bubblegum and she did this selfish thing to intentionally hurt her mom."

"But you said she changed, wanted to make amends."

She drummed her fingers on her mug, enjoying the noise that her nails made on the glass. "I never said that. I said _she_ thinks she's changed."

"You're not so certain?"

Veronica shrugged in response and took another sip of her tea. She held the mug in her hands and
then placed it up to her cheek, enjoying the warmth it provided.

Alicia sat across the counter discreetly watching her with one eye as she sipped her own tea.

Little thoughts and revelations were clicking into place. As she worked through how to broach the subject she really wanted to discuss with Alicia, she was grateful that Alicia seemed to be so content to wait her out.


This is just talking. There's nothing scary about asking for advice.

Veronica finished her tea and set the mug gently on the counter. She placed her two palms flat on the countertop and looked up at Alicia who was still peacefully sipping her own tea.

"Alicia?" Alicia placed her mug down and crossed her hands, resting them lightly on the countertop. "How did you and my dad get back together?"

Whatever Alicia had been expecting, it wasn't that as her brow furrowed, puzzlement written on her features. "I thought your dad told you the story?"

"No, I mean, I know logistically how it happened. It was only natural with Wallace and I being roommates that the two of you would see each other more. What I'm wondering is…well, it's just that you and my dad have broken up almost as many times as…well, no offense, but it seemed like a lot of times."

Giving her a half smile, she nodded. "It was."

"But you guys tried again."

"Yes. We did."

Dipping her finger into the mug, a few drops of liquid remaining, she began to draw shapes on the outside of the cup. "And you seem really happy and solid."

"That's because we are."

"Are the two of you going to get married?" Veronica slapped her hand to her mouth. "Sorry, Alicia. That's none of my business. Ignore me. I'm terrible at girl talk."

"You're not as bad as you think. And yes, we've talked about it seriously. We're both planning on our future's involving the other person."

Veronica's voice rose in volume and she threw her hands up in frustration. "But how?!!"

Both women looked startled by the vehemence in her voice.

Where did that come from? I am woman hear me shout emphatically.

Veronica looked down at her feet and spoke in a much quieter voice. "How did you guys get past the stuff between you and decide to give it another go?"

Alicia placed her hand lightly on Veronica's, turning Veronica's hand over so she was holding it gently. She lightly tugged Veronica's hand to gesture her to come and sit next to her. When Veronica sat, Alicia wrapped an arm around Veronica's shoulder and she allowed her head to fall gently on Alicia's left shoulder.
"We established a ground rule."

I knew this would all come back to rules. Damn my insatiable need to buck against authority.

She scrunched up her nose in distaste at the word. "Rule? As in singular?"

"Yes. No lying."

"That's it? No lying?" Her voice was incredulous, and she was a little concerned that Alicia would begin to believe she had a total disdain for the truth. Really, it was just a complicated relationship.

"Yes, but it has some parameters."

She smiled and turned her face up to look at her, shaking her head as if she didn't really understand the concept. "Your rule has parameters?"

"Hey, sassy, do you want to hear this or not?"

Veronica nodded her in response, almost most thrilled by the little bit of sarcasm coming through than the conversation itself.

This woman is the best. If dad screws this up, I'm going to kill him.

"First, lies of omission count as lies. Second, if one person suspects the other of withholding something, all they need to do is ask 'is there something I should know?' Third, believe the other's answer, no matter what."

Pursing her lips, she cocked her head to the side. "Sounds so simple." And if it really was that simple, then she and Logan had no excuse for the way their relationship always managed to crash in a blaze of unglory.

Apparently seeing the mixture of bemusement and concern, Alicia placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "It is now, but nine months ago, it wasn't so easy."

"Has anything changed? I mean, is it working?"

"I can't speak for your father, but for me it has. It used to be that there were parts of my life I didn't feel he had the right to know about. Now there's nothing in my life I don't want him to know about."

Turning her head down, she lightly kicked the island. "Even the bad stuff?"

More than a time or two I wished I could have gone all "Eternal Sunshine" on Logan with some of the stuff in both of our lives.

"Especially the bad stuff. Veronica, there isn't a man more loyal than your father. I figured if anyone was going to stick by me when my little life boat was going through rough waters, it'd be him."

Continuing to kick the island, she found a spot to stare at on the wall, trying to figure out if that was really all it took. A mutual agreement to be completely honest. She looked down and saw that Alicia's hand was still holding hers gently. Alicia moved to pull it away, but Veronica gripped hers back a little more tightly.

"Veronica? Is this about Skyler? Are you wanting to get back together with him?"

She immediately let go of Alicia's hand and shook her head emphatically. "I don't want to talk about Skyler."
"Veronica, did he hurt you?" Alicia saw the tear forming in Veronica's right eye and wiped it away with her thumb. "I'll take that as a yes."

"Alicia, I don't want to talk about it. Maybe one day I'll tell you the whole story. Yes he hurt me, but not in the way you're thinking and not in a way that's going to make me want to get back together with him. Ever."

She could understand her confusion on the subject, however, here she was grilling Alicia about reuniting with an ex. It would make sense if the ex she was referring to was the one she had most recently broken up with.

"So, why all these questions about me getting back together with your dad?" Alicia's voice trailed off as she seemed to realize just who Veronica was talking about.

Unable to meet her eyes anymore, Veronica laid her head on the countertop, vocalizing a small groan. She closed her eyes tightly. "I know, I'm pathetic."

"Not pathetic. Never pathetic." Veronica felt Alicia's hand on her head, gently playing with a few strands of her hair. "Veronica, I'm not going to pretend to understand the scope of your history with Logan, and I don't know what brought on this change of heart, but I will say this. If you don't want to be with Logan, if you're just feeling lonely, or curious, or if you're on the rebound, then you need to leave him alone."

Veronica raised her head up to look at Alicia. "What?"

I guess Logan has worked his magic and charmed my whole family.

"If you don't want him, Veronica, you need to leave him alone, for good. Let him move on with his life."

This made it sound like she was intentionally hanging on to him. Like she was consciously acting in a way from preventing him from moving on, and that just wasn't the case. "But he has moved on with his life. He's got a job he loves and is really good at, a group of friends that care about him, he's rich, handsome, still as charming as ever. Logan Echolls isn't pining away for me."

"No, he's not. But he does love you."

Veronica felt her breath leave her and a slight smile played at the corners of her mouth. She put her head back down on the counter and picked up Alicia's hand, placing it back on top of her head. Concentrating on the feeling of having her hair played with, rather than the excitement that coursed through her at Alicia's declaration, she looked up at her.

"I came to Neptune to say goodbye to him."

"And now that you're here?"

Her breath evened out and she tried to remember a recent moment where she had felt better cared for – sitting in her dad's home, with Alicia, the woman he loved, listening to her every word as if they were important. Which probably accounted for why she felt giving an honest response that demonstrated she didn't have all the answers was okay. "I don't know."

"Wallace tells me that he and Mac still talk to Logan, hang out with him whenever they visit. I'm not
encouraging espionage here, but they could probably give you some insight into what he's thinking."

"I told Mac and Wallace a long time ago that they weren't allowed to talk about me with Logan and I didn't want to hear anything about Logan from them."

With a knowing smile, Alicia patted Veronica's arm. "Regretting that decision?"

She simply groaned in response.

Hearing the approach of footsteps to the kitchen, and assuming soon they were her dad's, she lifted her head up. She laughed as she saw him fumble through the hallway balancing his, Darrell's and Wallace's empty bowls, his eyes squeezed shut.

"Warning! Man entering the kitchen. Immediately bring all girl talk to an end." He slowly opened one eye and when he saw Alicia and Veronica smiling back at him, figured it was safe to enter.

Veronica hopped off her stool and went to take the bowls from her dad, placing them in the sink. "I'll take care of those in the morning. I'm sorry to be antisocial, but I'm going to say goodnight to Darrell and Wallace and head to bed."

Keith placed one arm around his daughter. "Totally acceptable, kid."

"Goodnight, Alicia. Thanks for everything."

Alicia's heart lifted at the sound of thankfulness in Veronica's voice. "Anytime." Keith watched his daughter leave the kitchen and walked over to Alicia, kissing her lightly on the cheek.

"So," he said, "good talk?"

"Good talk."

An hour later Veronica was unpacking her suitcase and hanging clothes up in the large wardrobe that her dad had bought especially for her new room. She'd pay good money if someone could one day figure out a way to simply transport this room in its entirety to wherever she moved in the future. It was painted a pale grey-blue, and had white crown molding around the entire base of the room. While some elements of their former apartment had survived the move, most of the furnishings were new to her. Her dad had asked her what she wanted and her sole request was a larger bed. The room now housed a full size bed, covered by a puffy down comforter in an ornate cerulean and white pattern. She had saved up her PI money for a couple of months and had purchased a set on sale from Anthropologie. It was the softest fabric she had ever touched and it made it difficult to get out of bed whenever she came to visit.

Her dad had also installed a custom light fixture. When turned low it cast a warm glow throughout the entire room. Veronica had seen a Dale Chihuly blown glass installation while in Chicago and loved how it simultaneously looked like fire and the sea. While the lighting fixture was nowhere near as opulent, it still produced the same gravity defying effect as a large scale Chihuly sculpture. Veronica would often fall asleep with the light fixture turned low, but lit up as she slept.

Veronica continued to put her clothes away, and heard a light knock on her bedroom door. "Come in."

Her dad slid the door open and stood in the doorway. "I thought you were going to bed."

"I am, but I wanted to unpack real quick. If I don't do it now I'll just be living out of my suitcase for
the next two weeks."

He watched her for a few minutes as she put her clothes away, set out the clothes she wanted to wear the following day, and slid her suitcase under her bed. "It's really good to have you here, kiddo."

Veronica stopped what she was doing and turned around, taking three steps towards him and putting her arms around his neck. "I'm sorry I've been away for so long."

"Hey, no need for apologies. You're here now." He held her for a second more before taking a step back. Turning around again, she picked up the messenger back she had thrown onto the large oversized armchair in the room. "Are you just going to stand there all night and watch me like a weirdo?"

"My house, my rules."

Rolling her eyes, she pulled the Hercule Poirot postcard she had brought from Chicago out of her bag.

"What's that?" her dad asked.

"A postcard."

_The chances that dad will take the hint I don't want to discuss this anymore are slim to none._

"I can see that. Why do you have it?" Her dad had this way of asking questions that sounded innocent, but were really laced with intention.

"I don't know; I guess it's kind of like my good luck charm. Plus, his goofy expression makes me smile." She held up the postcard next to her face and gave her dad an exaggerated smile, showing as many of her teeth as possible. "We make a cute couple, right?"

Her dad had to know the postcard had greater significance than she was admitting, but he dropped the subject. Veronica walked over to the bulletin board hanging above her desk and pinned the postcard up.

"See. It's like he's my guardian angel."

"Should I be offended that I'm no longer your favorite balding detective?"

Tapping the postcard, she smiled at her dad sweetly. "Don't worry, daddio, there's space in my heart for both of you. Plus, he has a mustache."

"Fair point. Goodnight, sweetie."

"Good night dad. See you in the morning." Keith walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Barely one day back, and she was already exhausted by the weight of her thoughts and emotions. Things that she only ever seemed to think and feel when she was back in Neptune.

From one of the drawers in the wardrobe, she pulled out the sweatshirt Logan had gifted her and a pair of plaid boxer shorts, she was fairly certain had also been Logan's at one time. She examined the elbows of the sweatshirt and noticed they had almost been worn through from constant wear.

_Closure does not mean no longer sleeping in his sweatshirt._
As uncomfortable as parts of her earlier conversation with Alicia had been, she almost wished it hadn't ended so soon. She wanted to be able to explain to her that she wasn't holding on to be cruel. Neither she nor Logan had remained celibate. They knew enough about one another's lives to know that. Skyler was her most recent and most significant relationship since Logan, but he hadn't been the only one. If dating other people and not seeing one another for more than a year didn't constitute as letting one another go, she didn't know what did.

Veronica turned on her side, and covered her mouth with one of the sweatshirt sleeves, trying to fall asleep as she breathed in the smell.

Veronica pulled out of the Neptune Grand parking garage and felt a wash of guilt. Logan had just learned the truth about Norman Phipps, and looked more broken than she had seen him in a while. Her heart ached as he expressed his desire for honest to goodness family. She felt even worse when she admitted to him that she had to leave him alone to spend time with her own honest to goodness family. Her dad had planned a father/daughter movie and dinner night and Logan had insisted she go, despite her insistence that she cancel to stay the night with him.

She wasn't more than five minutes from The Grand when her cell phone rang.

Balancing it on her chin, she answered. "Dad, I'm only 10 minutes away. Don't think just because I am a little late that you get to pick the movie."

"Actually, honey, you can definitely pick the movie. And you can order whatever you want for dinner."

Wary of his offer, she responded cautiously. "What's the catch?"

"I won't be there to eat it with you."

She groaned and raised her voice slightly. "Keith Mars, are you standing me up?"

"Veronica Mars! Yes I am."

While she was disappointed to not spend the time with her dad, she was already looking in her rearview mirror, prepared to turn around. "The PI business calls?"

"I just got a tip about that child support case I've been working on. The ex-husband was spotted in Tucson." As he spoke, she heard the sound of a suitcase zipping. He really was on his way out the door.

"Need me to pull over and book your ticket?"

"Already got it taken care of. I'm sorry, honey, I'll make it up to you."

She wanted to tell him it wasn't necessary. That him cancelling on her, was in a weird way, one of the kindest things he could have done. But, she opted to capitalize on his guilt instead. "For this, I'm making you watch Labyrinth again." Tapping a rhythm on her steering wheel, she smiled both because how she knew he'd react, and

His answering groan made her laugh. "But you hate David Bowie in spandex."

"Not as much as you." Tapping out a rhythm on her steering wheel, she pulled up to a stop light, prevented from taking a u-turn by the median in the road.
“You’re evil.”

“And you’re the one who spawned me. See you in a couple days.” She was already making the move to disconnect the call, when she heard her dad clear his throat. Never a good sign.

“Oh, honey.” His voice was deceptively casual, but she knew better.

“Yeah dad?”

“Do I need to remind you where your bed is?” And there it was.

Thankful that he wasn’t there to see the grin that spread across her face, she shook her head. “Nope, got that covered.”

“I’m sure. Love you, sweetie.”

“You too, dad.”

Veronica tossed her phone on the passenger seat, looked in her rear view mirror, and flipped a u-turn, managing to only get honked at by two cars in the process.

Parking her car back in the garage at The Grand, she arrived back on Logan’s floor only 15 minutes after she had left. Using her key card to enter, she expected to see Logan sitting on his couch clutching a bottle of scotch, and was surprised to see him in the exact place she had left him; standing on the balcony, staring at the skyline.

“Alright,” she said loudly, clapping her hands together.

Logan turned around to look at her, startled at her entrance and stared.

Ignoring the vacant look in his eyes, she continued to speak in an upbeat tone. “Dad is in Arizona probably until Thursday, which means you have a new roomie for a couple days. I promise I’ll try to leave the toilet seat up.”

He turned back around, and continued to stare out over Neptune.

Taking a deep breath, she joined him on the balcony, putting her hand over his and also looking at the skyline. “So, what’s the plan for the night?”

“Veronica,” he started to protest.

She looked up at him and traced the line of his jaw, trying to make her voice both firm and reassuring. “I’m assuming your plan was to get drunk tonight?”

“Yeah.”

“How drunk?”

“Shitfaced.” He turned his cheek into her hand, and she could see the way he both wanted to push her away and hold her close in that moment. Neither of them were particularly great at knowing what to do with themselves in the midst of tragedy.

“Well, it’s been a while, but I’ve heard getting black out drunk is just like riding a bike.” She grabbed his right hand with her own and pulled him back into the suite.

He stopped following her, coming to a halt in the doorway. “Veronica, stop.”
She knew he didn't want her to see him like this, but she already had her defense in place if he tried to get her to leave. Dropping his hand, she held his head between her hands and kissed him lightly. "Logan, I'm not leaving you alone tonight. I don't have class tomorrow, so if you want to get drunk, let's do this thing."

He smiled at her and placed his hands over hers, which were still cradling his face. She actually saw the moment when he decided to let her help him, and she could have cried she was so relieved.

He kissed her back, and touched his forehead gently to hers. They stood that way for a full two minutes, him closing his eyes every once and a while before opening them again only to see that Veronica held his gaze.

"Alright. Let's get drunk." He let go of her hands and made a move to the mini-bar.

Shaking her head, she clucked her tongue at him. "Not so fast. We're not getting mini-bar drunk."

He looked legitimately confused as he stared down at her. "Why not?"

"Because if I am getting black out drunk, I intend to do so in a public place where I am able to loudly shame both myself and you."

Veronica's heart lightened slightly as she heard him laugh. "Go big or go home, huh bobcat?"

"Exactly. Plus, I'd like to keep the suite reserved exclusively for fun activities, like makin' whoopee. Don't want to sully it with my puke." She turned to walk away and felt Logan's arm wrap around her waist and turn her back around.

He gripped her tightly to his chest and placed a series of light, open-mouthed kisses on her lips. He didn't say anything, but she could almost hear the words 'thank you' as he kissed her once more.

Two hours later, they lay in bed together, Logan on his stomach with his face turned towards her, Veronica curled up to him on her side, lazily running her fingers up and down his back. While she knew the combination of really good gin and even better sex was going to leave her with a headache in the morning, she was feeling good at the moment.

Something about the way Logan was still raw with emotion was drawing her out in a way that was rare. She caught his eye and her fingers stopped their movement.

"Don't stop," he said.

She smiled at him and resumed tracing the lines of muscle in his back. As she watched him close his eyes, she felt a swell of protectiveness in her gut, and thought she'd do anything to prevent him from being hurt again. The thought came to her that this must be how he felt about her all the time.

"Logan," she whispered directly into his ear.

"Hmm?"

Placing a hand on his shoulder, she asked, "Why did Norman mention Harry and David's?"

Logan opened one eye and looked at her. For a moment she didn't think he had the emotional wherewithal to give her an explanation, but she held his gaze, hoping he saw the compassion there.

Determined to respect his decision if he didn't speak, she was a little surprised when he began to tell the story, his eyes locked with hers the entire time.
Her hands kept tracing the lines of his back as he spoke, but when he finished, she grasped both of his hands in hers, causing him to roll to his side so they were face to face. She moved closer so her head was tucked under his chin.

There was so much she wanted to say, she was afraid the words wouldn't come out right. "You know studies have shown that smell is the sense that is the greatest trigger of memory," she mused.

"Yeah," he responded tentatively, unsure of where she was going with this.

Her thumb moves in small circles along his knuckles as she spoke. "Pears are obviously a bad one. Do you have any good ones?"

"Good whats?"

"Smells. Ones that trigger good memories?" She tilted her head back to look up at Logan's face.

Looking down at her, he ran one of his fingertips down the bridge of her nose and then traced the outline of her lips.

"Yeah, I have one." Veronica didn't say anything, but looked up at him expectantly, then smiled when he laughed despite himself. "It was spring of our freshman year of high school and I had to stay after school for some reason."

"Probably detention." She kissed his cheek and then burrowed her face into his chest, placing a kiss there.

"Probably. I walked outside to meet my driver and I saw you sitting outside, angrier than I had ever seen you."

"I remember that." Nodding into his skin, she grasped Logan's hands tightly and felt him squeeze back. "My mom and I were supposed to go on a mother/daughter shopping trip and she never showed up. At first I was worried, but then my dad called to let me know mom wasn't feeling well, as in she had had too much vodka, and asked me to get a ride home with Lily."

He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, and she felt momentarily guilty that the conversation switched to make her the focus. "Why didn't you?"

"I was too embarrassed to tell her what was going on." She snuggled a little closer to Logan. "What happened next?"

"You don't remember?"

"I do, but I want you to tell it."

He smiled and kissed the crown of her head. "I offered you a ride home and you said no. You said you wanted to walk off the anger, so I sent the driver off to wait for me at your house and I insisted I walk the four miles with you."

"My hero."

"Do you want to hear the rest? If so, zip your lip."

Veronica made like she was locking her lips with a key and then pulled Logan's chin down and placed the imaginary key on his tongue. He grinned and pretended to swallow the key, preventing her from unlocking her lips. In moments like these, she wasn't entirely certain as to who was
comforting who.

"You didn't say a single word to me as we walked. I knew something was wrong, and that you weren't going to tell me, so I just kept blabbering. About halfway through the walk, it was as if the skies opened up and poured out every ounce of water on our heads. It was the heaviest I had ever seen it rain in Neptune. We were soaking wet within 45 seconds and, given your mood, I didn't know how you were going to respond."

As he spoke, she had allowed her eyes to fall shut.

"Veronica, did you fall asleep on me?"

The sensation of his finger running along her cheekbone caused her to open her eyes. She pursed her lips as if they were still locked and shook her head.

He rolled his eyes, and even she could see the way that gesture belied how much he cared about her. It was all over his face.

"So, I looked at you, absolutely sure you were going to throw a fit, but you did the most amazing thing. You burst out laughing. And then you threw your backpack and books on the ground and started jumping in the water, and you grabbed my hand and made me do the same thing. The rest of the way to your house we jumped, and splashed, and I think we may have even sang at a certain point." He looked down at her again. "Do you remember?"

She nodded her head, both because she was still playing their silence game, and because she found herself choked up by his nostalgia. They had so few truly pure and untainted moments between them.

"Well, any time it rains, and the air gets that fresh smell that it only does when it first starts to rain, I think of that day."

She pretended to talk though her pursed lips, but it just came out with muffled noises.

Logan sighed in response, but she saw the way he was amused, a lightness in his entire demeanor unmarked by the events of the night. How he could find so much peace by being with her, despite everything that had happened that day, mystified her.

He pretended to take out a secret key from behind his ear, and unlocked her mouth. Before she could ask her question, Logan grabbed the back of her head and pulled her in for a kiss. She smiled against his lips as he kissed her, which caused him to smile in response.

When they separated, Veronica asked, "Why is that a good memory? Because we had so much fun?"

"Yes. But mostly because it was the first time I ever remember wanting to kiss you." Her expression made it evident that this was new information to her.

As he ran a hand up and down her arm, she played with the hair at the nape of his neck. His fingers stilled when she shivered and switched over to playing with the strands of her hair splayed out across his pillow.

She turned her head to place a kiss on his wrist, and then grabbed his hand, holding it against her chest. "Why didn't you?"

"Veronica, you were dating Duncan."
"Oh yeah." She laughed to herself, as she bit down slightly on her thumbnail, grinning at how the mere mention of Logan kissing her was enough to make her forget she had been dating someone else at the time. "It's a good thing you didn't, because I probably would have kissed you back, and that would have been a disaster."

"Maybe," he responded.

"You're right, that's a good memory." Veronica snuggled into his side and pulled the sheet behind her a little lower, exposing her bare back. She wrapped his arms behind her and looked up at him. "My turn." she said, before closing her eyes.

Logan took the hint, and began trailing his fingers up and down her spine. The way he held her tight told her he was grateful she had stayed despite his insistence earlier that he wanted to be alone.

As her breathing started to deepen, Logan's voice called her out of almost sleep.

"Veronica," he whispered.

"Hmmm?"

"What about you? What's a smell that reminds you of a happy memory?"

"You." She couldn't remember actually thinking the word. It simply fell out of her mouth, unplanned, but it felt right to admit it, so she made no move to take it back.

His fingers stopped moving, and his arm around her waist pulled her closer. "What?"

"You." This time she said it into the skin of his neck.

She wanted to be able to give him that intangible thing that he longed for between him and his brother. The thing that she had with her dad. That knowing and being fully known. In the long run, she knew she was too limited to be able to give him that, but maybe in this moment she could.

His voice, almost cracking, came through to her again as he placed a kiss just below her ear. "So, why is that a happy smell? What does it remind you of?"

Just before she drifted off fully into sleep, an answer pulled itself from her lips. "Home."

Lying in bed, the sleeve pressed up to her face, Veronica breathed in whatever traces of Logan remained and mulled over Alicia's words. She knew that Alicia had been right. She hadn't let go of Logan, not completely. And as sleep took over, and she sank further into the mattress, she acknowledged her true wants, for the first time in a long time.

*I want him, not the memory of him, but him.*

Now what, Veronica Mars? Now what?

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Chapter End Notes

I have had this done and edited for a couple of days, but have been hesitant to post it, because it didn't quite go in the direction I wanted it to. It's all pretty fluffy still, but
know that Veronica and Logan both have mysteries and secrets, but it is only Veronica's first day back in town. I've written mysteries before, but not in a while, so we'll see how it goes when I get to the actual clue leaving and slow reveals.

I have ideas of where I think the story is going to go, but I don't want to force any of the characters to do something that doesn't seem believable. All of that to say, if you have a direction you'd like to see this go, let me know!
The following morning Veronica woke up suddenly from a dead sleep. All of her limbs felt heavy and weighed down like she hadn't moved once over the course of the night. She rolled over and looked at her bedside clock. 11:15 AM. Seeing the time, Veronica's eyes went wide at the realization she had slept more than 12 hours. She stretched out her limbs and begrudgingly sat up and rolled out of bed, putting her Stewie slippers on as she padded out of the room to go to the bathroom.

Slowly making her way to the kitchen, Veronica sniffed the air, hoping to smell bacon and eggs, and was a little disappointed to only smell the scent of the honey vanilla soap she had just used to wash her hands.

*Maybe dad was waiting to make breakfast until I got out of bed?*

She walked down the hall, expecting to see her dad at the breakfast island, sipping a cup of coffee and reading the Sunday paper. Instead she found an empty kitchen with the lights off, and the Sunday paper casually splayed across the island.

"Dad?" she called out. Veronica went back through the dining room, into the living room, and opened the front door to see that her dad's car was no longer parked in the driveway. Assuming he had gotten tired of waiting for her to wake up and opted to run a few errands, Veronica made her way back to the kitchen, hoping there was still coffee left in the pot.

She pulled a mug out of the cupboard, grabbed the half and half from the fridge, and gave up a silent hallelujah to see the pot was half full and the little red light was still on indicating it was hot. Next to the coffee pot, she saw a note, and her face scrunched up in displeasure recognizing her dad's handwriting.

*Good morning sleepyhead. Sorry to miss you, but I got an emergency call from Vinnie and he needed my help down at the station. Should be home by 5pm. I'm taking tomorrow off, so Monday will be father/daughter day.*

"Shit." Veronica poured herself a cup of coffee and began rearranging her to-do list to accommodate this bump in her Neptune schedule. She had anticipated being able to spend time with her dad on Sunday, and while he was at the office on Monday make her way over to the Neptune post office to try and get some additional information for her own case. Now she'd have to wake up early the next day and make her way to the post office first thing to avoid suspicion. Mac was supposed to get into town on Saturday, and Veronica still needed to figure out exactly what to tell her in order to get her to help without having to reveal too much of what was going on.

*Come on, Veronica. If you just told your dad, you'd be able to solve this case faster and maybe actually enjoy your break.*

Veronica shook the thought away. Never going to happen.

One thing was for sure. Despite her now open and available Sunday, she was in no uncertain terms going to see Logan. Yes, she had admitted to herself the previous evening she had not moved on. Yes, her heart beat a little more rapidly at the thought that he may still have feelings for her. Yes, a big part of her wanted to invite herself over to his house and just happen to wear her smallest bathing
suit to go swimming in. But an even bigger part of her knew that she wasn't brave in the same ways Logan was.

Veronica had risked it all once, showing up on Logan's doorstep a few weeks after he had broken up with her their freshman year at Hearst. She had jumped into his arms, and they had spent three additional blissful weeks together. It was the best their relationship had been since that brief time their junior year of high school.

After each breakup with Logan, her heart felt like it had been both twisted and flattened. Some days she would forget how to breathe and she'd catch herself holding a breath to the point where it made her lungs ache before she'd finally exhale. She had spent close to 2 ½ years of her adolescence dating Duncan Kane, and yet neither of their break ups caused her close to the amount of pain she experienced hearing a 19 year old Logan accuse, 'you never need anything'.

Logan didn't know any of this. Hell, no one did. She thought that Wallace had suspected, but it was one secret she intended to take to the grave. And if she saw Logan any more than she had to while she was in Neptune, she wasn't certain she'd be able to act rationally. Screw closure. Her new goal was survival.

In their sixth counseling session, Joanna finally managed to get Veronica to talk about her relationship with Logan. She wanted Veronica to see that there was a direct correlation between the amount she was willing to risk and how happy she was. "The greater the risk, the greater the reward."

Veronica had smirked and rolled her eyes. "You mean greater the potential for total annihilation."

Coffee poured, Veronica sat down at the island in the kitchen and noticed that her dad had set aside her favorite sections of the paper. She settled into the peace of being in her dad's home and decided to enjoy her day despite the unexpected complications.

Postponing real news, Veronica started with the Sunday comics. It was while chuckling softly at that day's Pearls Before Swine that Veronica heard the doorbell ring. She was almost certain that the doorbell was in her imagination, but then she heard it ring once more and she remembered she had texted Wallace and asked him to stop by.

Without looking through the peephole, Veronica opened the door to find Logan standing there, one hand casually picking a spot of wood on the door frame, with his head turned down looking at his feet.

Intruder alert! Intruder alert! All Veronica Mars defense mechanisms man your battle stations.

Veronica was all of a sudden painfully aware that she was wearing Logan's sweatshirt, Logan's boxers, and no bra. Thankfully he hadn't looked up to see her surprise, so she had a moment to readjust her countenance and affect disinterest at his sudden appearance.

"You're not my Wallace."

He smiled and lifted his head, his eyes naturally locking with hers. He took in her appearance and smiled even larger. "No, I'm not. But that is my sweatshirt."

"Actually you gave it to me, so it's my sweatshirt." Veronica crossed her arms, trying to hide the fact that the cool air was causing her to nip out under the almost threadbare hooded sweatshirt.

"Maybe, but those are definitely my boxers."
"Possession is nine tenths of the law. Let me guess, you were just in the neighborhood?"

Logan had stopped playing with the woodchip, and stood with his hands in his pockets. Veronica tried not to allow her eyes to drift over Logan and take in what he was wearing, but she couldn't help herself. He was wearing well fitted, dark wash jeans, and a lightweight heathered red hooded pullover. He looked put together, yet relaxed, and she wanted to punch him in the throat for not calling before he came over so she could at least brush her teeth.

"Actually, I was. I had an appointment a couple blocks away so I thought I'd stop by and say hello."

"You mean you graced the 05 zip code with the Echolls presence on a Sunday morning? Whatever did the middle class of Neptune do to earn such an honor?"

Logan's face tensed slightly, and Veronica knew she had unintentionally struck a nerve. She didn't know if it was the mention of their difference in economic status, or the implication that she saw him as an elitist. After another second of silence, Veronica realized that Logan was tense because he was deciding what version of the truth to give her.

She heard him let out a small puff of air and figured he had settled on the whole truth. "I was at my counselor's office."

"Logan Echolls is in counseling? God, Logan. How long are your sessions? Three, maybe four hours?" Veronica knew she was one to talk, and that she had misguidedly responded with the first words that came to mind. The moment they left her mouth she knew that they were the wrong ones.

She saw Logan visibly flinch and his eyes narrowed just slightly. He took a step back and shook his head at her. "You know what, it's too damn early in the day for this."

He began to walk away and Veronica quickly lunged forward to grab his arm and stop him from leaving. "Logan, stop. I'm sorry. I just woke up 20 minutes ago and have barely had any coffee. Apparently my wit is extra acerbic in the mornings. No wonder Wallace usually waits to leave his room until I'm gone for the day."

Logan had stopped walking away but his eyes were still turned down. Veronica lightly tugged on his arm. "Please, Logan, come inside for a little bit." She moved her hand from his arm to his hand and began walking him inside. "Or you can stand out here and tear my dad's house apart wood chip by wood chip. It's your choice." She let go and he wordlessly followed her, stepping aside to allow her to shut and lock the front door. Veronica swallowed, and pointed in the direction of the kitchen.

"The kitchen is through there, and there's plenty of coffee. Make yourself at home. I'm just going to go get dressed real quick." She nudged his shoulder slightly to get him going in the right direction, and then hastily made her exit to her room. There wasn't any time to conceive of an ensemble that would cause him to steel his breath, but there was time to put something on that made her feel less naked.

_Avoidance works a lot better when the person you're avoiding doesn't just show up at your house._

She settled on a t-shirt and jeans, and made her way quickly to the bathroom to throw her hair up into a ponytail and brush her teeth. What she needed was for time to slow down. She needed to have an hour, a day, a month to figure out what to do next. But Logan was sitting in her kitchen now, and the damn clock kept ticking.

She walked into the kitchen and smiled seeing him at the island, idly flipping through the sports section of the paper. She noticed he had taken her up on her offer of coffee. Logan looked up as she
walked in, his eyes hard and guarded. But then he took in the complete sight of Veronica Mars and his expression softened.

"Nice t-shirt. Is it ironic, or a tribute to Back Up?"

The third official member of the Mars family had been put down the previous year and while her dad kept mentioning getting a new dog had yet to do so. Veronica looked down, having already forgotten which t-shirt she had selected, and saw that it was her v-neck featuring a large picture of a pit-bull. It had the words "Young and Reckless" in large print across the top.

Veronica smiled back and shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe a little bit of both." She felt sitting next to Logan would be a bad idea, so she opted to resume her position from the previous evening and leaned over the side of the island across from him. She reached forward for her coffee cup, and realized she was unintentionally allowing Logan a clear view down the front of her shirt. Veronica pulled back, a faint blush rose to her cheeks, and she hoped that if Logan noticed he wouldn't think she was trying to repeat her antics from the previous day.

"You okay, Veronica?" Logan asked, raising his coffee mug to his lips to take a sip.

"Peachy keen."

"You mentioned Wallace when you opened the door. Is he supposed to come over?"

"Unfortunately I left one of my text books in his carry on and forgot to grab it from him before we parted ways. He promised he'd drop it off this morning."

Logan slowly shook his head and pursed his lips in mock disapproval. "What's that saying about all work and no play?"

"Hey, it may make Veronica a dull girl, but this dull girl is at the front of the pack. I was supposed to hang out with my dad today, but he got called in by Vinnie."

"That means you got what you wanted, right? Your dad distracted so you could do whatever you needed to this Christmas break?"

Veronica didn't try to deny that she had ulterior motives. Logan had figured it out, and there wasn't any point in pretending he hadn't. "I wanted him distracted, slightly, not guilty of reckless abandonment."

Logan laughed and raised an eyebrow at her, taking a sip of his coffee. "You always want it all, don't you Mars?"

Veronica was pleased she had just proven to herself she could speak more than a single sentence to Logan without unintentionally or intentionally cutting him down. But, the world renowned Veronica Mars curiosity wouldn't allow her to keep the conversation light for long. "So, uh, your counselor's office is nearby?"

He sat his mug down and began to slowly rotate it between his hands. "Nice segue." He had raised his eyebrow as he spoke and didn't even try to hide his sarcasm. "Yeah, it is." He looked up and saw her forehead scrunched up, trying to put together pieces of a puzzle. "Is that surprising?"

*Not any more surprising than the fact that I've been seeing a counselor for the past six months.*

"Yeah. No. I mean, a little. I figured 09ers only allowed their own kind to shrink their heads."
Damn it, Veronica! Logan is trying to have a relatively barb free conversation with you this morning and you just can't keep it together.

For the second time that morning, Veronica opened her mouth to apologize, but was cut off by Logan's smirk and an explanation. "The last thing I need is some elitist asshole charging me $500 an hour solely to use me as an anecdote in whatever pseudo pop-psychology book he's currently writing or to use his position as my doctor to weasel an appearance on Oprah. The 05 zip is just fine with me."

"Do you always meet on Sundays?"

"Yeah. It may be a little paranoid, but I don't want to risk some low life looking to score a quick buck taking my photo in the waiting room. My counselor, Thomas, opens up the office just for me on Sundays."

Not for the first time, Veronica was reminded that Logan's life had always been tinted with shades of the peculiar. Having known Logan as long as she had, she always saw his wealth and status as simply an attribute of what made him him. Just like his brown eyes and dark hair were parts of him, so was his wealth. His eye color, while decidedly splendid, didn't define him, and she never thought his trust fund did either. She forgot that not everyone saw it that way.

Veronica leaned back and took her coffee mug with her after hearing this latest admission. She nodded her head, and turned back to the coffee pot to pour herself a little more. "How long have you been in counseling, if you don't mind me asking?"

Logan cleared his throat, and paused again before answering. "A little over a year and a half."

Veronica felt her body tense. It couldn't be a coincidence that Logan started to see a counselor just about the same time the two of them had stopped communicating, could it? She wondered if Logan's counselor had convinced him she was an unhealthy person to be around and that's why he had all but cut her out of his life.

Calm down, Veronica. Breathe.

Veronica took a sip of her coffee and allowed the hot liquid to slowly ease its way down her throat. She turned around and smiled, as if this information didn't at all surprise her. She was determined to be the picture of ease.

"Has it helped?"

"I'd like to think so. But, you'd really have to ask the people in my life. They'd be better able to answer that question than I am."

"Are you still a jackass who can't stop himself from making the low blow comment?"

"Of course."

"And do you pride yourself in making almost anything a sexual innuendo?"

Logan laughed good naturedly at her teasing. "Naturally."

"Do you still have an unnatural fascination with wearing the color orange?" She scrunched her nose at the memory and he could almost see her brain conjuring the image of him in orange cargo pants.

"No, thank God. House fire, remember?"
"Oh yes. Do you still prefer to punch first, talk later?"

Logan went from silly to serious in a moment and he looked down at his mug, almost embarrassed, or maybe pained at a memory. "You still see me that way?"

Veronica didn't know how to respond. *Shit. Apology number three?*

Again, Logan interrupted her thought process. "I haven't gotten into a fight in close to two years, Veronica. I never have more than two drinks when I go out, don't try to drive while intoxicated, floss my teeth daily, and always help grandmothers cross the street."

"Logan, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply anything, I just don't know much about your life right now."

"And yet you feel like you have the right to comment on anything and everything?"

Veronica felt properly reprimanded and she placed her mug carefully on the counter. She self-consciously rubbed her right hand up and down her left arm. If it hadn't been her father's house, she would have left.

She heard Logan clear his throat and she felt it in her gut more sharply than any punch. He could tell she wanted to leave and he was commanding her attention. "So, what do you think Veronica? Now that I've answered your questions, do you think counseling has helped me?"

In their brief interactions over the past two days, neither had dared to touch the subject of their prolonged absence in one another's lives. To bring it up meant that it would need to be addressed, and while Veronica had every intention of addressing it during her time in Neptune, she had wanted to do it in her own way and on her own terms. At Logan's question, Veronica had forgotten that she had ever resolved to do such a thing. "Logan, I haven't really been a fixture in your life for a while now. What the hell do I know?"

Logan locked Veronica in place with his stare, not smiling, but not quite scowling either. It was the same stare he would fix on her their junior year of high school when his feelings toward her had begun to thaw. When they weren't quite enemies but not quite lovers. She felt like he was sizing her up, but she didn't know what he was looking for.

Veronica wasn't feeling like herself. She had been so certain when she left Chicago that this would be the trip where she would end things with Logan once and for all. Then she had been even more certain when she had woken up that day that that was an absurd notion and what she really needed was to stay away from him. What the hell did Joanna know? She had only gotten her PhD in Psychology from Stanford.

And now, with Logan proving with every word that while he was still Logan he wasn't the same jackass she had left behind her freshman year of college, she just wanted him to leave. She was about to make a lame excuse as to why he needed to go, when the distinct and loud sound of her stomach grumbling broke the silence and Logan laughed.

"What do you have in there? An alien baby?"

"Ugh, no, but I went to bed on a full stomach and that always makes me a million times hungrier the next day."

Logan stood up and Veronica thought for a second that he had read her thoughts and opted to leave. She was surprised when he walked over to her and grabbed her hand, bringing her back to the side of the island he was just sitting on and indicated he wanted her to sit down.
"Sit. I'll make us some breakfast."

Veronica gasped in fake astonishment. "Logan Echolls cooks? What will it be this morning? Pop Tarts or peanut butter toast?"

"Actually, smarty pants, I was thinking of poached eggs, avocado and roasted red potatoes if that works for you."

Veronica couldn't hide the look of surprise her face currently held. Again, Logan laughed. "I may always be a jackass, but now I'm a jackass who knows how to cook." His comment put Veronica at ease. She had no idea why, but he was allowing all of the verbal missiles she had launched that morning to go without explanation or equivocation and now he was going to make her breakfast. Counseling looked good on him.

"Since when?"

"About a year ago. It was an assignment from Thomas. He challenged me to do something that I had always avoided because I assumed I wouldn't be any good at it."

"So, cooking? Did Wolfgang Puck fly down south for the winter to give you lessons?"

"No, it was Weevil's grandma."

Veronica choked slightly on the sip of coffee she had just taken. "You have to stop doing things that surprise me, Logan! My heart can't take it."

"I like surprising you."

"Wait, so if Mrs. Navarro taught you how to cook, does that mean…?"

"Yes, I now have the Navarro family recipe for chicken posole."

"And does that mean…?"

"Yes, if you're a very good girl and eat all of your vegetables, I will make you some while you're in town." Logan raised a finger and pointed it at her. "Maybe."

Veronica bounced slightly on her seat and rubbed her hands together in anticipation. "Oh, I will! I can almost taste it now." Veronica's stomach grumbled again, even more loudly than before. "Uh oh, I think my alien baby fetus just split and is now twins."

"You read the paper and drink your coffee, I'll make breakfast."

"Can I help?"

"Please don't." Veronica had to resist the very juvenile urge to stick her tongue out at him, and instead took him up on his offer. She grabbed the local section of the paper to flip through to read all the fluff stories. After a few minutes she looked up to observe Logan in her dad's kitchen. His back was turned to her, so she could watch him unguarded.

He moved around her dad's kitchen easily as he filled a pot with water and placed it on the stove top. She watched for a few minutes longer and then narrowed her eyes at his back: he knew where everything was. He instinctively opened the second drawer down beside the stove to pull out a slotted spoon for the poached eggs, the cupboard above the stove for the vinegar, the cupboard below and to the right for the box of kosher salt, and the bread from the breadbox on the far side of
the counter.

Unable to withhold a comment any longer, Veronica interrupted his concentration. "So, you seem to know your way around my dad's kitchen pretty well."

She sat the paper down and folded her arms on the island. Logan looked casually over one shoulder to see her watching him. He smiled before turning back to the stove, preheated the oven, and then joined Veronica at the island where he began to slice potatoes.

"I like your dad's kitchen. It's homey."

"Am I to guess that part of Mrs. Navarro's training was providing schematics for a well-organized kitchen?"

Logan continued to slice potatoes as he answered her, "No, but your dad has had me over for dinner a few times and I've helped him cook a little. And then I insisted I make family dinner a couple weeks ago to thank him for everything he's been doing for my case."

Veronica's face hardened and she gripped her folded arms firmly across her chest. "Family dinner? As in with my dad, Alicia, and Darrell?"

"That's the one." When Veronica didn't say anything, Logan looked up and saw her clearly displeased expression. He frowned at the sudden change.

"Huh! Interesting!" She managed to spit out.

Logan continued to prep breakfast, consciously aware that something he had said upset her. He'd look up occasionally to see her staring angrily out the window, clearly trying to decide if what she intended to say was worth it, and always electing to stay quiet. After a few close calls where he nearly sliced a finger while trying to figure out where he had gone wrong, he just focused on making breakfast, and hoped Veronica would open up while eating.

Veronica had no intentions of opening up. She knew she was being uncharacteristically transparent. That even if Logan hadn't been as tuned into her own emotions as he was his own that he would still have known something was wrong, but she couldn't make herself care. Interacting with Logan always made her feel like all her emotions had been sandblasted and left vulnerable to the elements. But hearing from him directly that he had been included in family dinner while no longer making any effort towards her to be her family specifically, made her feel like her already raw emotions had opened up into gaping wounds.

Veronica was startled from her introspection by the sound of the doorbell. Without a sidelong glance or a word, she ran into the living room and opened the door to find Wallace standing there holding her text book. Before he could say anything, Veronica grabbed his shirt collar and pulled him into her dad's house.

"Geez, Veronica, what's gotten you all agro?"

She let go of his collar and put a finger to her lips. "Shh, Wallace, not so loud. Logan is in the kitchen and I need your help to get rid of him."

Wallace simply rolled his eyes and massaged his brow as if a migraine had spontaneously developed. "What'd he do now?"

Veronica's eyes narrowed and she crossed her arms again. "Nothing," she said bitterly. "He did absolutely nothing."
"Wait, let me put that through my Veronica translator. Processing. Processing. 'He did absolutely nothing’ means that he didn’t do something he was supposed to do? Is that it?"

Veronica grabbed his arm and stepped close to him. "He's in there making breakfast now. You won't have to say anything, just nod your head and smile."

"Fine, against my better judgment I'll help, but I'd like to encourage you to go with the friendliest dismissal possible because tomorrow morning you're going to realize you're acting like a crazy person and the less you have to apologize for, the better." Wallace looked down and noticed Veronica's t-shirt. He chuckled quietly. "Well, you definitely got the reckless part right."

Veronica gave off a quiet huff of frustration and grabbed his arm, pulling Wallace towards the kitchen. Before taking the final step to face Logan, she took a few deep breaths, and then strode in casually.

"Logan, I am so sorry, but I forgot I told Wallace that if he brought me back my text book, I'd pay him back with lunch."

Logan looked at the pair who had just entered the kitchen and immediately knew he was being fed a lie. While Veronica was an accomplished liar, Wallace looked like he'd pay good money to be anywhere but in the middle of whatever was going on between him and Veronica. Wallace gave Logan a pathetic wave and looked behind him to the front door, as if he was trying to calculate whether or not he could outrun Veronica and be freed from this awkward moment.

Logan had just finished coating the potatoes in olive oil and seasoning them. He was about to put them in the oven, but instead placed the still cool pan on top of the stove top. "Why don't we just eat here? There's plenty for three." He crossed his arms in challenge and looked Veronica straight in the eye.

Veronica held his stare and crossed her own arms against her chest. "Unfortunately, Wallace had his heart set on a burger from Rick's. He was very insistent. Weren't you Wallace?" Logan looked at Wallace and smirked. Wallace was now sitting down at the island, finishing off Veronica's coffee, and flipping through the sports section. Logan could have sworn he heard Wallace quietly speak, "Leave me out of this."

"You're absolutely right, Veronica." Logan gestured to Wallace with one hand and clutched his forehead with the other, throwing his head back. "Look at him! He is chomping at the bit to get out of here. He is clearly wildly uncomfortable. You better go now."

Logan turned and pulled a container of saran wrap from one of the drawers, covered the potatoes, and threw them in the fridge. "Good to see you, Wally F."

"You too, Logie Bear. We still on for Friday?"

"Yeah, but I may have to work late, so let's push it to 8pm."

"Sounds good, man, see you then." Logan saluted him with two fingers then put his own coffee mug in the sink.

Veronica gaped at Wallace, and he simply winked at her.

Veronica stepped close to Wallace and lowered her voice, putting her mouth close to his ear "What the hell was that?"

"Hey, you may have put the kibosh on being friends with Logan, but some of us still like the guy."
She shook her head at Wallace, willing him to be on her side. "Wallace, you don't understand…" She trailed off when she remembered Logan was probably standing five feet behind her, but then frowned when she noticed that he had already left the kitchen. She walked quickly out to the living room.

"So, now you can't even manage to say goodbye?"

Logan closed the door a little more loudly than he intended and spun around to look at her. "Veronica, did I do something? Because one minute we were laughing and having a good time, and the next you're doing a pretty terrible job of covering up the fact that you want me out of your dad's house."

"It's complicated, Logan."

"Then uncomplicate it. Let's get dinner tomorrow. Catch up, like we said we wanted to."

"Sorry, I can't. Father/daughter day."

"Okay, how about Tuesday?"

Veronica simply shook her head 'no.' She needed to work on her case that day, and while her schedule could be rearranged, today had shown her she wasn't ready for closure with Logan, let alone 'catch up' time. Joanna would have to be content with the fact that Veronica hadn't killed the guy, but really that was the best she could do.

Logan pursed his lips and rubbed a hand through his hair in frustration. "Dammit, Veronica. What did I do?"

Veronica sidled close to him and patted his shoulder patronizingly. "Logan, you did absolutely nothing. Remember? Nothing's ever your fault."

"You know what, my initial instinct was right. It's too damn early for this. Call me when you're ready to be my friend again." He turned around and opened the door, stepping out onto the porch.

"Oh that's rich, Logan. What the hell is that supposed to mean?" she threw back at him.

He quickly turned around on his heels and stared at her. "Look, I obviously did something to piss you off. Not sure how or what it was, but when you're ready to talk and stop acting like a petulant three year old, give me a call."

"Excuse me? I'm being petulant? Do you even know the definition of the word?"

"Sulky, and ill-tempered. Veronica Mars personified." Logan stormed off; heat and anger rolling off him in waves.

Veronica didn't bother to respond or counter that sulky and ill-tempered had actually been trademarked by Logan Echolls in 2004. When she closed the door the tight band of control she had placed around her emotions while Logan was there snapped. She slapped the door frame several times with an open palm, and kicked it once for good measure.

"Well, that seemed to go well."

She jumped at the sound of Wallace's voice, having forgotten he was still there. Veronica turned around and marched past him, pointing a finger threateningly as she walked into the kitchen. "Don't start with me, Wallace."
Not at all scared of her threats, Wallace followed her as she fumed and angrily opened drawers and shut them louder than necessary. "Looking for something, V?"

"I'm hungry, and Logan was making me food, and then he started acting like an ass hat, and I'm still hungry." She stomped to the refrigerator, grabbed the pan of potatoes Logan had prepared, pulled off the saran wrap, turned the oven back on, and threw them in. She took an apple from the fruit bowl on the island and sat down with a huff.

"Sorry to interrupt what is clearly shaping up to be a fantastic tantrum, but Darrell is outside in the car waiting for me. We need to do all our Christmas shopping."

Veronica waved a hand at him dismissively. "Don't mind me. Just go."

Wallace walked over to Veronica and threw an arm around her shoulder. "Call me if you need to vent later." He released her shoulder and headed for the front door to show himself out, but not before throwing out one last comment. "He's a good guy, Veronica. I haven't always thought so, but I like the guy he is now."

He left the kitchen and Veronica groaned, slapping her head down on the cool granite of the island.

_I do too, and that's part of the problem. Damn Logan Echolls._

Veronica felt like a caged animal, pacing back and forth in every room, sitting down for 20 minutes at a time before jumping up to do something in a different room, only to repeat the same cycle. After Wallace left she ate more than half of the pan of potatoes and made a peanut butter sandwich to accompany it. She considered throwing out all of the avocados in the house simply because Logan had even mentioned them, but thought it might be going to extremes. Veronica managed to focus long enough to take notes and make flashcards for the first chapter of her genetics book, but focusing for that long simply wound her up even more.

Donning a pair of shorts and a tank top, Veronica grabbed her iPod and a house key and made her way to the beach. She loved her room at her dad's house, but her absolute favorite thing about it was that it was only a mile away from the beach, so she could run down to and then along the beach without having to bring her car. She selected the playlist she and Wallace had created for the half marathon they ran their first year in Chicago and lost herself in the driving down beats of the songs and the feeling of her feet hitting first pavement, and then as she ran further, hard and compressed sand. Veronica ran until her side ached, and then ran further until the ache had subsided. She looked at her iPod and saw she was on track 18, and she hadn't yet skipped a track. She was still pissed. So she kept running.

Veronica did her best to avoid thinking about anything other than her body moving because every time she did she saw damn Logan Echolls looking damn adorable preparing what was bound to be a damned good breakfast. Her lungs started to ache from the fast pace she had set, but she increased her pace even more. After another two minutes of a full out sprint in time to the rhythm of the song she was listening to, she stopped, hinged at the waist, and put her hands on her knees, taking in as much oxygen as possible. She stood up and began to walk in small circles to regulate her heart beat, and then for the first time her brain consciously recognized the song she was listening to and the lyrics rang in her ears:

_I'm in the corner, watching you kiss her / I'm right over here, why can't you see me?_

Veronica ripped the head phones out of her ears and threw them down on the ground, along with her iPod not caring if she broke either. She stomped her foot once, gave out a scream of frustration, and
then unceremoniously flopped herself backwards onto the sand, one hand put over her eyes to block out the sun. She felt like she might be on the brink of a complete and total nervous breakdown.

*I'm going crazy and I'm getting there in a jet plane.*

Veronica felt her sun being blocked and she didn't care who was standing over her, she just wanted them to leave. Before she could spit out an oft-used idiom that encouraged sexual intercourse with one's self, she heard the voice of the person who had driven her to her desperate run.

"I see we've moved on from petulant three year old and are now regressing to the terrible twos."

"Go away, Logan."

"Frustrated are we? If it's sexual let me know, and I can arrange a time to help you with that."

Veronica fisted a handful of sand and threw it in the general direction of the voice. "You show up at my dad's office, my dad's house, and now the beach. I'm thinking of taking out a restraining order."

"Which the judge will throw out as soon as I mention you put a tracker on my car."

Veronica still had her eyes closed but took the hand off of her face and held up two fingers. "Two trackers, actually." She heard Logan laugh in genuine amusement and she smiled lying on the sand.

Veronica loved happy Logan. Despite his current kindness towards her, she had put her heart on the line two years prior, and he had said no thank you. She couldn't get attached again. She wouldn't let herself.

"Besides, Veronica, anyone can tell that I was here first." Veronica opened her eyes and pushed herself up on her elbows to see Logan standing in front of her with his hair mussed, the top half of his wet suit pulled down, and holding a surfboard.

*Damn Logan Echolls with his damn abs.*

"You went surfing? You hate surfing in the afternoon."

Logan ruffled his hair with his free hand and gave a slight shrug. "Well, you weren't the only one who was feeling frustrated." He held a hand out to Veronica and she took it. With one quick motion he had her standing on both her feet. She dropped his hand and then picked up her iPod, now conscious of the fact that she may have broken it. She turned it over a couple times and saw it was relatively unscathed.

"I should head home," she said to no one in particular.

"I'm leaving too. I'll walk you to your car."

"Not necessary, I ran here."

"Holy shit, Veronica? You ran here?! That's gotta be more than eight miles from your dad's house."

She looked at Logan and smiles. "Yeah, well, I didn't really plan it. I just felt like running."

Logan grimaced and gestured at her with his head to follow him. "Come on, Forrest Gump, I'm giving you a ride home."

"Logan, you don't have to do that."
"I know, but I'm going to." Logan started walking in the direction of his car, and it pissed Veronica off to no end that he just assumed that she would follow after him. Before she realized it, she was doing just that.

They reached Logan's car, neither saying a word to one another. Logan unlocked the car, and Veronica sat in the passenger seat, waiting for Logan to secure his surfboard to the roof and change out of his wet suit. As uncomfortable as she felt sitting in Logan's car, sweaty from running for more than an hour, she was grateful she wouldn't have to make the long walk home. She hadn't really thought about the consequences of running full speed ahead in one direction. Veronica was starting to get antsy waiting for Logan, and she looked outside to see him take off his wet suit and throw a hooded sweatshirt on before opening the back door and tossing in his duffel bag.

He opened the driver side door and slid in, handing Veronica a water bottle as he did.

"You're not changing?" she asked.

"Nah. I'll just wait to do it at home." He started the car and left the parking lot, knowing he only had 20 minutes before he reached her dad's place to have this conversation. "So, are we going to talk about why you were so upset earlier?"

"No."

Logan could feel the heat rise to his cheeks and he willed himself to take a few breaths and calm down. "Why not?"

Veronica was looking out the window, twisting and untwisting the cap of the water bottle, occasionally taking a sip. "Because I don't want to," she answered softly.

There didn't seem to be anything else to say, so Veronica didn't offer another answer, and Logan didn't bother to ask another question. The short drive ended in silence.

When he pulled into the Mars' driveway, Veronica unbuckled her seat belt before he had even put the car into park. Her eyes never met his and her voice was barely audible when she muttered a simple, "Thanks" and opened the car door.

Logan was reeling. Four hours earlier, she was prickly. She went from prickly to friendly pretty quickly, and then friendly to dismissive even faster. Now she was morose and it was all pissing him off to no end.

*I can't keep letting her do this to me.*

Logan grabbed Veronica's hand and pulled her to face him before she could leave the car. "Veronica, if this is how it's going to be while you're in town, then maybe we don't need to spend any time catching up."

Veronica pursed her lips, nodded, and then exited Logan's car, quietly shutting the door behind her. He watched her as she untied her running shoe, removed the key from the lace, and entered her house. He sat in his car for close to a minute, reminding himself to breathe in and out. Everything had to be on Veronica's terms, and she had made her terms this time painfully clear.

*Alright, Veronica. I'm done.*

He pulled out of the Mars' driveway, certain that this time he was really going to be able to let her go.
Veronica stood in the shower, allowed the hot water to cascade down her back, and leaned her head against the cool tile. "Dammit, dammit, dammit!"

She knew she had just effectively pushed Logan away and that she had made it abundantly clear she didn't even want his friendship. The thing was she didn't want his friendship; she craved it. She had been strong for so long in so many areas of her life, but the thought of sitting Logan down and demanding an explanation as to why he cut her out of his life almost two years ago made her feel weak and defenseless.

Since the first time they dated, Logan had been abundantly clear on what he wanted from Veronica: love, romance, matching tattoos. Veronica was less clear on what she wanted from Logan and more times than not offered him friendship in return for his declarations of love. But now he was the one offering friendship and it felt like a slap in the face. She told herself if she couldn't have him the way she wanted, it was best to push him away; otherwise both of them would get hurt.

She got out of the shower and made her way to her bedroom to get dressed. She towel dried her hair and heard her dad open the front door and lock it behind him. He was forty-five minutes late, but it was more on time than she had been expecting.

She twisted her hair up off her neck and fastened it with half a dozen bobby pins before heading to the kitchen where she knew she'd find him with a glass of milk and half a dozen of the cookies she had baked in her post-run haze. Not one to disappoint, there he was sitting at the counter, currently dunking a cookie into the coffee mug of milk.

"Well, I'd ask how your day was, but I'm currently eating the fruits of your labor."

Veronica responded with a tight lipped smile. She had been tempted to slip laxatives into the cookie mix to get back at her dad for withholding some key information from her, but having been accused of acting like both a three year old and a two year old in one day, she wanted to avoid any additional allusions to behaving like a frat boy.

"How was work?" She grabbed a cookie for herself and bit in with a little more force than necessary.

"Pretty good. We made lots of progress on the case I'm helping with. I'll tell you all about it at dinner; see if those deductive reasoning skills are still as sharp as they used to be. What'd you do today, besides baking these wonderful pillows of sugary confection?"

Veronica placed both palms on the counter and affected an easy expression. "Not too much. Slept in, studied for a little bit, went for a run."

"Sounds nice."

"Mmm-hmm. It was. Before I went on my run your new best friend forever Logan Echolls stopped by. He said it was to see me, but I think it was actually to see if you were free for another man date sometime soon."

Keith swallowed his bite of cookie. "Logan mentioned he's come over a few times for dinner, huh?"

"And that he cooked for family dinner. You know, the family that I thought I was a part of, and was unaware now included Logan."

"So the two of you caught up?"

"Yeah, a little. And then we humped like monkeys right on the counter where you're sitting." To emphasize her point she put both hands behind her head and gave a small pelvic thrust.
Keith pushed back from the counter suddenly, almost stumbling to the ground, and knocking the stool over in the process.

"Veronica Anne Mars!"

"Don't worry, daddy. No glove no love. And we disinfected the counter afterwards." Veronica looked off into the distance to try and capture the memory. "I think."

"Please tell me you're joking."

Veronica smirked at him and placed a hand on her chest, taking on a shy and coquettish demeanor. "What, dad? Would that make you upset? To find out that your daughter and Logan Echolls had a secret relationship that you knew nothing about, only to have one member of that relationship unceremoniously drop a bomb on you?"

Veronica backed herself up to the counter beside the stove top and placed her hands behind to jump up and sit down. She leaned back and allowed her legs to dangle off the side of the counter, moving them slightly back and forth. Her dad was still standing by the island, staring at the counter top. She laughed and was moved to take pity on him. "We didn't have sex, dad. I got mad at him, kicked him out of the house, and then we had a rather tense run in on the beach later. It was all depressingly familiar."

"Sweetie, throwing Logan Echolls out of the house is my move. Get your own thing."

Veronica laughed again and looked up to see her dad staring at her. If she didn't know better, she would think it was pity she saw in his eyes. He opened his mouth to ask a question, and then thought better of it, allowing her to continue to talk.

"Why didn't you tell me dad?"

Keith put the stool upright under the counter but chose not to sit back down. While he knew Veronica had just intended to get a rise out of him, the idea of her and Logan having sex where he ate breakfast was a little more than he could handle.

"Sweetie, you made it pretty clear a couple years ago that Logan was an off-limits topic of conversation." She opened her mouth to disagree with him. "You know it's true. You didn't exactly plug your ears and shout, but it didn't seem above you to do so."

Veronica nodded her understanding and didn't bother to refute what he was saying.

"Come on, kid. I can't tell you everything, but I'll tell you what I can." He walked over to where Veronica was perched and grabbed her hand, pulling her into the living room where the two could sit comfortably on the couch.

"Logan came to me about two months ago and asked me to investigate something for him. I refused to let him pay, so he made me promise his case would be my last priority after my work at the sheriff station and any paying cases that came in. When I found a little piece of information a couple weeks later, I called him in and the two of us got to talking. I know that you know this, Veronica, but he doesn't really have a family. So I had him over to the house and we grilled steaks. And then I had him over two or three other times. Just dinner and some sports talk."

Veronica didn't know why, but she could feel tears start to build in the corners of her eyes. "What you're investigating for him must be really bad, huh?" She looked up, her bottom lip trembling just slightly despite her best efforts to will it still. "It's pretty bad?"
Keith smiled sadly and tucked a strand of hair that had fallen from her twist behind her ear. "Not worse than anything else he's experienced."

"That doesn't instill me with much confidence, dad."

"Logan wanted to return the favor and make dinner for me, so I invited him to family dinner without thinking. I didn't mean to keep it a secret, and then I didn't know how to bring it up."

For a long time all Veronica had wanted was for her dad to accept and know Logan and now it seemed like he was well on his way. But she wasn't a part of it. "You promise that when he's come over, the two of you haven't talked…have the two of you talked about…" Veronica trailed off and then gestured to herself, embarrassed at what she was asking.

"No. Although I know he's wanted to."

"You know more about his life right now than I do."

"Come on, sweetie, let's go get some dinner. Emotions always feel less extreme when one has a belly full of food. I'm thinking we can go to Luigi's. They changed the recipe…"

"…of their Tiramisu. I know. I hear it's good." Keith laughed, not certain how she got this information, but not at all surprised she was one step ahead as always. She tucked another strand of hair behind her ear and forced herself to smile, although it was thin and didn't reach her eyes. "Let me just grab my coat and then we can go."

Veronica stood up and noticed the sad look her dad was throwing her way. "Dad, I'm fine. Just let me have the ride to Luigi's to stare despondently out the window, and then I'll be back to my old self." She bent down and kissed him on the forehead. "I promise."

He watched her go and shook his head both at her and himself. He was foolish to think that things with her and Logan would snap into place easily. It was clear that he didn't have as many facts about their relationship as he had thought. He felt certain that each of them still had feelings for the other, but for some reason neither believed the other reciprocated. He had kept his word to Veronica and done his best to never mention her to Logan, but he was beginning to see this was one area where listening to his daughter wasn't the best course of action. Keith stood up to grab his keys and as he slipped his wallet into his back pocket, mused to himself.

"When did I become a fan of Logan Echolls?"

Chapter End Notes

When I first posted this chapter, I ended up pulling it from fanfiction a couple days later. That was a direct result of getting some really fantastic feedback, specifically from ShanghaiLily. Because of that I was able to fix some of the problems w/ this chapter that I couldn't quite get my hands around at first.
On the way home from Luigi's, Veronica was in a fit of rage. It was the sort of driving anger that caused Keith to inventory his actions for the past six months just to make sure he hadn't done anything that she could now use against him. She had been silent for about thirty seconds, but then found her voice with a new list of complaints. "I mean, where do they get off pulling this kind of crap? And everyone is just letting them get away with it. Seriously, dad, where is the justice?"

"I know, Veronica, I know."

"I mean, changing the Tiramisu recipe is completely acceptable. It was an upgrade, but I don't care how much they insist otherwise, what I ate was not bruschetta."

"It was one of many…"

"Not you too dad, not you too. Bruschetta is tomatoes, and garlic, and olive oil. Not eggplant, and definitely not goat cheese." Veronica paused. "My ravioli was delicious, though."

"So Luigi's will live to serve the people of Neptune another day."

"Yeah, I suppose." Veronica was silent for a few minutes as she watched the city go by in the almost completely dark night. "I miss having a car."

"Anytime you want the Saturn in Chicago let me know and I can drive it out."

"I don't know how to drive in the snow."

Keith pulled his car into the driveway and turned to look at his daughter. "You have it in you to watch a movie?"

"Only if I get both popcorn and ice cream."

"Second dessert?"

"If the Hobbits can do second breakfast than the Mars family can do second dessert."

They both opened their car doors and stepped into the pool of light that had been activated by the automatic sensors on her dad's garage light. True to her word, Veronica's mood had substantially improved when they had gotten to the restaurant. Keith could tell that Veronica had made a decision about her relationship with Logan, and his guess was that based on her improved mood it was a positive decision. He hoped that if he asked he might get a straight answer from her.

Veronica made it to the door first, and opened both locks with her key. "You pop the popcorn, daddio. I'll meet you in the living room in 10 minutes. Just want to change clothes."

Veronica went straight to her room and pulled out a pair of sweats from the wardrobe. She wanted to get as ready for bed as possible in case she got too tired to finish the movie.

She had told her dad 10 minutes, but her whole wind-down routine took closer to 20 minutes, and when she walked out of the bathroom she was not surprised to see her dad standing in her room. She was surprised to find him staring at the postcard she had brought from Chicago. He had been
intrigued by it the previous evening, and it seemed as if he was going to ask her about it again.

Rather than be bombarded by his questions, Veronica bit the bullet and volunteered the information. "Logan sent that to me junior year at UCLA."

Keith kept his eyes on the postcard and Veronica moved around her room, hanging up the jeans she had worn out to dinner, placing clothes in the hamper, and then eventually coming to stand beside her dad.

"You and Logan trade a lot of postcards?"

"Yeah, quite a few. Not so much lately, but a lot junior and senior year."

Her dad looked down at her with a bemused expression. Neither she nor Logan had mentioned this to him. "Why'd you bring it with you?"

"I told you. Poirot is my guardian angel." Keith looked at her and raised one eyebrow. "Because it's my favorite postcard Logan ever sent me."

"Why is that?" Veronica leaned forward and removed the postcard from the bulletin board. She wordlessly handed it to her father and sat down on her bed.

Keith flipped over the postcard and saw a short note in Logan's handwriting. Although she had clearly intended for him to read it, Keith glanced at Veronica to make sure it was okay. She gave a half smile and a quick nod, and he read the note that apparently held such significance for his daughter.

_As a P.I., Hercule Poirot has solved close to 100 cases. Amateur._ –Logan

Keith flipped the postcard over. Surely there had to be more to it than that, right? This postcard was significant enough to warrant his daughter traveling with it, and yet there were less than fifteen words, all quippy, with the exception of the boy's name. Even then, Keith imagined that if Logan could find a way to write a capital 'L' ironically he would have.

Veronica saw her dad's expression as he posted the card back up on the bulletin board and she knew he didn't get it. Hell, she wasn't even sure if she got it most days.

"So, why is that your favorite?"

"I don't really know. I guess because it reminds me of who I am. Or was. It reminds me that I was good at something, or at least Logan thought that I was good at something, and it makes me hope that maybe I'll be good at something like that again."

Keith made his way over to Veronica and sat down beside her. He took both of her hands in his and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Do you miss being a PI?"

"Some days, yes, but some days, no. I miss the puzzle, and I miss working with you."

"But the cheating husbands, dumpster diving, and bad stake out coffee?"

"Not so much." Veronica looked at her dad and wasn't certain how far she should push the honesty thing. She swallowed and went for broke. "I thought medical school would be the same kind of puzzle, but it's not. It's…well it's different, I guess."

"Remember how you asked me a question yesterday and requested that I answer it without any
follow up questions?" Veronica groaned, pulled her hands from her dad and gave him a light shove away from her.

"Let me guess. Tit for tat?"

"They are the rules we live by, sweetie. Do you still have feelings for Logan?"

Veronica opened her mouth several times to answer, and finally gave up, simply nodding her head slightly.

"You planning to tell him?"

The whole 'not speaking thing' seemed to go so well for her the first time she opted to just shake her head no.

"Why not?"

"Dad, I think we're stretching the limits of tit for tat, here."

"Maybe, but need I remind you…"

In a voice filled with as much male bravado as she could muster, Veronica finished, "…my house, my rules. I know." Veronica was playing with the cuticles of one hand with the thumbnail of her other. She was about to admit something that she was afraid put her in a pretty bad light, and earning her dad's displeasure was not something that excited her.

"I don't want to get into our whole history, dad, but by the time Logan and I started dating our junior year of high school…"

"Behind my back."

Veronica bumped his shoulder with her own. "Yes, then. By the time we started dating, Duncan and I had been broken up for more than a year and a half. I guess Duncan wasn't over me, but I didn't know that. I mean, he dumped me and was dating someone else at the time." Veronica stopped playing with her cuticles and tried to gain strength in her voice by placing her hands firmly on her knees. "But when Logan and I broke up that summer, I waited less than a month before I started dating Duncan again. At the time I didn't have any regrets, but I think about it now and it feels wrong. Like I did a bad thing by dating Duncan so soon after Logan."

"Veronica, you were eighteen years old. I had thrown Logan out of the apartment. It makes sense you wanted to be with someone who made you feel stable." Veronica shook her head slowly and smirked at her dad's memory. "What, sweetie?"

"It's just that, whenever I did something in high school you disagreed with, I was old enough to have known better. But whenever I'm too hard on myself looking back, you tell me I was just a kid." Keith simply wrapped an arm around her in support.

"I'm not saying Logan is the innocent in all of this. We all know he made a few mistakes." At her dad's snort of laughter, Veronica slapped his arm gently. "Okay, more than a few. What I am saying is that I guess I get where he was coming from."

"Careful not to rewrite history, Veronica. Logan was pretty unsteady in high school."

"Dad, what if after you and Alicia had broken up the first time she had started dating your best friend one month after the two of you split? Would you have acted like everything was fine and played
nice?" Veronica lightly shrugged off her dad's arm and began playing with her hands again. "I don't really know where you're going with all of this, Veronica."

"Yeah, I don't know either." She stood up abruptly and started moving around her room, straightening the pencils in the pencil cup on her desk, removing the push pins in her bulletin board and organizing them in a straight line, and eventually stopping in the middle of her room, feet planted steadily despite continually wringing her hands. "I guess what I'm saying is, that it's my turn. Logan gets to call the shots this time around. He wants my friendship, nothing else, and I don't have the right to ask for anything different. I owe it to him."

"Is that what you screaming at him this afternoon was? Being okay with his decision?"

Veronica looked embarrassed and hung her head. "Growing pains. Logan managed to sort of be my friend while I waved my relationship with his best friend under his nose. He let me move on, and just because I'm not ready to now, doesn't mean I can prevent him from doing so. He deserves better than that."

"Veronica, I don't think you know as much about what Logan wants as you think you do."

Veronica placed her hands firmly on her hips and narrowed her eyes. "And by that you mean?"

Keith knew with just a few words he could easily untangle this knot, but it wasn't his place. "Just talk to him. Be honest. And maybe apologize."

Veronica sounded out the word slowly as if it was foreign to her. "Apologize? What is this 'apologizing' you speak of?" At her dad's chastising look, she conceded. "Yes, dad. I'm going to apologize, but not tonight."

"Well that's good, because I have both Rear Window and North by Northwest."

"Hmmm, Jimmy Stewart or Cary Grant? Always a tough decision."

"Let's go with North by Northwest. I don't think I can handle another night of your Jimmy Stewart impression."

"My Jimmy Stewart impression is flawless!"

Keith stood up and kissed her on the cheek. "It's about as good as your Clint Eastwood."

"What's wrong with my Clint Eastwood?"

"So many things, kiddo, so many things."

The first postcard Veronica sent Logan was of James Dean smoking a cigarette. Her junior year of college had just started, and somehow she and Logan had avoided seeing one another for their whole sophomore year. She had expected to run into him when she visited her dad for Christmas, but it was not so subtly dropped in conversation by Wallace that Logan and Dick had gone to Vail and wouldn't return until after the holidays.

The first time she actually saw Logan was in LA, March of her sophomore year, and Logan didn't know he had been seen. Veronica was sitting outside studying at Espresso Cielo, absentmindedly dunking a biscotti into her latte when a slow tingle started at the base of her neck. It was the feeling she got whenever someone was watching her or standing over her shoulder. She looked behind her. 
No one. She looked around her. No one. Veronica bit off a bite of her biscotti, annoyed that her sixth sense was malfunctioning. Then she remembered there was a third scenario that also prompted the same spine tingling sensation: Logan Echolls being within 100 feet of her.

Panicked, she looked around quickly and didn't see him anywhere outside. She turned around and looked into the coffee shop, and there he was, quietly holding the hand of a tall long haired brunette girl. Veronica saw him tuck a strand of hair behind the girl's ear like he had done with her so many times. Veronica immediately put her text book back in her messenger bag, grabbed her biscotti, and left the latte unfinished. She had no idea if Logan saw her retreating form as it ran past the large set of windows, but she knew that the first time she talked to Logan was not going to be while he was draped around his flavor of the month.

The following week, Mac and Wallace drove to LA to spend a few days of their spring break with Veronica. Their first night there, the three gathered on Veronica's couch to watch *Battlefield Earth* and play their favorite drinking game: whenever a tilted camera angle was used, they took a shot. Thirty minutes into the movie, Veronica was happily buzzed, and uncharacteristically desirous of discussing Logan.

"But what were they doing in LA?"

Wallace shook his head, refusing to participate in anything even resembling girl talk. He clutched his shot gloss tightly, as if that would save him from the conversation. Mac sighed, knowing Veronica wouldn't let up until she got answers. "It was Sarah's birthday, and her favorite author was having a book signing at Vroman's. They were just in town for the day."

"Let me guess, her favorite author is Danielle Steel? No wait, Nicholas Sparks?"

"Actually, it's John Irving."

Veronica felt properly reprimanded. "Oh."

Veronica knew it was irrational, but even after all this time she still felt like he was her Logan, and that if he was going to lease himself out, she as his property manager must first be consulted.

"Yeah, oh. A Prayer for Owen Meany is Sarah's favorite book."

"It's a…It's a good book." Veronica's eyes flicked to the movie and saw another drink warranting scene. "Shot!" Mac, Wallace, and Veronica all poured a shot of tequila, with Mac doing her best to hide that she was only filling her glass halfway.

"Veronica," Mac somehow simultaneously slurred and shouted. "You're one of my best friends, but Logan is quickly becoming one too. And he couldn't wait for you anymore."

"What do you mean wait for me?" Veronica slammed her shot glass down on the table, causing the shot Wallace had poured himself to slosh and spill out on her coffee table. That was enough to gain Wallace's attention, and he jumped into the conversation which he had been doing his darndest to ignore.

"You told him he was out of your life, for good."

"I didn't say 'for good.'" Veronica took a shot for the hell of it. She didn't like being wrong about Sarah or being double teamed by two of her friends.

Mac, not realizing Veronica's shot had been voluntary, took another herself. "Well, then what did you say?"
Veronica abruptly stood up and walked briskly in the direction of the kitchen. Mac and Wallace turned around to watch her, uncertain if she was running from the conversation or going to the bathroom to vomit. They watched as she took a glass out of her cupboard, filled it with ice water from her fridge, and chugged it all without taking more than a breath. She placed the glass on the counter, and then steadied herself by resting her hands on the counter. "I said he was out of my life 'forever.'" Mac and Wallace scoffed at the lack of distinction. "What? There's a difference!"

"How is 'forever' any better than 'for good'?"

"Don't yell at me, Wallace. We're only 45 minutes into the movie and my head already hurts."

"Mac and I aren't trying to gang up on you, but you asked and we're answering."

"Wallace is right, Veronica. The thing about telling a guy who has been systemically abandoned by everyone in his life that you don't want to have anything to do with him is that he believes you, easily. Any other guy might have understood you were pissed and felt violated by the video and just taking it out on him, but Logan…"

Veronica didn't need Mac to explain, because she knew. It was the same reason he could go from close friend to chief torturer while they were in high school. Lily left him by dying, Duncan left him by retreating into a medicated cocoon, and so it clearly followed that Veronica was only moments away from leaving him. When Keith went after the Kanes for Lily's murder, Logan had gotten all the confirmation he needed. Being 15 and heartbroken and an idiot, he couldn't see it any other way.

"I know, Mac. Logan always expects it. He doesn't know when or why, but he thinks everyone will walk out." Veronica took another cup out of the cupboard, filled the new glass and the one she had just used with water and walked back into the living room, joining her friends on the couch. She handed each a glass of water. Mac simply held hers, not finished with the conversation, but Wallace chugged his gratefully.

"He's not going to call you, Veronica. If you want him back in your life in any capacity, it's going to have to be you making that first step. But, I don't think you should, for a while at least."

"Why not?" Veronica felt like a child being told not to touch the stovetop. She hadn't realized she wanted to call Logan, but having Mac tell her not to made it clear that that was exactly what she wanted.

Mac looked to Wallace for help, but he was refusing to make eye contact with either her or Veronica. Mac sighed, and continued to plug along as Logan's spokesperson. "Because he's happy with Sarah. I don't think it'll go the distance, but it makes him happy now, and I like seeing him happy."

"You think I'm going to screw it up?"

"I think you're a song he has had stuck in his head since he was 16."

Veronica laid down, placing her head in Mac's lap. "When did you get so smart? I hate it."

"Hearst is a really good school, Veronica."

"Sorry to make you two do this. You know, be in the middle of it all."

Wallace looked down at Veronica, amused to see her eyes more glazed than he had ever seen, but sympathetic to her obviously conflicting emotions. "You didn't make us do anything, V."

Mac played with Veronica's hair awkwardly. "Are you going to hold this against us? Make us both
sleep on the hardwood floors instead of the pull out?"

"Yeah, and you guys only get a single fitted sheet to cover up with."

Wallace nodded his head. "Of course."

"Seems fair," Mac agreed.

Veronica groaned and pitched her body forward to stand up. "Alright, I can't take any more shots. Mac, you can share my bed with me, and Wallace can take the couch." Mac didn't need to be told twice and stood up, immediately heading into Veronica's room.

"You two are giving up! We still have an hour of the movie to go."

"Yeah, but this is further in than we've ever gotten before." Veronica patted Wallace on the head. "Remember where the spare blankets and pillows are?" Wallace nodded, and Veronica turned off all the lights in the living room and kitchen, except for a small lamp on a side table that Wallace could use to safely navigate from the bathroom to the living room. "Good night, Wally F."

"Good night, V. See you in the morning. I expect good hangover food."

"What kind of a hostess would I be if I didn't provide such things?"

Six weeks after they had visited, Veronica learned from Mac that Logan and Sarah had broken up. She did a quick mental calculation and figured out that Logan and Sarah had dated for five months. That was almost as long as she and Logan had made it before he had broken up with her freshman year. Maybe now Sarah was the one who got away.

That summer Veronica was killing some time online while she worked reception at the student health clinic. She visited the Neptune Gazette website, browsing both funny and disturbing articles about the town she grew up in. The front page article was about the opening and dedication of the new Lyle Sternn Community Center. The previous community center had never fully recovered from the pool and gasoline incident with the O9ers from a couple of summers prior and had fallen into a state of disrepair. A more than generous donor had contributed six million dollars to the project and the entire community center had been gutted and rebuilt. The donor only had two demands: 1) they wanted to remain anonymous, and 2) they wanted to name the facility.

Veronica stopped reading the article. Something wasn't adding up. Who the hell was Lyle Sternn? There was no one in Neptune by that name and Veronica assumed that if someone was going to sink that amount of money into a charitable project that they'd name the building after themselves. She did a quick search and found a very wealthy Lyle Sternn who lived in Little Rock, Arkansas. Veronica called and was quickly disappointed when he told her he had never heard of Neptune, California and didn't know anything about a community center.

A few weeks later classes had started and Veronica still hadn't figured out who Lyle Sternn was or how he was connected to Neptune. She had called her dad, Mac, and Wallace, and no one knew more than she did. One afternoon she was sitting in class waiting for the professor to arrive and she found herself doodling 'Lyle Sternn' over and over in the margin of her notebook. She made all the letters lowercase and smooshed them together, 'lylesternn', and then lazily mixed them up, 'Lyster Lenn.' At the newest permutation Veronica's throat developed a sizeable lump, and she rearranged the letters one more time, 'Lynn Lester.'

"Logan," she said quietly as she looked at the name. She heard her professor clear his throat and begin to lecture.
The next 90 minutes were torture, as she fought to make sense of this new information while taking notes on organic chemistry. As soon as class was dismissed she tore out of the room, and pulled her cell phone out, ready and prepared to call Logan and tell him...tell him what exactly? She had no idea what she wanted to tell him. And if she figured it out, did she have a right to say anything? Mac was right: she needed to make the first move, but what was the first move in a situation like this? Flowers? Chocolates?

Studying that night at a used bookstore near campus, she took a break to visit the café inside and her eye caught their postcard display. Staring back at her was James Dean in a scene from Rebel Without a Cause looking unimpressed and smoking. Veronica knew it wasn't the same as catching him before he got on the plane to leave the country, or Lloyd Dobber standing outside a window with a boom box, but it was something.

Didn't you hear? Bad boys smoke cigarettes, they DO NOT make anonymous philanthropic donations to build a new community center. I'm proud of you. – Veronica

Veronica wasn't expecting a response, but a week later she opened her mailbox to find a picture of Basil Rathbone as Sherlock Holmes staring back at her. She smiled and didn't quite understand why her heart beat a little faster as she turned it over to find Logan's scrawl.

Way to figure it out, Sherlock. Word on the street is you're trading in your magnifying glass for scrubs. I'll always be proud of you. – Logan

That year she continued to send Logan postcards of brooding bad boys: Judd Nelson from The Breakfast Club, Brad Pitt in Fight Club, Christian Slater in Heathers, Marlon Brando in A Streetcar Named Desire, Paul Newman in Cool Hand Luke. When the bookstore ran out of postcards to fit her theme, she found photos online and glued them to 4x6 notecards, making her own. By the end of the year she had sent him close to twenty postcards. Her notes were simple and provided snippets about her life. She was conscious not to pull any punches or try to hide anything; in large part because she didn't want him to feel like he had to either.

I'd pay Christian Slater good money to come and blow up my school. That wasn't a bomb threat. Don't turn me in. – Veronica

School is kicking my ass. Accidentally got drunk. Jared was less than amused. - Veronica

Went on a date. Is it bad when the smell of his breath is stronger than his cologne? – Veronica

In return Veronica received several more Sherlock Holmes postcards featuring Jeremy Brett, Julia McKenzie as Miss Marple, a series of Nancy Drew book cover cards, Columbo, Jessica Fletcher from Murder She Wrote, Raymond Burr as Perry Mason, and to her great amusement Jim Carey as Ace Ventura Pet Detective. Logan matched Veronica line by line, never sharing more than she did, but matching her in vulnerability.

Applying for an internship at Gant Publishing. Interview next week. – Logan

Trina is in town and coming over for dinner to meet Jenna. This is going to go badly. – Logan

I hate my 'Literature by Women' professor. I'd try and sleep with her to get a better grade, but she's 62. – Logan

Both of them were committed to full time internships the summer of junior year and therefore knew it was unlikely they would see each other for another long while. She knew that if she had asked, Logan would have come with Mac and Wallace for their junior year spring break, but she wasn't ready to see him again. Light, nonromantic, open and honest banter was what they needed. If they could focus on that, they might just be able to pull off the whole friends thing.

Fall of their senior year Veronica took a calculated risk and started sending Logan ironic postcards of
Los Angeles landmarks she had found in a quirky consignment store she wandered through. She had gone to find a replacement for her light blue denim jacket. Every time she wore that jacket she was reminded of showing up at the Grand, and Logan opening the door, and Logan peeling the jacket off her shoulder. With their resurgence of contact in the past year, ignoring those reminders of yesteryear was becoming increasingly more difficult and the jacket wasn't helping.

The first LA postcard she sent had a photo of a rather polluted section of the Los Angeles River with a bold banner across the top: "The 12,543 Wonder of the World!" Veronica thought about countless ways to rephrase her note. She was switching the rules of the game and she didn't know what he would say when he saw that. On the back, her hand shaking slightly, she wrote:

*When you come visit me in LA, we should have a picnic along the river. Clearly it's enchanted.* – Veronica

Veronica wasn't disappointed when a week later she received a Luigi's postcard in her mailbox.

*Luigi's changed the recipe of their Tiramisu. Don't worry, it's good. When you come visit me, I'll buy you a wheelbarrow full.* – Logan

They continued to trade postcards, neither demanding more than what the other was willing to give when that March Veronica changed the rules of the game once again. She took a picture of herself wearing a chauffeur's cap and holding a sign that said "Logan".

*Visit me for spring break.* – Veronica

Logan must have sent his response immediately because she received it in the mail three days later. It was a picture of his suitcase already packed.

*I know you already have the hat, but I think I'll drive. See you on the 19th. I got your address from Mac.* – Logan

Mac and Wallace opted to go on a trip to Mexico with a group of friends that spring break, so for six days it was just her and Logan. After he went back to Neptune, she spent a few days deciding on the next set of postcards she wanted to send and finally found a book of postcards she thought would work perfectly. They were all solid black with various inspirational quotes in bold faced white century gothic font. She pulled out all the ones about love and romance and sent him one a week.

*And yet I have had the weakness, and have still the weakness, to wish you to know with what a sudden mastery you kindled me, heap of ashes that I am, into fire.* — Charles Dickens

*Love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies.* — Aristotle

In return, Logan managed to convince a few of the authors he had met through his internship to hand write a sentence or two of their own, expressing their thoughts on love, and desire, and passion. One postcard came that didn't list an author, and Veronica was left wondering if he had left it out on purpose, or if the author simply failed to sign the postcard.

After a month, Veronica admitted to herself that the postcards, while beautiful, weren't saying everything she wanted to. So she penned a rather long letter and sent it the following day, uncertain why putting a stamp on an envelope and placing it in her mailbox seemed like the most dangerous thing she had ever done.

She sent her last postcard to him on her final day in LA before she left for the airport.

*I love you as certain dark things are to be loved, in secret, between the shadow and the soul.* — Pablo Neruda
She had just gotten back from two weeks in Neptune to say another round of goodbyes, and now with Wallace in tow, she was moving to Chicago for med school. She wondered if he had even noticed when her postcards stopped coming regularly. Because his had stopped coming at all four months prior, and it was all she could think about.

Veronica had fallen asleep halfway through the movie, but once she picked herself up and went to bed she had a difficult time falling back asleep. Her erratic behavior that day was foremost in her mind and her cheeks wouldn't stop burning in embarrassment. She'd begin to fall asleep and then her mind would flash to a particularly cutting remark she had made, or Logan's look of disappointment, and she'd be wide awake again. When she and Logan had dated, accusations of nefarious deeds were her thing; temper tantrums were not. And flinging herself backwards on the sand was definitely a tantrum.

It was past 11:30 PM, but she picked up her cell to call Wallace anyway. He picked up the phone after one ring with a slightly groggy, "Hello?" in greeting.

"How did you know that I was going to wake up and realize I was acting like a crazy person?"

She heard Wallace sit up in bed and flick on his bedside lamp. "So it didn't take all the way until morning I see."

"Nope, I was pretty much aware of my crazy as it was happening. But much like a Tara Reid movie, it was out of my control to stop." Veronica paused for a moment and grimaced loudly. "I hate being a girl." She heard Wallace laugh quietly, and she wasn't sure if it was with her or at her.

"V, you realize who you're acting like, right?"

"That astronaut lady who drove from Houston to Orlando wearing diapers to kidnap the other woman?"

"No. You're acting like Logan senior year of high school."

Veronica shook her head vigorously and turned on her own bedside lamp and sat up. "I don't think so. Do you remember Logan senior year?"

"Yes, do you?"

"I remember him hating my guts, again. Banging Kendall Casablancas. Using Hannah Griffith."

"You mean you remember Logan being upset you broke up with him, and then lashing out repeatedly? I feel like this is a song I've heard before." Wallace trailed off, and Veronica could see his faux innocent expression as if he was sitting in her room.

"It's not the same thing."

"No, you're right Veronica, it's not. Because he was 17 years old and in high school and you're 24 years old and should know better. Tell the guy how you feel, or don't. Either way, grow up."

Veronica laughed slightly. "Only you could say something so harsh and yet sound so nice about it. Seriously, if you had a British accent, you could call me every name in the book and I'd probably thank you for it."

"He's the only one you do this with, you know?"
"Do what?"

"Refuse to let move on past high school. You've never thrown mine, Mac's, your dad's, hell, even Dick's mistakes in our faces the way you throw Logan's in front of his." Veronica remained silent for close to a minute, and Wallace was afraid he had pushed it too far. "Veronica?"

"I'm here." She cleared her throat. "You're wrong, though. I don't throw Logan's mistakes in his face. I just don't let him move on from them."

"Which is better, how?"

Veronica threw her head back onto the pillow and turned off the bedside lamp. "How was shopping with Darrell?"

She heard Wallace lay back down and turn off his own lamp. "Pretty good. We got a good deal on mom's present. Her Kitchen Aid crapped out on her a few months ago and we split the cost of buying her a new one."

"Which means you paid for it."

"He covered the sales tax, which was nice." Wallace shifted in his bed so he was lying on his side. "Talk to him, V. There's nothing that man wouldn't forgive you. A few snarky comments and a tannenbaum tantrum don't even rank in the worst offenses you've ever committed."

"I want better for him. I want better for us as friends."

"Then you'll get it. But don't be someone different. Just try and channel some of your more tenacious qualities in positive ways."

"I thought engineers were supposed to be socially awkward? Unable to hold down a real conversation?"

"That'd make things easier on you, wouldn't it?"

After she hung up with Wallace, she dozed off and on throughout the night. She figured it was only fair given that the previous night she had slept more than twelve hours at one time.

Veronica had never been more nervous about purchasing a cup of coffee. She vaguely remembered taking a quiz in a magazine once that attempted to analyze her personality based on her caffeinated beverage of choice. It seemed like a ridiculous assertion at the time, but standing in line in this particular coffee shop at 7:30 AM, she wished she would have given the quiz more credence. Was there a cup of coffee that communicated contrition? She settled on an Iced Americano with cream, hoping that Logan wouldn't make any cheap shots about her obvious penchant for iced beverages as an extension of her ice queen persona.

Logan had mentioned on one of his postcards he sent senior year that the drip coffee at the café six blocks away from Gant Publishing was the best he had ever had. She hoped that he still maintained that belief, and that it was still a part of his morning routine. Veronica didn't know if he was an 'in by 8:00 AM' or an 'in by 9:00 AM' kind of guy, so figured that 7:30 AM was a safe bet. If he was an 'in by 7:00 AM' guy, she was screwed and wasn't sure she'd want to be friends with someone who intentionally woke up that early.

Veronica was standing off to the side, waiting for her Americano when the all too familiar spine tingling sensation began at the base of her spine and slowly made its way up to her neck. She turned
around and saw Logan staring at her. He kept his expression guarded, and she figured it was most likely because he wasn't certain which Veronica he'd encounter that day. She turned back around, grabbed her Americano from the coffee bar, poured in some half and half and then joined him in line.

"Veronica."

"Logan."

He looked down at her and smiled and then looked back up again. She could see he was trying to maintain a sense of calm, but his left hand was in his pocket, and she could hear the change jingling as he repeatedly fisted the coins in his pocket and then let them go. She had never seen Logan dressed for work before, and she liked the sight. He was wearing charcoal trousers, a royal blue button down collared shirt that looked tailor made, and a black tie which was a little skinnier than the ties her dad wore, but not skinny enough to make him look like a member of The Decemberists. He caught her perusal and smiled again.

"Checking out my ass, Mars?"

She shrugged her shoulders as response and gave him a half smirk. "It's a good ass." He looked at her sharply, surprised at her admission. "What time you have to be at work?"

"8:00 AM. I like to get here a little early to ready myself for battle. Apparently, the battle decided to find me today."

"Want to forego that and come sit with me?" Logan looked a little wary, and before he could say anything she interrupted. "Because I have a crazy story to tell you."

"Really? Lay it on me." They had to pause briefly for Logan to order his coffee. He tipped as much as his coffee cost, all the baristas knew him, and it was clear that those without wedding rings wanted him for their own. There were plenty of open tables as the majority of the morning crowd was of the 'get in, get out' variety.

"Back to my crazy story. I saw you on Saturday, right?"

"Yes. You did."

"Well, after that everything is a blur. Turns out Sunday morning I had been possessed by this rage demon. I'm told she caused me to yell at you, my dad, and even throw a little bit of a fit on a public beach."

Logan laughed in spite of himself and snapped his fingers. "You know, I thought she looked familiar."

"You've encountered this demon before?"

"Only once a day, almost every day, for a good couple years. I thought she had gone into hiding though. Turns out, I was wrong." Logan took a sip of his coffee and eyed her warily, not certain if his response would piss her off, or if she'd still keep their conversation light.

"It was pretty serious apparently. Dad called a priest. He almost called the pope. They had an exorcism and everything."

"What did that consist of?"

"You know the scene in Addams Family Values when Wednesday was locked in the Harmony Hut
and forced to watch *The Sound of Music* on repeat? It was a lot like that."

"And now?"

"Well it worked, thankfully, and the priest says I'm good as new. He even tried to give me a chastity belt as a parting gift, but I told him he could keep it."

Logan took another sip of his coffee. Was this as close to a Veronica Mars apology as he was going to get? It seemed like her MO these days to gloss over difficult subjects, but he had been on the receiving end of a few teary eyed admissions, and this wasn't one of them. When he saw in his peripheral vision her hand move to take his, he looked up and saw the familiar soft expression with the slightly glassy eyes looking back at him.

"Logan, I said some things to you that were pretty terrible. And I'm sorry. I can't promise it'll never happen again, unfortunately, but I can tell you that I'm doing my best."

And with that, he was hooked again. He smiled at her to let her know that all was forgiven and gave her hand a tiny squeeze to let her know he was really there with her.

"Do you want to talk about what got you so upset yesterday?"

"No, Logan, I don't." Veronica could feel him trying to pull his hand away and she gripped a little more tightly. "But that has nothing to do with you! You did nothing wrong yesterday, honestly. I was just dealing with some baggage and I took it out on you. It was unfair, and I'm sorry."

"You can tell me about it, you know. Unless I am your baggage. And in that case, I say pretend it doesn't exist and let's make out instead." Logan waggled his eyebrows at her, and Veronica felt an honest to goodness laugh bubble up from her gut and spill out.

Logan had long stopped trying to pull his hand away and Veronica became aware that the two of them were sitting facing one another in a coffee shop, holding hands. She drew her hand back to take a sip of her coffee and then sat with both hands folded in her lap.

Logan cleared his throat and she looked up at him. "You know, this isn't the first time you've ever apologized to me. But it's one of the first times you've sought me out to say you're sorry and I didn't do anything to screw it up."

"Look at us, growing up. I figured I'd try something I always avoided because I assumed I wouldn't be any good at it."

"As someone who has had plenty of practice apologizing and making amends, you did great. Just don't go and do anything stupid to muck it up. Like lying about an alibi." Veronica frowned at Logan, but they both knew it was mainly for show. "That stuff is frowned upon, ya know." Logan looked down at his watch and Veronica noticed his brow furrow slightly.

"Time for you to go?"

"Unfortunately. I parked my car at the office and walked over."

"I'll walk with you. I don't have anywhere to be just yet."

Logan stood up and offered Veronica her arm. "Well then, Miss Mars, shall we?"

She playfully shoved him aside. "You're such a drama queen."
Logan put his left foot out straight in front of him, bent his right knee, and gave her a courtly bow as she walked by. He grabbed his messenger bag from his chair and waved to the baristas who all said farewell but who were more focused on checking out the girl he had been having coffee with.

As they walked to Logan's office, Veronica was struck by how much lighter she felt simply clearing the air. It had been a while since they had been just friends, without any of the preamble or dramatics, and she thought that if being friends with Logan Echolls meant drinking good coffee, and walking down the street on a slightly crisp December California morning, she would be content to be his friend for the rest of her life.

"So, Logan. Whose balls are we busting this morning?"

"As many people's as possible, Veronica. But, specifically, I have my eye on Kip Johnson."

"Kip Johnson, the author of The Silk in the Willow? He hasn't published anything in more than five years, right?"

"Seven years, and he's halfway through his next novel, and Veronica. It's amazing, let me tell you. I've never read prose like this before. It leaps off the page and grabs you by the throat. The main character is an 18 year old girl living in Dubai, but somehow he makes me feel like I'm reading my own story."

Logan was looking off into the distance as he spoke, one hand clutching his coffee, and the other gesturing wildly. Veronica had a strong urge to knock the coffee cup out of his hand and pull him down for a kiss under the guise of trying to determine how many sugars he put in his coffee now. Naturally, for research purposes, she'd have to use her tongue to determine this. Instead, she began idly playing with an end of her hair.

"Seven years and only half finished? What's taking him so long?"

"Name it, and it's happened to him. In and out of rehab for alcohol three times, several women suing him for child support for children who he claims aren't his. What's really put him out of commission was the death of his twin sister. He says his grief has choked his writing."

"How long have you been working with him?"

"For about a year. I told him if he stopped drinking, I'd stop drinking. I even went to AA meetings with him every day for six months. That worked for a while, and he penned another 80 pages, but that was before his sister died. He stopped going to meetings, and now drinks himself into oblivion most nights. I think he would have burned his book if I hadn't removed the draft from his house." At Veronica's look Logan continued. "He's old school. Types his first draft on an antique typewriter he bought at a pawn shop."

"What are you going to do?"

"First I have to convince Gant Publishing not to terminate his contract. I know he has it in him to finish this, I just don't know how to get through to him. Usually I'm able to alternate between coddling and tough love, but he's resisting all of my charms."

"Maybe I could talk to him? I mean, if anyone knows about resisting Logan Echoll's charms it's this girl."

He bumped her shoulder affectionately as they walked. "Yeah, and how long did that ever last?"

Veronica remembered how proud Logan was of the internship he had done with Gant Publishing the
summer after his junior year. Casey had offered him a position without the interview, but Logan insisted on being put through the ranks like everyone else. It was clear from those who interviewed him that his sharp intellect, his low tolerance for BS, and his inability to tolerate crap writing would make him an excellent editor once he graduated. He worked at Gant Publishing again the summer after senior year, but after his run in with Benny Scott, the company's best hope at being nominated for a Pulitzer that year, they offered him a job.

Benny Scott had been waiting for his agent in the lobby of Gant Publishing for close to 20 minutes when Logan walked by with a stack of submissions literary agencies had sent to be perused. His job was to sort and then distribute them to the reader or editor he thought would be most interested in the project. He was impeded in his process by Benny who grabbed his arm and pulled him down close to his face demanding to see the sonofabitch who was going to hack his life work to pieces. Logan had recoiled at the smell of whiskey on Benny's breath at 10:00 AM and asked Marla, the receptionist, to bring over some coffee.

90 minutes later, Logan was the sonofabitch reading and hacking at Benny's manuscript, while offering Benny bonus criticism about what an egotistical prick and sad sack he clearly was. At the end of their time together, Benny had a renewed enthusiasm for his work and refused to speak to anyone at Gant besides Logan himself. Gant Publishing had no choice but to hire Logan. They created a new position for him, Senior Editorial Consultant, that was a mix of literary agent and editor. He was assigned all the toughest cases as his clients. They were usually brilliant authors whose lives, for one reason or the other, had stalled. Logan never imagined his penchant for drowning his sorrows in liquor would one day be a marketable skill.

Walking with Veronica now, Logan could see that she had a thought, but didn't want to offer it without permission. "What is it, Veronica?"

"Well, it might be nothing, but when we broke up the last time in college, you seemed to be in pretty bad shape."

Logan swallowed and his jaw tensed slightly. "I was."

"And then a couple weeks later I saw you, and you were happy and laughing."

"I was laughing. Don't know if I was actually happy."

"Well, what pulled you out of that?"

Logan laughed at the memory, and he absentmindedly rubbed his free hand on the back of his neck. "That would have been Heather."

"Dick's ex sister-in-law?"

"That's the one. It was nice to focus on taking care of someone else instead of just wallowing. We played video games, ate ice cream, it was a good diversion. And then presto, I started showering again. Dick was eternally grateful for her interference."

"Does Kip have a Heather? Is there a niece, or a cousin, or a street urchin who needs a good home?"

Logan thought for a moment and then his face lit up with an idea. "No, but there is a puppy."

"A puppy?"

"The two of us walked by a pet store a couple of months ago and there was a Shi Tzu puppy in the window that he about drooled all over. I hadn't seen him that excited in a while."

"You sure that giving a man who is bathing in scotch right now a puppy is such a great idea?"

"Hey, you wanted to give him a kid!"

"True." By that time the two of them had long reached the front doors to Logan's office. He looked down at his watch again and Veronica knew it was time for her to head out. "I was serious about today being father/daughter day, but can I take you up on dinner tomorrow?"

Logan's face paled and he rubbed one hand down it, cupping his own chin. "I kind of made plans."

Veronica took a couple steps back nodding her head and Logan had to physically stop himself from grabbing her hand and intertwining their fingers to get her to stay. "It's Heather. She has finals next week and her and her friends need a break, so she convinced me to let them use the pool for a pool party."

"In other words, her friends convinced her to ask you because they want to come over and ogle you."

"Can you blame them, Veronica? I mean, look at me." Veronica bit her lip to stop herself from responding, but Logan had a feeling in that moment he would have very much liked to have heard what she had to say. "You should come over. Heather likes you a lot."

Veronica only hesitated for a second. "Yeah, okay. Sounds good."

"Does 6:00 PM work for you? I think she wants to BBQ too."

"6:00 PM sounds great."

And the next moment, before either could remember that this was Veronica Mars and Logan Echolls, one time lovers who were now tentative friends who had really only come back into one another's lives two days prior, Veronica stepped up on her toes and kissed him on the cheek. The moment her lips touched his cheek she was snapped out of whatever alternate reality she had been living in where the two of them were dating, and she had just walked him to his office, and he was telling her what he was making for dinner. She scrunched up her eyes as she planted her feet firmly on the ground, imagining how Logan would look when she opened them. She kept her eyes closed, her face flushing in humiliation. "I'm sorry, just got caught up in the moment."

Her eyes opened, and sure enough, there he was. An expression of total shock on his face. But with shock, she thought she saw something that made it seem as if he had expected something like that to happen all along.

She put her right hand out for a handshake, he took it, and she shook his hand firmly. "Thank you for the walk and the conversation. Again, I apologize for my behavior yesterday. I'll see you tomorrow. Good day to you Mr. Echolls."

He shook her hand back. "And good day to you, Miss Mars." They dropped hands and Veronica turned quickly on her heels to walk away, wondering if Logan was watching her as she did, and feeling strangely satisfied when she looked over her shoulder and saw that he was.

As quickly as she had walked away from him, she found herself turning around and walking back towards him. She stepped about three inches into his personal space and could see the uncertainty in his face.

"Miss Mars."

"Logan, when we broke up I was in pretty bad shape too. I just…I just thought you should know."
The hopefulness in his tone as he asked, "Really?" was almost more than she could take.

"I was just better at hiding it than you." And then she was gone again, walking the six blocks to her car before she did something crazy like admit to him that some days she was still in pretty bad shape.

For the second time in his life, Veronica had kissed him and left him standing by himself wondering what the hell had just happened. He didn't understand why a kiss on the cheek from Veronica was powerful enough to leave him incapable of speech, and yet there he stood. He suspected that if he ever kissed her on the lips again, his entire brain may explode, and he'd have no hope of recovery. From what he heard, brain explosions were almost always fatal.

Chapter End Notes

Really trying not to beat myself up for little writing foibles I'm discovering as I'm reposting this here. All part of the process, right? Friendly reminder that I still didn't have a beta at this point. Okay. Moving on.
She Fights (For You)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Having successfully reconciled with Logan, Veronica made her way back to the coffee shop to grab a muffin for breakfast, dodging the inquisitive looks of the baristas who had seen them leave together no more than 20 minutes prior.

While initially pleased with how well her conversation with Logan had gone, the further she got from the coffee shop the less certain she became. Agreeing to attend a pool party with Heather and a few of Heather's closest friends was not a part of the plan. Kissing Logan, even if it was just on the cheek, was not a part of the plan. Admitting to Logan she had been heartbroken in college after the whole Madison debacle was not a part of the plan. And yet, all those things had happened.

Veronica firmly believed that knowledge was power, and she had just given Logan a disturbing amount of both. She trusted he would never abuse it, but it still unsettled her knowing that she had willing given it to him. She could almost hear Wallace's calming voice talking her off the ledge: Calm down, Supafly, and step back from whatever weird mental place you just visited.

During their time in college, and now as roommates, Wallace had become more than just a best-friend: he had become the wire that grounded her. And she did the same thing for him. After graduating from Hearst, he had doubted he was smart enough to get into the engineering program at Northwestern. Veronica made charts and graphs that showed the average test scores and GPAs of those students enrolled and plotted Wallace's against theirs to prove to him he needed to go for it.

When a cute guy at a party would hit on Veronica and she'd create an entire backstory for him before even knowing his middle name, Wallace would encourage her to get to know the guy the old fashioned way before running a background check.

Veronica gave Wallace confidence when his wavered, and Wallace gave Veronica perspective when hers got blurry.

Driving to the post office, she knew she desperately needed Wallace-vision, so she channeled some of the best advice he had given her. In doing so, she arrived and parked at the post office certain that she had done the right thing in her time with Logan and that her honesty would only lead to positive things in their relationship. While she would never be an optimist, she was working hard to curb her bent towards cynicism.

That morning, Veronica had looked up the USPS requirements for opening a PO Box. Their website specified that two forms of ID were required. One had to be a photo ID; most commonly a driver’s license, university ID or passport, and the other could be a non-photo ID that stated the applicant's current address. Veronica had never provided these items to a postal worker, but that hadn't stopped someone from opening PO Boxes in her name in Neptune, Los Angeles, and Chicago.

Being a Monday morning at 9:03 AM, the line at the post office was non-existent. She had left a note for her dad letting him know she'd be back by 10:00 AM, and was grateful that it looked like she'd be able to keep her word. Standing at the one open window, she hit the small silver bell several times before a slightly rotund woman with an unflattering bleach blonde angled bob wearing an ill-fitting USPS polo shirt came from the back room to assist her. The woman looked annoyed by the disruption of a customer, and Veronica wondered how in the world she would fare as it got closer to Christmas when the lines to the post office wound around the block.
"Can I help you?"

Veronica swung her messenger bag around and pulled out her wallet. "My name is Veronica Mars, and PO Box 1004 has been rented under my name for the past several years." Veronica pulled out her ID and showed it to the woman. "I was wondering if you could confirm for me the ID required to open a PO Box."

"The federal government requires two forms of ID, one must be photo ID, and the other must contain your current address. Social security cards, birth certificates, and credit cards are not valid forms." The woman had already stopped paying direct attention to Veronica and was now taping tabs that declared in all caps, 'property of the US Government,' on the end of her blue ball point pins.

Veronica put her ID and wallet back in her bag. "Here's the thing. I have never opened a PO Box here, and yet, for the past seven years mail has been sent to this PO Box in my name. Is there any way someone could open one without my permission?"

"It is permissible for a spouse to open one in their name and list you as an approved user of the box, but they would still be the primary box holder."

Veronica held up her left hand to show the lack of ring. When the woman took out a container of Clorox wipes to begin wiping down her work station, Veronica snapped the fingers of her right hand to get her attention. The woman looked at her, clearly affronted by the gesture. Veronica pointed to her naked ring finger. "You see this? What does this tell you?"

"If you would like to have your name removed from a PO Box due to divorce, the primary box holder will need to provide a certificate of divorce."

"There's been no divorce, because I've never been married. Do you make photocopies of the ID provided to open a PO Box?"

"Federal regulations require that both forms of ID be photocopied and filed whenever an application for a PO Box is submitted."

Veronica placed her hands on the counter and then quickly brought them back, wiping them on her pants when she felt the counter still damp from disinfectant. "Could you please show me copies of the ID provided to open my PO Box? And receipts showing who paid for the rental?"

With a long suffering sigh, the woman left her workstation and headed to the back room from which she had originally come. By that time three additional customers had arrived and Veronica knew it was unlikely any of them would be attended to in a timely manner.

Veronica drummed her fingers impatiently as she waited for her new Neptune friend to return from the back. When she finally did, a full seven minutes later, Veronica had just won a game of "Words with Friends" against Mac with a high score of 509.

The woman slid the three pieces of photo copied paper across the counter to Veronica, and then dismissed her with a wave of her hand. Veronica stepped to the side to allow the next customer, who had been waiting ten minutes to buy one stamp, to step forward. She looked at the first piece of paper and saw the dates and amounts listed for payment for the box. Beginning on May 10, 2005, a cash payment had been received annually to rent the box for a full year.

Veronica saw that she was listed as the sole name on the PO box, which meant that despite the assertions of the woman standing in front of her, someone had found a way to get around federal regulations three times and opened boxes in her name alone. Computer hacking? Bribery? Hiring a
lookalike? There were ways to get around almost any policy if one tried hard enough.

The second piece of paper displayed a photocopy of the front and back of the driver's license she was issued when she was 16-years old. The third piece of paper showed her passport, and like her driver's license, it was also from when she was a teenager.

Veronica slid back in front of the woman at the window, cutting in front of a man who was waiting to pick up a certified letter. "I'm sorry, but this is my driver's license and passport."

"Circle gets the square." The woman turned away from Veronica to take the slip of paper from the man to collect his letter.

"But I never opened a PO Box here." The woman grabbed the pieces of paper from Veronica and then looked from the photos to Veronica.

"Is this you?"

Veronica rolled her eyes and nodded.

"Do you have the PO Box key?"

Veronica nodded again.

"Then congratulations! You have a PO Box. Would you like to close the account?"

Veronica shook her head no. "But that's not the issue; it's that…"

"Look, lady, clearly if being sent mail was such an issue, you would have closed the box account seven years ago. If that is not what you intend to do, please step aside so I can assist the other customers."

Veronica glared at the woman and took the photocopies back from her. She wasn't done asking questions, but she knew the woman wasn't going to spend much more time with her, and Veronica was loathe to make a scene until she knew exactly what she was digging for. Perhaps the staff in LA and Chicago would be of greater assistance. Or she could just come back to this branch when someone was working who didn't have food stains on their shirt.

Veronica was about to leave the lobby of the post office, when she stopped suddenly to stare at the outside of box 1004. She hadn't received mail in that PO Box since she had moved to LA, and based on the pattern of previous items received, there wouldn't be anything inside. But her instincts were telling her to check it now. She pulled out the PO Box key and inserted it into the box, jiggling the lock slightly to open it, like she had learned she had to do.

Veronica gasped slightly at the sight of the single piece of mail waiting for her. An 8.5" x 11" manila envelope, identical to all the others. Veronica reached into her messenger bag and searched for her Ziploc of rubber gloves. None of the other envelopes had uncovered any useful fingerprints, and she suspected it would be the same with this one, but she wanted to be careful. She carefully lifted the envelope out of the PO Box, and then closed it, dropping the key into the bottom of her bag.

Veronica breathed a deep sigh of relief when she looked at the postmark. It had been sent December 7 from Chicago.

_He hasn't followed me here. I'm fine. Everything's fine._

She repeated those words to herself as she slid her finger under the sealed flap of the envelope, and
carefully tore it open. She was pretty certain what she would find, but as she removed the 5x7 pencil sketch of her, with her hair pulled back into a long ponytail, parted at the side, one loose hair tucked behind her left ear, she felt her knees wobble slightly. She turned the item over and then slid down to the ground, her knees no longer able to support her weight. In the same carefully penned all caps writing she had gotten so used to seeing, she read:

*Welcome home, Veronica. I love you.*

She closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. "He hasn't followed me here. I'm fine. Everything's fine."

"Excuse me?"

Veronica opened her eyes and saw the woman from the post office glowering at her.

"You can't sit here. Does this look like a park to you?"

"Well, it could be. I mean, the cheese sauce drizzled down the front of your shirt would suggest this is a Denny's, despite the fact I am woefully without a short stack." The woman looked like she was going to swear, but Veronica didn't give her the opportunity. She stood up, put the sketch back into the envelope, and exited the lobby.

She knew her jab was a little harsh but she was in no mood to be messed with. The adrenaline was causing her pulse to sound loudly in her ears and she had several calls she needed to make. She looked at her watch and groaned. 9:28 AM.

No, she couldn't do any of that. What she needed to do was head home for father/daughter day.

She got into her car, placed the offensive envelope into her messenger bag and removed the rubber gloves, throwing them on the passenger side floor. Her hands gripped the steering wheel tightly and her knuckles turned from pink to white.

"He hasn't followed me here. I'm fine. Everything's fine."

Each time she repeated those words she believed them less.

Veronica had carefully honed her skill of compartmentalization since her high school days, but she had very rarely been able to hide anything from her dad. Even when she hadn't shared the details of her troubles, he had always known when she was out of sorts. Since the fallout of her investigation into The Castle her freshman year of college, he had become relentless in his pursuit of the facts where they concerned Veronica. This meant she had exactly twelve minutes to convince herself that nothing was wrong so that when she saw her dad, she could convince him of the same thing.

She slipped her mask of unaffected disinterest back on, and as much as she sometimes hated it, she acknowledged she wore it well.

Father/daughter day, while not an unmitigated disaster, was the exact opposite of everything Veronica needed on that particular Monday. When she got home she clued her dad into her now vegan kosher friendship with Logan and her plans for the following evening, then the two of them set off for their whirlwind day. They went to their favorite diner for a proper breakfast, then took in a double feature at the $3 second run cinema (*Moneyball* for her dad, *Tucker and Dale Vs. Evil* for her), and had tacos at the best taco truck in Neptune, before heading to the mall to spend a little time finishing up Christmas shopping. They agreed to meet at the food court in forty-five minutes as they each only had a few gifts to pick up.
In truth, Veronica only had Alicia's gift to buy, and it took her less than ten minutes to pick up the full line of Alicia's favorite skin care products from The Body Shop. She headed for the Starbucks that overlooked the food court and sat down to make a few calls.

Both the Los Angeles and Chicago post office branches agreed to fax Veronica the proof of ID that had been provided to open the PO Boxes and the accompanying invoices. She gave them the fax number for Mars Investigations, and now just had to figure a way to sneak out of her dad's grip for a few minutes to stop by and pick them up. She looked at her watch again and hurriedly made her final call.

Agent Erin Baxter picked up on the second ring. "Veronica Mars, my protégée and greatest let down."

"If it isn't Erin Baxter, the strong arm of the law herself."

"That's Agent Strongarm to you."

"And that's Greatest-Let-Down, future M.D. to you." Erin's laughter brought some much needed levity to Veronica's day. Despite everything that had happened after her internship, Veronica had been incredibly tempted to return to the FBI simply to work with Agent Baxter again.

"I'm surprised to hear from you, Mars. My annual call to beg and plead for you to come back isn't scheduled to take place until after the holidays. Unless you're calling me to finally concede defeat?"

"While I hate to be the one to dash your dreams upon the rocks…"

"Don't lie to me, Mars. You love it."

Veronica didn't respond immediately. She had pulled out the manila envelope from her bag and was staring at the sketch once more. In the drawing she was smiling broadly, and whoever had drawn it had shadowed it in such a way that her cheeks looked flushed.

"Veronica, where'd you go? Are you okay?" The use of her first name brought Veronica back to the moment. They only used one another's first names when they were being serious.

"Erin, I know you told me nothing could be found on those drawings I sent you, but I just wanted to check in again."

"Nothing, Veronica. No fingerprints and the handwriting wasn't a match. No known stalkers fit the profile. We even did a search for all the phrases that were written, and there's nothing in the database about them ever being used in connection to a case. Did something else happen?"

Veronica stared at the sketch lying on the table, and began to fiddle with her necklace, idly sliding the charm back and forth on the silver chain. "I got sent another one. Here in Neptune."

"Did they send it…"

"No, not from Neptune. It was sent from Chicago." Staring at her own image was starting to turn her stomach, so Veronica flipped it over, but she found everything about the message on the other side even more troubling. She screwed her eyes shut to block it all out.

"Veronica, I don't know why you're not more worried about this. This person has had you in their sightlines for almost seven years now. You need to take this to the police."

"No, Erin. Not yet. Whoever is doing this has a fixation, but they're not dangerous."
"Jesus. You take one profiling class and you think you're an expert? These things always escalate, and given this person's long term fascination, I would say they are one step away."

Erin was saying the things Veronica had been trying to keep quiet in her head for a while now. And she shuddered as she thought about the way the person who had sent her the sketches had silently been a part of her life for so long. First in Neptune, then in LA, and now in Chicago.

"I don't know why you waited so long to tell someone about this as is."

"I didn't know, Erin. I thought they were just a misguided attempt at romance. As soon as I realized I was wrong, you were the first person I called."

"But I was the only person, wasn't I? Look, you were only here three months, Mars, but you became family to a lot of us. And looking into this for you was the least we could have done. But we're really worried."

"I'll be fine." Veronica opened her eyes and shoved the sketch back into the envelope, holding the corner with a napkin from Starbucks.

"No, you won't, Veronica. You're too close to this. This person has a clearly personal interest in you, and you don't have any idea why."

"But if it's personal, then I need to be the one who figures it out. I'm the key somehow."

"And you can't see the trees for the forest. You're right, you are the key, but you're missing things. I'm sure of it. This person has rattled you and there are probably clues right in front of your face that you're glossing over. You're making it personal in all the wrong ways."

"What do I do?"

"Take it to the police."

Veronica slammed her hands on the table in frustration. Customers sitting at nearby tables sipping lattes and peppermint hot chocolates look startled at the interruption to their Christmas revelry. "No. Erin, I can't do that. If my dad finds out, he's going to lock me up and throw away the key." Both women remained silent for a few seconds, and Veronica breathed heavily, trying to slow her heart rate.

"Veronica, what's going on? Something has gotten you more worked up about this than normal."

Veronica sighed and gulped down the last ounces of her iced tea. "He changed his pattern."

There was a pause on the other end of the line, and Veronica knew that she had been right. Changing the pattern was bad news. "How so?"

"I wasn't supposed to even get a package at all and the words on the back were different. They were clear and cogent. He welcomed me back to Neptune."

"Veronica, your dad has the time and the resources needed to figure out who is doing this. You need to tell him."

Ignoring the advice entirely, Veronica focused on an aspect of the case which she and Erin had long disagreed on. "You always do that, you know? I also refer to whoever is doing this as a 'he' and you always say 'person.'"
"Like I said, Veronica, you're too close to this. You have no idea if it's a he or a she, and jumping to conclusions prematurely is dangerous."

"But isn't it true that the vast majority of stalkers are former intimate partners? You call it jumping to conclusions, I call it making a logical leap."

"You've already ruled out all your intimate partners. Besides, when you started being stalked, your only former intimate partner was Duncan Kane, who from what you tell me is still on the run and overseas. So explain to me how he managed to send you packages postmarked in Neptune, LA, and Chicago."

Veronica was silent, and Erin knew she was shutting down, uncomfortable with being asked questions she didn't know the answer to.

"Look, Veronica, this isn't an official case so I can't make you do something you don't want to do. But if you insist on keeping this from your dad…"

"Which I do."

Erin sighed, clearly exasperated at Veronica's stubbornness. "If you're not going to tell your dad, you need to tell someone else who knows you well. They might help you see some of what you're missing."

"That'd be Wallace or Logan. But Wallace would freak, and Logan…well, he'd freak too." She held the envelope with the napkin and placed it in her messenger bag, hiding it between the pages of her textbook in case her dad happened to look in her bag.

"Pick one and tell them, Veronica. I hate to bust out an ultimatum here, but if you don't tell someone soon, my fingers are going to have a hard time not dialing the number for the Chicago PD and telling them what's going on."

"You wouldn't." She felt her eyes begin to mist over. She was dealing with two kinds of fear. The first was fear that Erin was right, and she was in fact in a dangerous situation. And the second was fear that Erin would really call the police and she'd be made to feel like a victim again.

"You know I would."

"Please don't, Erin. I'll tell someone. I promise." Veronica wiped her eyes with the napkin, ignoring the stares of those in Starbucks fascinated by this woman who had gone from angry to weepy in a matter of seconds.

"Good. Now, I need you to do two other things for me."

"Alright, alright. You can have my first born child."

"Not that. Any child of yours is bound to be a handful, and I'm not as spry as I once was. First, you need to have a Merry Christmas. And second, I need you to seriously consider coming back this summer. If you don't want to be a field agent, I get it, but I showed one of the best investigative specialists your file and he wants to meet you, Veronica."

"Erin." They had had this conversation about the FBI more times than Veronica could count. It wasn't just once a year Erin called. Erin had called her at least three times a year since her internship freshman year. Sometimes it was just to chat, but it always ended with her begging Veronica to reconsider coming back.
"Just think about it. That's all I ask."

"Okay. I concede to both of your requests. Consider a Merry Christmas already had, and I'll definitely think about the FBI thing."

"Call me when you've clued someone in. Until then, the number for Chicago is going in my speed dial."

"Well, Agent Strongarm, you've lived up to your name once again."

"Take care of yourself, Veronica. Be safe."

"I will if you will."

Veronica hung up just as she saw her dad round the corner below and stand in line for Orange Julius. She texted him that she was a few minutes away and asked him to get her an orange pineapple smoothie. Her hands were on the table, all ten fingers spread out in front of her and she took in several deep breaths. She picked up one hand but it was noticeably shaking, so she placed it back on the table and took a few more breaths.

She hated feeling this way. Out of control, and incapable of doing anything to get control back. When Veronica had first concluded the sketches were sent to her by a stranger, she had run into the bathroom and thrown up. Each sketch had contained a message on the back and they all ended with "I love you." She had almost a Pavlovian response to the words now. Even when her dad said them, she felt nauseous. Whoever this person was, she hated them the most for that.

But now she was in Neptune with her dad and Wallace, and she knew both men loved her. Mac would arrive on Saturday, and while not overly touchy feely, she trusted Mac loved her. And Logan was here. Veronica didn't know for sure, but she hoped against hope that in some small way he still loved her.

She stood up, hands now steady as a rock, and went to join her dad.

The next stop on the father/daughter day train was home, where they ordered Chinese delivery for dinner. Veronica would normally have eaten her beef with broccoli with ardor, but the events of the day had left her with little appetite. Her dad noticed, so she threw in an occasional yawn and rubbed her eyes so he would stop looking at her with concern and simply assume she was tired.

The faxes she needed were waiting for her at Mars Investigations, and she wouldn't be able to sleep knowing they were there. She considered sneaking out in the middle of the night to go and collect them, but figured her dad's reaction if he woke up while she was still gone wouldn't be worth it. After moving one piece of broccoli around the circumference of her plate, she settled on the direct approach. She perched the end of her chopsticks on her plate and looked up to say, "Dad" just as her dad swallowed his bite of Kung Pao chicken and said, "Veronica."

Veronica gestured for her dad to go first and she picked up her chopsticks again, this time moving the piece of broccoli in a zig zag pattern along the diameter of the plate. "Beloved daughter of mine. How much would you hate me if I went to the office briefly? Just one, maybe two hours, max."

She attempted to spear the broccoli with one chopstick, and when she was successful, held it up and then chomped down loudly. "Can't it wait until tomorrow?"

"When you were out this morning, I worked from home and made a pretty significant break for a client. They can't meet tomorrow, so I wanted to get it to them tonight." Veronica laughed internally
at the way her dad was trying to be vague, avoiding the use of personal pronouns, so she wouldn’t suspect who the client was. Despite his best attempts, she was fairly certain she already knew who he was planning to meet.

Veronica waved the now empty chopstick in the air. "Who could be so important, that my dear old dad would abandon his daughter to go work at 7:30 at night?"

She saw the struggle play out on her dad's face. He was wondering if he should avoid, flat out lie, or obfuscate the truth. "Dad, cool it. I know you're meeting Logan. This is perfect actually, because I need to use the computer at the office."

She stood up, grabbed both of their plates and dropped them in the sink.

"Sweetie, you're not going to the office to do something like place a tracker on Logan's car are you?"

"Believe it or not, dad, I do use my PI license for more than keeping tabs on my ex-boyfriend. One of my friends in Chicago is going on a date tomorrow night with a guy she met online and I told her I'd do a quick background check for her."

"And they say romance is dead." Her dad stood up and began closing containers of take out and putting them away in the fridge. "So, this really has nothing to do with Logan?"

"Not this time. In fact, can we drive separately? My search should only take a few minutes and I'd like to come home as soon as I'm done rather than wait around for you."

Keith stood with his back to the fridge, keeping a watchful eye on his daughter as she wiped down the counter and tossed a few serving utensils into the sink. "Veronica Mars, place your right hand over your heart and raise your left hand."

Veronica sighed, but put the dishrag on the counter and did as she was told.

"Please repeat after me. I, Veronica Anne Mars."

"I, Veronica Anne Mars."

"Solemnly swear that I am not following my dad to the office in order to impede his work with Logan Echolls."

"What you said. Amen." Veronica picked up the dish rag and tossed it into the sink. "Can we go now? I'd like to get home in enough time to call my friend and watch Conan."

Veronica didn't think too much about how easily the lies she told her dad rolled off her tongue. She was glad that the thing her dad made her promise not to do was currently the furthest thing from her mind. Yes, she still wanted to know what was going on with Logan, but that was going to have to wait until the following day when she was at Logan's house and could more easily weasel information out of the source.

When Keith and Veronica pulled up in their separate vehicles, Logan's Lexus was already parked outside of Mars Investigations. He stepped out as Keith and Veronica got out of their respective cars and stood at the front entrance of the office.

"Don't tell me, Mr. Mars. The news is so bad you had to bring reinforcements?"

"Actually, my darling daughter is here for altruistic reasons that are supposedly not at all related to you."
Logan quirked an eyebrow at Veronica and she nodded in false solemnity.

"Protecting one friend at a time from online sociopaths. It's a lonely calling, but one I treat with the uttermost seriousness." Veronica leaned in slightly and poked Logan's chest with her index finger. "If you ever start online dating, god help us all."

Keith unlocked the door, preemptively rolling his eyes at the jabs he knew were going to be lobbed back and forth.

"Come on, Veronica. You think I'd stoop to online dating? You know what meeting women is like for me."

"Like shooting fish on Ambien in a barrel."

"Yes, if the fish willingly flopped themselves out of the barrel and threw themselves at my feet."

Veronica and Logan followed Keith as he opened the door and stepped inside, turning on the overhead light and the lamp sitting on Veronica's former desk. "Dad, does it feel stuffy in here to you? I think Logan's ego is sucking up all the oxygen."

"'One may understand the cosmos, but never the ego.' G.K. Chesterton."

"'Logan Echolls, kiss my ass.' Veronica Mars."

"Veronica Mars, gladly."

Neither had noticed that with each comment they made, they moved closer together until they were invading one another's personal space. The sound of file folders falling to the ground in her dad's office made them aware of their surroundings. Keith walked out of his office hitting the edge of his coffee cup with a spoon in a constant rhythm. "Ding, ding, ding. Round two over?"

Logan fixed Veronica with a stare and he felt a grin pull up the edges of his mouth. "I was just getting started, Mr. Mars."

"Well, too bad for you, I have no interest in being here all night. Logan, I have the information for you in my office. Veronica, I'll see you at home." Keith stepped back into his office and Veronica met Logan's stare.

She smiled at Logan and hit him affectionately on the shoulder. "Good thing Papa Mars stepped in. There was no way you were going to win that one."

"Anytime you want to go for round three, you just let me know."

"I'll keep that in mind." Veronica unconsciously licked her lips and felt supremely proud of herself when Logan's eyes went straight to her mouth. He nervously cleared his throat and took a step back from her as if she was suddenly too potent to be close to.

Veronica's eyes flicked to the fax machine and she saw several pieces of paper turned downwards. She gestured with her head to her dad's office. "You better get in there. He gets all Hulk like when he's kept waiting."

Logan took two steps towards her dad's office and then turned around. "So, you're really not here to pump me for information?"

She shrugged, tilted her head to the side, and seeing her dad was hidden away in his office already,
went for broke. "Not tonight. Maybe I'll try to pump you tomorrow."

His eyes went wide and he broke out into a rare Echolls full face grin. "Innuendo looks good on you, Mars."

"Hmmm. Was that innuendo or double entendre? I always get those confused."

"Either way, sexy as hell." He turned around and stepped into her dad's office. When he shut the door, Veronica let herself break out into a grin that rivaled Logan's.

**Shameless flirting wasn't on my agenda for the night. But it's always fun.**

Veronica grabbed the papers, seven in total, off the fax machine and found information that confirmed what she had already suspected. Both LA and Chicago had faxed her copies of her driver's license and passport, but unlike in Neptune, whoever had opened the PO Box account had used her more up to date ID. Both accounts were paid for annually with a cash payment. The one in LA was opened January 2009, and the one in Chicago was opened August 2010.

The faxes from LA also contained a copy of the submitted online supplication for a box rental. In the comments section she read that the person's first choice box number was 1004, and then box 105 was requested in the event box 1004 was unavailable.

Veronica had long suspected the PO Box numbers themselves were significant as both her Neptune and Chicago PO Boxes were 1004. She knew it was too peculiar to be a coincidence, but she had never figured out what the numbers 105 and 1004 referenced. Erin suggested they corresponded to dates: October 2004 and January 2005. While that made sense, Veronica had repeatedly been over her actions during those months and she wasn't any closer to understanding their importance.

October 2004 was the fall of her junior year and was the month wherein she had dated and broken up with Troy, and solved a few cases for classmates, including Wallace's short lived girlfriend Georgia. In January 2005, the whole of Neptune was still reeling from (and gossiping about) the attempted murder of Aaron Echolls. Logan had rallied long enough to salute her as she was arrested.

There wasn't any overlap between those events and she knew she was missing something. Veronica wasn't a girl who kept a diary detailing her daily activities, and even if she did she wasn't convinced she'd be able to understand the significance those dates held for the person sending the letters. Erin had told her the dates most likely had nothing to do with her, and everything to do with whatever warped reality whoever was sending the sketches ascribed to.

She tucked the photocopies into her bag and leaned over to turn off the desk lamp. As she did, she saw Logan's file sitting out on her old desk, plain as day, presumably left there by her dad when they had first come into the office. She knew it would be easy enough to slip into her bag and peruse from the comfort of her dad's home, but dealing with someone who had been stalking her off and on for seven years made her a little wary of behaving in any way that could be deemed irrational. Instead she picked up the file and knocked lightly on her dad's office door.

"Come in."

Veronica opened the door and popped her head in, keeping the majority of her body out in the lobby. "I just wanted to let you know I was heading back to the house." She stood up straight and removed her grip on the door handle and then walked into the office, dropping Logan's file on the desk. "Logan's file was out there and I thought you might need it."

Before her dad could settle his face into any sort of expression, Veronica turned and looked at
Logan, whose face registered a mixture of embarrassment and concern. "I didn't look at it. I would suggest you fire my dad for leaving such sensitive information out in the open, but I hear you're not paying."

Logan's features immediately relaxed and he held his hands up towards the ceiling. "You get what you pay for, I guess."

She took another couple steps to exit the office and then bent over so her mouth was close to Logan's ear. "I hope you appreciate the sheer force of will it took for me not to open that file. And I would like to be rewarded by having you tell me what's going on voluntarily." She stood back up and enjoyed being the one who towered over Logan for once. "It can be tomorrow night when I come over or sometime later this week, but you will tell me."

Logan moved his head the smallest amount, and Veronica registered it as a nod. She backed herself out of the door and looked at her dad as she did. "If Logan suggests playing a drinking game, concede defeat right away. He may look slight, but the man can hold his liquor."

Logan continued to look at Keith's office door and didn't turn his eyes away until he heard the outer door to Mars Investigations open and then close. When he looked back at Keith, he could almost read the question in his eyes.

"You were always planning on telling her, weren't you?"

Logan shrugged his shoulders, which Keith had learned over the past several months was as close to an emphatic 'yes' as Logan would ever provide. "High school girls everywhere know they're going to give it up on prom night. Still feels good to be asked."

Two hours later, the small but significant amount of information Keith had collected had been related to Logan, and Keith was now entertaining them both with story after story of the most ridiculous cases he had seen whilst he was sheriff.

Logan's head was thrown back and he had his arms clutched around his stomach which had cramped up from prolonged laughter. "What the hell was he thinking?"

Keith wiped away a tear that was forming in his right tear duct. "He told us that he figured none of the guns would be loaded since they were for sale." Which just caused Logan to laugh even harder. "But all the employees at the store had concealed weapons permits, so when Terry came in, baseball bat smashing everything in sight, the clerk just pulled out his own gun."

Logan doubled over with laughter, hinging at the waist, uncertain if he was going to be able to catch his breath.

"And then." Logan's laughter was contagious and Keith stuttered and stopped through his own to get out the actual punch line of the case. "And then, he called the sheriff's department and insisted we arrest the clerk for pulling a gun on him."

Logan sat back up, and took a few deep breaths to calm himself down. "Well, at least he didn't bring a whiffle bat." Which was enough to send both men into another fit of hysterics.

Keith recovered first, and as he saw Logan try to gain his composure, it occurred to him that this was the first time he had ever seen Logan laugh. He had seen Logan smile, lord knows he had seen Logan smirk, but he had never seen him laugh.

Logan leaned forward and stood up slowly. "Thanks for that, Mr. Mars. I really needed a good
laugh."

Keith stood as well and nodded his head soberly. "Logan, I'm making your case a top priority for the next couple of weeks. Let it be my Christmas present to you." Keith extended his hand across his desk, and Logan took it, both men shaking firmly.

"Okay, but these periodic progress reports are kind of killing me. Maybe just call me when you've uncovered all there is to know."

Keith nodded that he would and Logan turned to leave the office. Keith followed after him and by the time they reached the door that led out to the hallway, he had talked himself out of and back into asking Logan about his relationship with Veronica at least three times. He was busy putting a series of items into the mental column labeled 'reasons for butting in' when Logan's voice startled him.

"You know, Veronica gets the same look on her face when she's debating whether or not to ask an awkward question."

"Must be genetic."

Logan let out a puff of air that may have been laughter, but could also have been him steeling himself for the impending inquiry. "Mr. Mars, you can ask me anything."

"Could you put that in writing for me?" Keith began shifting his weight between his two feet, and Logan could tell he was trying to ground himself. Whatever question he was about to ask was going to be a doozy.

"Logan, anyone can see that you still have feelings for my daughter. And unless I'm much mistaken, you've felt this way since high school."

Logan looked grim and nodded. Apparently Keith was taking on the role of 'Ghost of Relationships Past.'

"I know that Veronica can be a tad prickly, but even she had to have known how you felt."

"Well, I told her every chance I could, so I hope so."

"There's only one reason I can think of that would make Veronica close the door on you." Keith stopped talking, and it seemed as if he thought he had made his point.

"I'm not trying to be obtuse here, Mr. Mars, but what are you asking me?"

"Did you ever cheat on my daughter?"

Logan felt as if he had been hit in the stomach, the air rushing out of him in one quick whoosh. "No! No, Mr. Mars. I would never...I would never do that."

Logan hadn't yet opened the door to leave the office, but his hand was on the doorknob, and he had never felt the urge to run more strongly. He willed himself to let go of the handle, and then took a few steps towards Keith, passing him, and then sitting down a little more firmly than he intended on the couch.

Less emphatically than he had first answered, Logan said "no" again, but wasn't certain whether it was for his or Keith's benefit.

Keith sighed and sat down next to him, flopping his head back on the edge of the couch, and turning
his head to look at him out of the corner of his eye. "You're not really selling me on that answer, Logan."

Logan closed his eyes, and rubbed his hands over his face, before resting them on his knees. "I never cheated on Veronica, Mr. Mars. You have to believe me. But…"

Keith sat up, and raised an eyebrow, a note of slight warning in his voice. "But?"

Logan stood up quickly, the proximity of being so close to Veronica's father suddenly too much. He began pacing back and forth, not certain whether he was going to answer or leave. "Is it too late for me to take back the 'ask me anything' offer?"

"Talk, Logan. You never cheated on Veronica, but what?"

"Okay, so I'm not trying to make excuses here, but I kind of had the worst role model in the history of the world teach me about women." Logan groaned and ran a hand through his hair, clearly uncomfortable with this topic of conversation. He continued to pace back and forth, but his tempo had slowed slightly. "On my thirteenth birthday my dad gave me a box of condoms and 'the talk' which was mostly a warning he would kill me if I ever got a girl pregnant."

He stopped pacing the room, and had turned his back to Keith, clenching his hands into fists and then releasing them again and again. Keith didn't know if he was trying to stop himself from punching something, or if it was just a nervous habit.

"My dad was, well, my dad. And my mom was, well, my mom. And my first girlfriend was Lily. All of that added up to a pretty fucked up understanding of relationships."

Logan had stopped talking and Keith could hear him breathing heavily. He wasn't certain if that was all Logan had intended to say, but it sounded as if he was working himself up to an admission of infidelity. Keith stood up and walked to where Logan was turned away from him. He stepped in front of Logan, but several feet back so Logan didn't feel trapped, and nodded that he wanted him to continue.

"When Veronica and I got back together before college, I felt like the consolation prize. Like she was only with me because Duncan wasn't around anymore. I never cheated, but I would… I don't know…I guess I'd test her sometimes to see how she actually felt about me, and the easiest way to do that was with other women." Knowing that that was the worst of what he had to admit, Logan took several steps back until he felt the couch behind his legs, and sat down heavily.

"Girls would hit on me in front of her, and I wouldn't mention Veronica was my girlfriend. Or, they'd give me their number, and I'd leave it in my pants pocket on purpose to see if she'd notice. Because I thought that if she was getting jealous, then it meant she cared."

Keith looked at Logan, who sat hunched over with his elbows on his knees, looking absolutely miserable and ashamed.

"How'd that work out for you?" Keith moved over to the desk and sat on the edge.

"Better than I wanted it to." At Keith's frown, Logan continued. "Jealousy gave way to suspicion. She tracked my phone, once for sure, maybe more than once, I don't know. I could see it happening, and I knew it was my fault, but I couldn't undo it. So, I just tried to be better, not play so many games but at that point." He threw his hands up in the air, not quite certain how to finish his thought.

Keith crossed his arms tightly across his chest. "It was too late?"
Logan nodded and then slouched low on the couch.

Let it be over. Please say he's done.

"If you didn't cheat, then why did it end?"

Well, shit.

Logan began to pick at the cuticles of his left hand with his right thumbnail. If it hadn't been so quiet in the office, Keith would have missed Logan's answer. "When we were broken up around Christmas I slept with someone I shouldn't have. She couldn't get past it."

Logan's eyes were getting brighter with the sheen of held in tears, and Keith was surprised to see the way this young man was again experiencing the hurt and regret of that mistake so clearly, as if it had recently happened.

"Fuck. Why did I just tell you all this?"

"Because I asked you." Keith steepled his fingers, brought them towards his lips, and then pointed them at Logan, affecting a tone he had borrowed from Dr. Phil. "Logan, I hope you can understand now why using that tactic with a girl whose mother had been having a long term affair wasn't conducive to developing a relationship of trust and understanding."

Logan rubbed his forehead as if fending off a migraine. "Hindsight, et cetera."

"Well, you were an idiot. No one will deny that fact. But I think you'll survive."

"We'll see." Logan was exhausted. The fact he had only had a Cliff bar for dinner wasn't helping. He wanted to go home, fall asleep, and forget this embarrassing display of emotion had ever happened, but he knew Keith wasn't finished with him yet. He leaned his head back on the couch and closed his eyes.

"Can I offer you some fatherly type advice?"

"I don't know if I'd be able to recognize it. Aaron's advice usually took the form of admonishments in the 'don't make me regret having you as a son' variety."

Logan still had his eyes closed, and Keith wondered how it was possible for him to say such things so matter of factly. They rolled off his tongue like they were baseball stats, or a grocery list, not what he knew must be painful memories.

"Well, my advice is bound to include a few 'atta boys' and a 'when I was your age,' if I can manage. Think you can handle it?"

Logan kept his eyes closed, but a slight smile tugged at his lips and he nodded.

"A few months after Veronica moved to LA, I was on a plane to Denver to go after a bail jumper I had been tracking. When I got on the plane I was relieved to find my seatmate was a fairly normal looking man in his early sixties. I wasn't in the mood for idle chit chat, and thought I would be safe." Logan opened his eyes and sat up a little straighter, angling his body to face Keith.

"I sat down and immediately he starts talking to me, asking about my life, and family, and job. By the time the flight attendants started their safety demonstration, he had heard a good part of my life story. Then, just before take-off he goes to turn off his cell phone, and breaks out into an ear to ear grin. His wife had sent him a text message telling him to have a good flight." Keith shook his head
slightly as he remembered, and Logan slid over on the couch a few inches closer to the desk.

"Based on how this guy grinned, I figured he was a newlywed with a trophy wife. But after we take off, he pulls out a photo of her, and she's this totally normal looking woman with gray hair in her late fifties. We spent the next three hours talking about his wife, and his family, and Lianne, and love in general. I asked him how he did that. How he could still have the look he did after being married for thirty-five years."

Logan looked down at his feet.

*The longest me Veronica ever made it was six and a half months. How the hell does anyone make it thirty-five years?*

"He told me first and foremost to forget about finding someone who made me a better person." Logan looked up and stared intently at Keith, the young man's surprise apparent. "He told me that the secret was to find someone who helped you love other people better. Because loving someone for the way they make you feel is easy, but loving someone because they make you better for others, that's hard."

Logan furrowed his brow and rubbed the back of his neck, trying to work out what Keith had just said. "Is that really the secret?"

"I'm not saying it's THE secret, no, but it works for him and his wife."

"So you believe him, then?"

"I will say this. Being with Alicia does make me a better man for myself, but it also makes me a better father to Veronica, a better boss to my employees. I guess she makes me better for me and for others."

Logan stood up. "Why are you telling me this, Mr. Mars?"

"It's pretty simple, Logan. Does being with Veronica make you better for others? And even more important, do you make her better?"

Keith could see Logan sorting through memories, undoubtedly sorting some in the good file and some in the bad, trying to answer the question for both himself and Veronica. After a few seconds, he looked at Keith with an almost fearful expression. "I don't know."

"Well, then figure it out." Keith hopped down from the desk and genially slapped Logan's shoulder.

"Mr. Mars, do you think that I do that for her? Do I make Veronica better?" He began to walk towards the exit, and Keith walked beside him.

"I can't say one way or the other, but she fights for you, and for Veronica, that means something."

Logan nodded again. "Thanks Mr. Mars." He opened the door and took one step before Keith stopped him.

"Logan, why do you keep calling me Mr. Mars? I told you to call me Keith."

Logan shrugged. "I like it. I like that there's someone older than me I can actually respect. It's, uh… it's been a long time since I had that. My elders have been…disappointing."

Keith laughed. "You routinely swear and hit on my daughter in my presence, but you draw the line
at calling me Keith?"

"Have to draw the line somewhere."

"Well, I promise that my sheen of greatness will remain untarnished, regardless of what you call me. Good night, Logan." Logan smirked, and turned down the hall once more.

Keith stepped into his office, grabbed his keys and briefcase, and turned off the lights before stepping out and locking the door to Mars Investigations. He walked out of the building and pulled his phone out to check the time and grimaced to see how late it was. Veronica would not be pleased. No doubt that was what the text message she had sent an hour prior intended to communicate.

Keith was more than a little surprised to see what she had actually written.

From Veronica 8:46 pm  
Be nice to him, or I'll kick your ass.

He laughed out loud and shook his head. He wished he had checked the message earlier and could have shown the text to Logan as proof.

See, Logan? She fights for you, even when you don't know she's doing it.

Chapter End Notes

This was the first chapter with the aid of my dear beta and now even more dear (dearer?) friend scandalpants.

And this here, as you can see, is where we start to get into the nuts and bolts of Veronica's mystery arc. The stalking storyline can feel overdone, but I've wrapped it in saran wrap and put it in tupperware to make sure it stays...fresh. Sorry for that. Scandalpants should beta my author notes.
The whole middle section is a flashback to their often alluded to spring break together. When you get there it should be pretty clear.

Veronica had less than an hour before she was supposed to be at Logan's. Yet, there she was, standing in her room wrapped in a towel, no closer to getting dressed. She searched through her wardrobe for a swimsuit and settled on a black bikini with a tie-front halter top. She didn't intend to swim, but figured it'd be odd to show up to a pool party without a suit.

That morning Veronica had spent as much time as possible working on her case. She had stopped at her dad's office under the pretext of dropping off his lunch, but also managed to pocket a jar of fingerprint powder. Hunkered down in a quiet corner of a coffee shop, her suspicions were confirmed. There weren't any usable fingerprints on the sketch, and there were too many on the envelope to be of much use.

After that failed attempt, she went to an arts supply store to see if they could provide any insight into the materials that had been used to create the drawing. The clerk told her the paper came from a run-of-the-mill sketch book, and the pencils used were slightly above average graphite. Once she got a few additional leads, she planned to visit several art supply stores in Chicago and see if that turned up anything useful. For the time being, that part of the investigation had stalled.

When she got back to her dad's she spread out every sketch that had been given to her. She took a stack of post-it notes from her dad's office and spent the next hour labeling each sketch with the date it was received, the phrase that was written on the back, and any details of the sketch that caught her attention. In addition she wrote the names Logan, Duncan, Piz, Jared, and Skyler on the appropriate post-it notes. Almost her entire romantic history on display before her on a series of sticky notes. Was one of these men in some way responsible for what was happening to her?

She arranged the sketches in the order they had been received and noted their variety. Some of them depicted her with the short and spunky hair she had worn sophomore year of high school, some with her hair long like she had worn it as an undergrad, and some with her hair cut just above her shoulders like she wore it now. She found it odd that they were sent to her out of chronological order. The last sketch she had received in Chicago depicted her with hair just below her chin worn in loose waves. Her hair hadn't been that short since high school. Apparently her stalker was nostalgic. A number of the images looked familiar to her, like she had seen them before, but she couldn't quite place them.

Erin was right. She was too close to this and was overlooking things.

Veronica had carefully put the sketches back in their envelopes, keeping the post-it notes with pertinent information listed, and then changed to go for a long run. This time the distance had been completely intentional. She ran for three miles along the beach, and then back. By the time she returned she had just enough time to make a peanut butter sandwich, take a shower, and get ready to go to Logan's.
Now she stood in her bedroom, wearing the swimsuit she had selected, and rifling through her drawers for an appropriate outfit. Nothing she had packed seemed appealing, so she opened her closet and pulled out a box of summer clothes she kept at her dad's house. She rifled through the box and selected a navy blue halter dress with hook and eye closures up the bodice and eyelet lace at the hem. It was a tad wrinkled, but she flattened it out with her hands the best she could.

Veronica put on the dress, blow dried her hair and styled it into two pigtails at the nape of her neck. She added mascara and a little lip gloss and called it good. Before she left the house, she wrote a note for her dad reminding him where she was spending the evening and promising to be back by 11 PM.

She was two steps away from the front door when she changed her mind and returned to her bedroom to grab the stack of manila envelopes. She wasn't certain if she was going to tell Logan what was going on with her, but having the evidence with her would at least give her the option. With the evidence tucked under her arm, she turned off the lamp in the living room and left, double checking that she had locked the front door.

On her way to Logan's house, she was a bundle of nerves. It partly had to do with seeing Logan's house for the first time. He had told her about the project, but she had never actually seen it. It also had a little to do with seeing Heather again. The last time had been around Christmas her senior year of college.

She had been in Neptune visiting her dad and was running a few errands to get the fixings for Christmas dinner. Her dad had been working late the whole week, so she stopped to pick up a pizza and salad from Cho's to bring to him at the station. She hadn't expected to run into Logan and a young teenage girl sharing a pizza. She had vaguely remembered seeing her a few years before, but when Logan introduced the two of them, everything clicked into place. Veronica may have only seen her once, but she had heard enough stories about Heather from Mac to feel like she knew her.

By the time Veronica's pizza was ready to go, Heather had decided that she and Veronica were destined to be best friends. Over the past couple years, Veronica had received half a dozen texts from Heather, who had presumably gotten her number from Logan, asking for advice on a dress for homecoming, or which brand of lip gloss to commit to. She always responded politely, and Heather insisted she was the absolute greatest, but the two didn't have much of a relationship.

Veronica had stopped interacting with teenage girls the moment she ceased to be one. She wasn't sure she was up for starting a relationship with one of them, but she knew Logan really cared for Heather, and therefore was willing to try.

As she drove to Logan's, Veronica knew three things were true. One, she had every right to ask Logan for what she wanted. And what she wanted was answers. Two, Logan was well within his right to ignore what she wanted. Three, if Logan didn't give her what she wanted, there was very little she could do to get him to change his mind. He didn't belong to her.

Only three days back in Neptune and she was already a mess. She had been the one to suggest to Joanna over their monthly coffee date that this vacation would provide closure to a number of aspects of her life, chief among them her relationship with Logan. Joanna had simply given her a knowing smile.

Veronica had gotten defensive and assured her repeatedly that things were going to change. "Joanna, I can't keep coming back here. I can't keep coming back to this imaginary place in my head where Logan Echolls is the one who got away."

"Well, Veronica, if you can't keep going back there, where will you go?"
Veronica had no idea why both her and Joanna's words had been echoed a week later in a dream she had about Lily. Probably because Joanna was the kind of woman she had hoped Lily would have grown up to be. Fiercely confident, strong willed, passionate about life, and prone to wild acts of fancy. Joanna's PhD in psychology served to steady her, but she was all fire.

Joanna's final words of advice to Veronica that day had been: "Whether you kick him or kiss him, it doesn't really matter. But whatever you choose to do, make sure it's what you truly want. Once you've decided, you need to face the consequences of your choice. No running away. Face it like a woman."

And that's what Veronica intended to do. She'd go to that house and face things like a woman. She'd take Wallace's advice and harness the tenacity that put her at the head of her class in medical school, and gave her a PI record without any unsolved cases, and she'd apply it to her personal life. Hell, she'd done it before. She could do it again.

True to his word, Logan set out for LA on the 19th. When he texted Veronica at 10 AM that he was just leaving Neptune, she had to stop herself from pacing the length of her apartment the entire two hours it took him to get there.

The plan had not been well thought out. Their only contact, aside from their brief interaction that Christmas, had been through the mail. They hadn't discussed where he was staying during his time in LA, nor had she mentioned that it was going to be just the two of them for the week. Veronica had always intended for Logan to stay at her place, but she hadn't figured out how to mention that to him. Her roommate Alison, also a pre-med student, was out of town and had given permission for Logan to use her room.

Alison had made it clear to Veronica that she thought that by remaining single Veronica was wasting her hotness and the opportunity to hook up with a plethora of handsome, soon to be wealthy doctors. When Veronica mentioned Logan was going to visit for break, Alison actually attempted a cartwheel in their living room, only to fall flat on her bottom. Even if she hadn't already had plans to road trip with her own boyfriend to Vegas for spring break, Alison would have found a way to leave Logan and Veronica alone.

A knock sounded on the outside of Veronica's front door at the same time she pulled out the final batch of peanut butter M&M cookies from the oven, a blatant attempt to try and make herself useful.

No matter how many times she reminded herself that Logan was just a friend, and that they hadn't dated for close to three years, she couldn't stop the racing of her heart as she walked the ten feet to the door. She had no idea what she was going to say when she saw him, but thankfully Logan helped her with that. The second she opened the door he gathered her up into a tight hug.

She held her hands semi-loose at her sides until she heard him say, "God, I missed you", which was all she needed to encourage her to wrap her arms tightly around him. She managed to choke out a, "Me too", before he let her go.

Logan sniffed the air and took a step inside her apartment. "Peanut butter cookies?" He walked over to the cooling rack and grabbed a cookie, then opened the fridge to pull out the carton of milk. He was making it clear that awkwardness was not allowed. They were friends, and they were going to act like it.

She rolled her eyes and closed the door. "By all means, make yourself at home."

After her third cookie, Veronica told him that if he was expecting a bellhop to collect his bag from
his car, he'd sadly be kept waiting for a while. He'd be better off getting it himself. Veronica assumed that on his way out to his car, he'd called whatever hotel he had made a reservation at and cancelled it.

On that first day, Veronica had intended to head down to Olvera Street for Mexican food but, just as she was going to make the suggestion, she received a text from the editor of The Daily Bruin, UCLA's newspaper. He begged and pleaded with Veronica to head to the women's softball home game. Their regular sports photographer had the stomach flu. Veronica said no, but Logan insisted it was okay, so they made their way to Easton Stadium instead.

The two of them stood on the sidelines and talked while eating overpriced stadium food, pausing periodically for Veronica to take a few photos. Logan took to guessing which members of the team actually fulfilled the popular stereotype of softball players, and Veronica eventually got him to shut up by pointing out that the vast majority of the team could probably beat him up without much effort.

The game ended with the Bruins losing 4-1. "Well," Logan said, "at least in softball they don't have to watch their team lose for nine innings." Veronica shot him a glare and then laughed when she noticed the entire team had heard Logan's comment and were also staring him down.

They headed from the game to her editor's office to drop off the photos and since she promised to be quick, Logan waited in the lobby of the newspaper office. When she returned to the lobby, having declined Jerry's offer for more work that week, Logan was staring transfixed at a framed photo on the wall. It was of a UCLA Bruins football player who had obviously climbed into the stands, still wearing all of his football gear except his helmet. The player had both his arms around a girl's waist and they were in the midst of a heated makeout. The crowd around the couple was turned toward them and cheering them on and a few of the male fans were slapping the player on the back.

Veronica blushed at the intensity with which Logan was staring at the photo. She didn't know he was even aware she had walked into the room, until he glanced at her for a brief second before turning his eyes back to the picture. "Damn, Veronica, you're getting good." He looked at her again pointedly and gestured to the photo. "When did you get this good?"

Veronica walked over to where Logan was standing and frowned. The photo didn't have a sign saying she had taken it, and she didn't sign it. "How'd you know I took this?"

Logan shrugged. "I could just tell." He pulled his wallet out of his pocket and pulled out two twenty dollar bills. "Think this will cover it?"

"Cover what?"

Logan didn't respond and walked over to the reception desk and chatted briefly with the student sitting there. He handed her the two twenties and Veronica saw the student nod and smile, first at Logan, and then at her. He walked away from the receptionist and back to Veronica where he took the framed photo off the wall.

"Logan, what the hell are you doing?"

"I've only been in L.A four hours and I've already bought art."

An hour later they were sitting on a bench near the inverted fountain, each of them sipping on a fruit smoothie. Logan was flipping through a copy of The Daily Bruin, trying to guess which photos Veronica had taken without looking at the credits. After Logan had guessed 12 out of 15 correctly, he turned to see Veronica looking at him.
"What? Do I have smoothie on my face?" He swiped around his mouth just to make sure.

Veronica shook her head. "I won a photo competition." She looked down at her smoothie and fiddled with the straw. "I have a picture up in the student gallery if you want to go see it."

She still hadn't looked up, but did so when Logan whacked her across the head with the newspaper. Just as she was about to settle on an appropriate expletive, he whacked her again. "Geez, Logan. What's your problem?"

"You didn't think that kind of information was postcard worthy?" He stood up and tossed the newspaper in the recycling bin beside the bench. "Which way to the gallery?"

As much as she tried to summon up annoyance at his behavior, she couldn't manage. She punched him lightly in the shoulder and then led the way.

Veronica paid for their admission into the gallery and they passed the first several hallways of contemporary art before arriving at the featured exhibit. She stopped walking and turned around quickly causing Logan to almost bump into her. Placing a hand on each of his arms, she opened her mouth to say something, but then nodded once before turning around and bringing them to round the corner. Logan's eyes darted to the left and right, not certain where they should land. Veronica smiled and pointed to a 16' x 20' photo hung on the wall opposite from them. He grinned and made his way over to where she pointed.

She watched Logan take a few steps closer and noticed his shoulders tense just slightly when he saw it was a photo of him. It was taken on the beach at the time of night when all the colors had faded and the setting sun bathed everything in gold. He was out in the middle of the ocean, lying on his back on his surfboard. His arms were folded behind his head, one foot was dangling in the water, while the other was flat on the board. He was almost completely silhouetted against the gold of the water.

Veronica came and stood beside him. "I wanted to tell you I had won, but it's not like you need any more fodder for your ego."

He looked down at her and she silently pleaded with him. Don't make a big deal out of this. Please say this is okay.

"Does this mean I can put 'award winning physique' on my résumé?"

She allowed a short puff of air to escape her lips. "I don't even want to think about the kinds of jobs that would qualify you for."

They spent another hour poking around the gallery before heading out to get dinner. After drinks, appetizers, dinner, and dessert, they were the last people to leave the restaurant.

The following day they lounged around her apartment for the better part of the morning, reading the paper, drinking coffee, and watching the last half of Wayne's World on TV. When they got hungry for lunch, they took a long walk to the farmer's market and ate their way through the different stalls and vendors. Veronica had purchased tickets for them to go to an art, chocolate, and wine class downtown later that afternoon. The gallery fed them chocolate and wine, then tried to teach them the basics of form drawing. Logan screwed his eyes intently at what he was working on, but when Veronica took a peak at his canvas, she saw he had merely drawn a series of stick figures in compromising sexual positions.

Clearly the man had no talent for fine art.
They left the gallery and Veronica's mood had dimmed slightly, but she perked up when she saw
Logan wobble on his feet. Logan Echolls had gotten day drunk off red wine. He insisted he was just
day tipsy, but she steered him to a nearby deli where they ate large Reuben sandwiches to soak up
the alcohol before he could be arrested for public intoxication.

By the time they made it back to Veronica's apartment it was close to 9 o'clock and they both wanted
to take it easy and watch a movie. He sprawled out on the couch while she curled herself up in the
armchair Alison had contributed to the apartment, only making it through the first 20 minutes before
falling asleep. She woke up briefly when she felt Logan picking her up from the armchair, but the
moment he put her on her bed, she was out again.

On Sunday they spent most of the morning and early afternoon at Espresso Cielo chatting over
coffee and biscotti. Occasionally they'd each pick up the book they had brought with them and read
for a few minutes. Veronica looked up from her book to see that Logan had switched over to writing,
filling up page after page of his black Moleskine.

She wanted to ask him about Sarah and maybe mention she had seen the two of them at the very café
where they were now sitting. But was it worth breaking the idyllic moment? Ultimately, she decided
it wasn't. She closed her book and placed it on the table and watched him write furiously for a few
more seconds.

"What are you writing?" she asked, bringing her mug to her lips and taking a small sip of her third
refill of coffee.

Logan kept writing but he smiled, so she knew he had heard her. He put a period at the end of his
sentence and closed the notebook. "My advisor wants a detailed outline of my senior thesis by the
end of the month. Just writing down some thoughts."

"What's the topic?"

"Not sure yet. But I'll figure it out."

Veronica shook her head, not at all surprised he hadn't decided. But if the critical essays he had
published in Hearst's literary magazine were any indication, his thesis would be well thought out and
articulate. She hadn't figured out how to mention she was a subscriber to the magazine and a fan of
his work.

They sat in amicable silence for a few minutes, drinking their coffee and watching people pass by.
Veronica swirled her biscotti in her coffee, took a bite and then looked up at Logan.

"So, how many more postcards will I be sending to the Neptune Grand?"

Logan brushed the crumbs from his scone off his lap and took another sip of coffee. "Funny you
should ask. I'm actually moving into a rental end of next month."

Feigning shock, Veronica placed a hand over her heart. "A rental? How the mighty have fallen."

"Well, the bigger they are, the harder they fall." He took another sip of his coffee and stared at her.
He always delighted at her annoyance with his inability to easily volunteer information.

She sighed. "But seriously. Where are you moving?"

"I'm building a house. Which is expensive. So, I'm moving into a condo for a while. The condo is
fairly close to the construction site."
"Okay, there's a lot for me to process her. First off, you're making a fiscally responsible decision. Shocking. Second, you're building a house! Where?"

Logan smiled and opened his notebook, ripping a blank page out from the back, and began to draw. She leaned over slightly to get a look, so he blocked her view and waggled one finger at her before resuming drawing.

"In the 1990's a neuroscientist named Joseph Ledoux developed an experiment to study the relationship between fear and memory. In his study he'd play a tone for a group of rats and then shock the rats once. Six months, and even a year later, when he played the same tone for the rats they still had a fear response to the sound."

Veronica placed her mug on the table and tried to get another peek at his drawing. He blocked her again, and she groaned. "Logan, what does this have to do with your house?"

He stopped drawing and looked up at her. "Do you mind? I'm expounding over here." Veronica rolled her eyes and waved him on.

"So, these rats only had to be shocked once to forever fear this sound. Then, Ledoux experimented to see what would happen if he injected chemicals called protein synthesis inhibitors into the part of the brain that helps consolidate memories." He rotated the page and kept drawing.

"Please, oh wise one, what did they find out?" The pieces were beginning to click together, but she was frustrated at how he was prolonging the description.

"I don't appreciate the sarcasm," he said, narrowing his eyes, "but I'll tell you anyway." Veronica pretended to wipe a drop of sweat from her brow in relief.

"When they injected this chemical right after the rats heard the tone and experienced the shock, the next time they played the tone, the rats didn't fear it. They kept experimenting with the chemical and discovered that there is a six hour window where they could inject this chemical and change the way the fear memories consolidated. If they waited longer than six hours, the rats would still fear the sound."

"How do you know all this?"

"I read a book. Anyway, what's even weirder is that this six hour window exists for humans too. Which means that when we have a fear response to something, a person, a place, an event, there is a limited amount of time to try and reconsolidate our memory to change our response. You have to start working on overcoming the fear the moment the fear response is triggered, and turn the negative stimulus into a positive stimulus." Logan stopped drawing and flipped the page over so Veronica still couldn't see what he had drawn.

"Okay, so let's say that a person once got stuck in an elevator and therefore always gets anxious when they are on an elevator. If this theory is correct, to overcome that they should…"

"They should have sex in the elevator. Yes."

"Excuse me?" Veronica crossed her arms over her chest in annoyance.

"It was just an example."

"I'm sure."

"It's all about taking what is usually a negative trigger and immediately working through it so it has
positive connotations." Logan flipped over the paper and slid it over to Veronica. He had drawn a
rather elementary, but clear, floor plan of a house. "That's the house I'm building on the Echolls
property."

Veronica looked up at him with wide eyes. "You're rebuilding your house?"

He looked down at his hands before answering. "I don't want to be afraid of him anymore. A lot of
good stuff happened there too."

She gingerly ran her fingers along the lines he had drawn.

Yeah, you idiot, I spent a summer falling in love with you there.

She choked down the memory before she spoke. "Well, tell me about the new Echolls estate."
Veronica slid the ground plan so it was in the middle of the table. Logan took his pen and pointed to
each room as he spoke.

"Well, not a single room is going to be just for show. Every room is going to be lived in. And it's
only going to have three bedrooms and an office, and two of the bedrooms will be guest rooms so
friends always have a place to be. Since it's going to be smaller house, I'll have a huge backyard to
set up a volleyball court, and have an outdoor patio, and pool." He sat his pen down and his voice
got quieter. "And there's not going to be a pool house."

He looked up at her and she nodded her head once then took his hand and held it tightly. He cleared
his throat and used his free hand to take a sip of coffee. "I'm painting the master bedroom yellow."

"Why yellow?"

"Because my mom always wanted to, and Aaron refused to sleep in a bedroom that was the color of
piss." Veronica was quiet and shook her head, keeping her eyes focused on her hand clasped in
Logan's. "What, Veronica?"

"Don't do that Logan." He tried to pull his hand back from hers but she held on and turned her face
up to meet his stare. "Don't do something just because it's the opposite of what Aaron would want.
Screw Aaron. Do what you want."

She flushed at the way Logan looked at her and she wasn't able to quite process what it meant when
he picked up her hand and placed a kiss on her palm. "Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome." Veronica ducked her head and tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear.
"When it's all finished, I want a VIP tour."

They had dinner at Veronica's house that night and later, before Logan could get out his suggestion
they finish the movie they had started the night before, she handed him his keys and told him he was
driving to their next location. When they pulled up in front of St. James' Episcopal Cathedral, Logan
couldn't hide his confusion.

"Church? You brought me to a church?" Logan parked the car and stared at her. "What about me
says church to you?"

She reached into the backseat and grabbed the blanket she knew Logan kept there, and then opened
her door to get out of the car. He followed, but kept up his string of complaints. "This whole trip was
an attempt to convert me, wasn't it?"

She rolled her eyes and bumped his hip with hers as they walked to the ornate front entrance.
"Actually I've joined a new cult and we're hoping you'll bank roll the operation."

He simply frowned at her and said, "I told you people in LA were weird. It was only a matter of time before they got to you."

"Shut up, and trust me." They got to the entrance and Logan opened his mouth to complain again, but Veronica shushed him and pressed a finger to his lips. She pointed to the sign in the foyer of the church, 'Compline in progress. Please enter in silence.' He rolled his eyes again and she leaned in to whisper in his ear.

"You'll like it. I promise."

As they walked into the church, Logan stopped to stare up at the high ceilings and he felt Veronica press a hand to his lower back to encourage him to keep walking. He moved to sit down in one of the wooden pews, but she shook her head and walked to the back of the room where dozens of people were sprawled out lying on blankets. She spread the blanket out and lay down with her hands behind her head. Logan sat on the blanket and looked around in confusion.

She didn't know the last time Logan had been in a church, but she’d hazard a guess that no service he ever remembered had such a diverse group of people in attendance. On the blanket closest to the two of them was a group of teenagers who were discreetly passing a flask back and forth and taking small sips. Behind then were several people sitting in wooden high back chairs with their eyes closed. On another blanket was a group of guys who looked like they'd be more at home at a Dropkick Murphy’s concert, lying on their stomachs. In the wooden pews, amongst others, sat couples in their 80’s wearing their Sunday best, and a large group of people who looked like they could be homeless.

When the choir director began to recite a scripture passage, she saw in her peripheral vision Logan glare down at her. She felt guilty for a moment that he was so uncomfortable with their surroundings, but then he exhaled a low breath and lay down next to her.

As soon as the choir director stopped speaking the choir that was hidden from their view began singing. The first notes burst out and she heard Logan quietly exclaim, "Woah." Maybe that meant he understood why it was that Veronica and such a diverse group of people would attend this event held only once every six months on a Sunday night.

The room was dim. Candles were lit throughout the whole space. The only voices heard were those of the choir. Most of the teenagers close to Veronica and Logan had fallen asleep curled up on their sides. Veronica moved her hand to grasp Logan's. She felt him shift, let her take hold, and then both closed their eyes tightly.

Several minutes later, she opened her eyes and looked over at Logan. He looked calm, at peace, quiet, and it made her wonder how improper it would be to initiate a makeout session in the midst of a church service. Logan opened his eyes to find Veronica staring at him and she saw his eyes darken slightly as he seemed to ask himself the same question. In response she squeezed his hand clasped in hers and looked up at the ceiling.

They left the cathedral in silence and didn’t talk until they had both fastened their seat belts and had pulled out of the parking lot. Veronica wasn't sure if Logan got why they had come, and she wanted him to know without having to explain.

"So much of my life is chaos, you know?" She was looking out the window but she could feel his eyes on her.
"Yeah, I know."

When they got back to her apartment, they both changed into their pajamas and sat on the couch drinking hot chocolate spiked with peppermint schnapps. Logan talked about Sarah, and gave Veronica, what she suspected was, a modified version of how things went wrong.

He talked about Jenna and how, despite his misgivings, she and Trina had gotten along quite well. He gulped down a large drink and admitted he had asked her if she wanted to find a place together, but she said she wasn't ready. The summer between their junior and senior year they broke up when Jenna told him she had cheated on him. Despite her pleas that she was sorry, that it was a onetime thing, and would never happen again, he refused to try to fix it. He just couldn't.

Veronica put her mug down on the coffee table. "I need you to know that I never…"

"Me neither."

After his blatant honesty, Veronica figured she owed him the story of Jared. A five month relationship that she knew was close to ending when she declined his invitation to spend Christmas of their junior year at his parent's house in Redding. The final nail in the coffin had been her response when he said, "I love you."

Logan fought hard to avoid a spit take when she told him that she had high fived Jared and said, "Cool bro."

"What possessed you to respond that way?"

She shook her head and slapped a hand to her forehead. "I don't know. I just didn't think we were there. I mean, he didn't really seem to like me all that much most days. I kind of thought it was just casual."

"Veronica Mars, were you using him for sex?" She chose to take Logan's amusement at the situation as a sign of his maturity, and not as a sign he didn't care about her.

She put her thumb and index finger up with a half inch of space between them, and then widened the gap so it was closer to four inches. "Just a little. Why do dudes have to make everything so complicated?"

Logan laughed heartily and uncapped the schnapps to add a splash more to his and Veronica's mugs.

She cleared her throat. "Jared was the only one who I...you know...since you." He looked down, focusing on putting the cap back on the battle. "And there hasn't been anyone since." He nodded he understood, and quickly took another drink of his hot chocolate, which did little to hide the smile on his face.

By 2:00 AM they had both shared enough to know that neither was currently seeing anyone, neither had a fuck buddy on retainer, and neither were on the rebound from a serious or semi-serious relationship. When they each checked off the final box on their mental checklists, they washed their mugs out and went to their separate rooms to go to sleep.

The smell of blueberry pancakes and coffee was what Veronica awoke to the next morning. By the time she padded out to the kitchen, Logan had set the table and there was a cup of coffee waiting for her on the counter. She almost walked up behind him and hugged him around the waist, but then reminded herself that the two of them were just friends. She continued to repeat the words as she sat at the table.
Still, when she took the first sip of coffee she couldn't help the 'mmmm' that escaped her lips and she blamed the smile he gave her in response for asking him, "Can I keep you?"

He smiled again and then it faded just slightly. "Nah. I'm perishable goods. Don't keep well." He intended the comment to be lighthearted, but Veronica could hear the insecurity behind it.

"Don't do that." She was ready for this conversation. It was time to get it all out on the table, but Logan didn't seem to think so.

"Breakfast is ready," he said.

The ease from the previous evening was momentarily suspended, but at the first bite of the pancakes, Veronica let out another 'mmmm' and Logan laughed at the accompanying groan.

"Should I leave you guys alone?"

"If you do, there won't be any left for you."

Over breakfast, Logan updated her on how Dick and Trina were doing. Dick had declared himself a Communications Major as soon as he realized that it was the major with the best ratio of women to men. He was currently working on his final project for his capstone class; a webisode surfing and adventures series Mac was helping him produce called "Dick's Big Ride."

Trina had made the decision to step out of the limelight for a while and was now attending the Tisch School of the Arts at NYU to get more advanced training. Apparently she had always preferred stage acting to film, but Aaron had seen the stage as a waste of time so she never pursued it. Logan called Charlie twice a year, but he never got a return call.

Veronica updated Logan on Keith, on the small group of friends she made in LA (Alison, Taylor the boy, Taylor the girl, and Caitlin), and told him the full story of the case that had gone bad and encouraged her change of career path. When she finished telling him the story, he was frowning at her.

She thought he was going to give her a belated lecture about being reckless, but apparently her story had raised more questions than it had answered. "But you still have your PI license?"

"Yeah, but I'm not using it really. I'm not ready yet." He shook his head and wiped one hand over his face. "What? What'd I say?" she asked.

"Why don't you tell me the real reason you left Neptune."

Veronica threw her fork on the plate. "That is the real reason."

"Oh, I believe it's part of the reason, but there's more to the story than you're telling."

"What makes you say that?" She crossed her arms, a defensive posture that mimicked Logan's.

"Veronica, really bad things have happened to you, to both of us; immensely bad things." He didn't need to say the specific names for her to conjure up the memories. Lianne, Beaver, Aaron, Mercer. "But no matter how terrible they got, you never gave up. You always fought. You expect me to believe one little car crash was enough to scare you off?"

"I'm not asking you to believe anything. It's the truth."
He rolled his eyes at her. "Sure it is."

"Fine, Logan. Since we're being so open and honest, mind telling me about the four days you spent in the hospital sophomore year as a result of Gory jumping you in a parking lot?"

His eyes narrowed and he fixed her with a stare. "How'd you hear about that?"

"I read the newspaper, Logan. You managed to make it so names weren't mentioned, but when I asked Mac and Wallace about it they clammed up and wouldn't say anything. Wasn't hard to figure out."

"Dammit, Veronica. Is this how it's always going to be? Us continuously holding secrets over one another's head to get the other to fess up?" Logan stood up and grabbed their plates and tossed them in the sink. "I'm going to the gym."

She stood up quickly and marched over to the sink. "You're here visiting me but you're going to walk out?"

"Yes, because if I don't this is going to turn into a fight."

"It's already a fight." She took a step closer to him, but he countered and took a step back.

"Well, I'm done with it."

"Fine."

They each stomped off to their respective rooms. Logan changed to go the gym, and Veronica changed into her running clothes. She was putting on her shoes when she heard the door slam behind Logan as he left.

_Damn Logan Echolls._

She got back to her apartment an hour later and Logan hadn't called. She took a shower, got dressed, did the dishes and still he hadn't called. Veronica was sitting at her kitchen table studying when she finally got a text from Logan asking if she was at home. She responded that she was and less than a minute later there was a knock at the door. She opened it to find Logan standing there, still in his gym clothes, holding a bag of takeout.

They doled out helpings of the food he had purchased at the Italian deli and sat down in the living room, balancing the plates on their laps. After she took a few bites of her pasta she sat her plate down and looked at him. "You're not going to tell me what happened with you and Gory, are you?"

He shook his head. She sighed, picked her plate up and continued to eat.

"You're not going to tell me the full story of why you left Neptune, are you?"

She shook her head. Logan sighed. "Okay," he said.

"Okay."

They finished the night with ice cream, purposefully avoiding any topics that might start another argument. Veronica woke up just before 4:00 AM and found herself on the couch, half draped over a sleeping Logan, their ice cream bowls still on the coffee table. She covered him up with a blanket before going to her room to sleep for a few more hours.

Veronica woke up the next morning when Logan jumped on her bed and started bouncing at the foot
of it. He declared that day to be Logan's choice as he would be planning everything they were doing. First, they got brunch at a café thirty minutes outside of LA, famous for their homemade biscuits. Logan purchased half a dozen and some of their jam for the road. From there they went west to Malibu to spend the afternoon on the beach. Before Veronica could open her mouth to complain, Logan pulled a small bag out of his backseat with her swimsuit, towel, sunscreen, and the book she was reading.

After they got bored with swimming and lounging in the sun, they kayaked near Surfrider Beach and enjoyed the view of the horizon and the dozens of surfers still out. Veronica insisted that Logan join them since they were there, and after only a few minutes of pretending that he didn't want to, gleefully rented a board and pulled his wetsuit out from his truck.

Dinner time was spent out on a dock, eating fish tacos, and drinking sangria. They returned to Veronica's exhausted, but still neither wanted to go to bed, each aware that Logan was leaving in less than 48 hours. The countdown clock had started.

Veronica promised she could stay awake for a movie but, just as she had earlier in his stay, fell asleep twenty minutes in. Again, she woke up as she felt Logan pick her up and move her into her bedroom, but this time when he moved to lay her down in the center of her bed, she kept her arms wound tightly around his neck.

"Veronica, let go. I need to go to my room."

"No." She smiled and pulled him towards her by the hold she had around his neck and kissed him softly. Their lips stayed pressed together moving an infinitesimal amount, as if they were in a 1940's movie, before Logan returned the kiss and they both opened their mouths just slightly.

He felt a laugh begin to form in the back of his throat and he couldn't stop it from escaping. Veronica frowned against his lips and pushed him back a few inches to look at his face. "What's so funny?"

"You have morning breath."

She shook her head at him but was smiling. "Oh, shut up."

He smiled back, a little too self-satisfied, and kissed her again.

The next morning Veronica woke up first to find her and Logan each lying on their sides so they were facing one another. His left arm was on her hip and her right arm was resting lightly on his bare chest. She left it there for a few seconds, feeling the beating of his heart, and then moved to brush a piece of hair off his forehead. His lips tugged up into a small smile at the feel of her fingertips but he didn't wake up.

She put her hand back on his chest. "Now what?" she whispered. The room was silent and the answer came to her after she watched him sleep for another minute.

_Breakfast._

She gently removed Logan's hand from her hip, tucked the sheet around his waist, and slipped on her UCLA sweatpants and sweatshirt. Given the fact that they hadn't fallen asleep until well after 3:30 AM, she didn't think Logan would be waking up any time soon, but she wrote him a note and left it for him on the counter.

When she got back to the apartment, it was as she suspected; Logan was still fast asleep. She took the pastries out of the bag, cut each of them in half and arranged them on a plate then balanced both coffee cups she had gotten in one hand. Quietly, she placed the coffees on her nightstand, the plate
on her bed, and shucked off her sweats to crawl back into bed. Logan was still turned on his side and
stirred slightly as she sat down. Veronica leaned over and kissed him lightly on his temple, then his
ear, his cheek, the tip of his nose, and finally his mouth. She felt Logan smile and pulled back to see
him open his eyes.

He grabbed both of her hands and held them to his chest and she lay down so they were again face
to face. "Good morning," he mumbled, still sleepy.

"Morning. I got us breakfast."

She sat up and handed him one of the cups of coffee. He sat up next to her, took the cup she handed,
and drank a long sip. He put the coffee cup on the table near his side of the bed and frowned at her.

"What's wrong? Did I not get the coffee right?"

"You're dressed." He crossed his arms across his chest, and pouted. Veronica rolled her eyes, and
flipped the blanket back.

"I'm pantless, just like you. But I had to put on a sweatshirt to go get breakfast." He leaned forward
to grab the plate of pastries and placed it in his lap.

"Well, you're back now, so what's your excuse?"

While she could have easily responded with a snarky rejoinder, she just shrugged her shoulders and
thugged the sweatshirt off, leaving her in her bra and underwear. He moved to kiss her again, but she
put a hand to his chest and pushed him back. "Breakfast first."

He growled at her in mild annoyance, and without removing his eyes from her face, reached down
and picked up a pastry, taking a large bite. In between bites, he managed to get out, "Happy now?"

Veronica had gotten four different pastries from the bakery, and convinced Logan to focus long
enough on breakfast to eat one half of each of them. She took a long drink of her coffee and
protested when Logan grabbed the cup out of her hand and sat it down on the nightstand.

"Hey, I wasn't finished with that." He moved over her and she lay back down so his face was
hovering right above her own. "What are you doing?"

He placed kisses on her right shoulder and then all along her collarbone to her left shoulder. "We
each just ate about 900 calories. We need to work some of that off."

She sighed as if she was much put upon. "If we must."

"We must."

The rest of the day passed more quickly than either of them wanted. Logan made a motion to spend
the rest of the day in bed, but it didn't get a second, so they spent the morning in bed and then
showered separately, despite Logan's protests. They stopped at Bristol Farms to pick up food for
lunch, and then went to wander and lounge at Griffith Park.

Veronica had never understood the appeal of feeding another person, but she quickly reassessed that
opinion when Logan took it upon himself to lick frosting off her finger from the cupcake she was
enjoying. Her eyes rolled back in her head and without a word on the subject, she started packing up
their food.

In a tone that belied his casualness, Logan asked, "Are we leaving?"
She shot him a glare. "If you want to see me naked again you'll wipe that smirk off your face and help me pack up."

"Yes dear."

They left the park holding hands and the rest of the night they constantly had some part of their bodies touching the other's. Logan's hand on her waist as she put the spaghetti noodles in boiling water for dinner. Veronica's legs draped over his lap as they ate. Logan's fingers drawing patterns on Veronica's back as they lay in bed together. Veronica's hand on Logan's chest as they slept.

The next morning the roles had reversed from the previous day, with Logan trying to get out of bed and Veronica stopping him at every turn. Admittedly he wasn't putting up much of a fight. His 9:00 departure time got pushed to 9:30, then 10:00, then 10:30, and finally 11:00 AM. Veronica walked with Logan out to his car, her hand tucked possessively in his back pocket, and his arm around her shoulder. When they got to his car she tried to hide that her eyes had glassed over slightly with held in tears.

He put his bag and Veronica's photo of the football player in the car and then turned her towards him, wrapping her up in a tight hug.

She pulled back slightly and looked at him. "You really have to go?"

"The interview is pretty much a formality, but I need to get home and get changed. Still want to make a good impression."

Veronica groaned and buried her face in Logan's chest. "God, responsible Logan is really sexy."

He laughed and kissed the top of her head. "You know," he mumbled into her hair, "we never talked about this. What happens now?"

She turned her face up to look at him and kissed him once more. "We'll figure it out."

He nodded, kissed her on the forehead, and got into the car. Veronica stayed on the curb, turned towards the direction his car had gone, long after he had driven out of sight.

"We'll figure it out." This time she whispered the words into the air as if they were a wish.

But they hadn't figured it out. If anything, things had gotten more confused between the two of them, and their individual histories more complicated; Veronica with Skyler and her stalker, and Logan with his mystery and his exes from the past eighteen months. From getting Wallace liquored up she knew there was at least a Rachel, a Dana, and a Jessica. Not to mention the issue with the unreturned letter.

She didn't know where the two of them were going, or where this tenuous reconciliation would lead, but she focused on her current pragmatic task of making her way to Logan's house. The turns and twists into the 09er zip code were done by muscle memory and in little time she arrived at the new Echolls estate.

There were noticeable differences since her last visit, most notably the lack of paparazzi and gawkers hanging around the gate. The gate itself had been replaced, now a solid barrier made of dark stained cedar that was both beautiful and functional, as it prevented photos from being taken from street level. She hesitated at the box, uncertain if she should try the entrance code that Logan had once upon a time created for her. It seemed like a Logan thing to do; program in her code, even after all their time apart. After another second, she opted to push the call button to alert the housekeeper.
Veronica was surprised when it was Logan's voice she heard. "Hello?"

"Hey. It's me." She grimaced. Maybe he didn't recognize her voice anymore? "I mean, it's me, Veronica."

She heard Logan laugh. "I know. I can see you on camera." Veronica looked up, and sure enough, there was a camera perched at the top of the gate and pointed at her car.

She looked directly at the camera. "So, you going to let me in?"

"It depends. What are you going to give me?"

She thought about mentioning the lemon cake she had stopped at Larson's Bakery to pick up on her way, but settled for flipping him off.

"Why that's the best offer I've gotten all day." Veronica quickly put her hand down, realizing exactly what it seemed like she was offering.

Logan noticed, of course he did. She could hear him laugh, but he took pity on her and buzzed her through the gate. His Lexus and a hunter green Kia SUV were in the driveway. The Kia looked a little beat up, but was still in relatively good condition, and she guessed, belonged to Heather herself.

By the time Veronica got out of the car and grabbed the cake, Logan was waiting for her with the door wide open. He saw the cake box and his eyes lit up. "Honey, you baked."

"No, the bakery baked." She handed him the box and stepped into the entryway, not quite certain what to do with her bag, or her hands, or the recognizable desire to flee a situation in which she felt out of control. Out of the corner of her eye she thought she saw Logan move to put an arm around her shoulder, but when she looked at him directly, he was standing with the cake in one hand, and the other in the pocket of his khaki shorts.

Logan took a couple steps past her to move them out of the foyer. "I'll go put this down, and then I think I owe you a VIP tour."

She had many ways she wanted to respond to that:

*How many other blondes have received the VIP tour? Brunettes? Red heads?*
*How many VIP tours end with the bedroom?*
*Does VIP stand for Very Irrelevant Person?*

For once she choked the snark down. She solved the problem of where to put her bag by placing it on a chair in the entry way, and solved the problem of what to do with her hands by putting them in the pockets of her dress. Logan solved the problem of her leaving by coming back into the foyer before she could move.

"We'll start upstairs and work our way down. But, I've been told we have to be quick about it. Heather apparently has a lot to tell you."

"Oh captain, my captain."

*It's just a tour. Not like we can fuck this up any more than we have already.*

Logan moved in the direction of the staircase and Veronica looked fleetingly at the front door, and then chose to follow him up the stairs.
So this chapter was almost 100% unabashed fluff and I make no apologies. All of the spring break dates, however, were chosen for a reason. Not just chosen -- semi-agonized over. Hopefully the purpose of each was apparent in the writing of them. And if not...um...that I will apologize for.
Every square inch of Logan's house was somehow both overwhelming and comfortable. It probably had something to do with the height of the ceilings and the amount of light in the house. Despite the fact the sun had long since set when Veronica arrived, she kept being tricked into thinking each room was lit by bright sunlight.

She allowed her hand to slowly drift up the bannister and relished the thought that, even if she were to never step foot in Logan's house again, her fingerprints would still be impressed on the staircase. A trace of her, albeit a small one, would remain.

When they reached the top of the staircase, Veronica leaned up against the wall and took off her shoes, tossing them aside to be picked up later. Logan turned to see what she was doing and raised an eyebrow. "You can keep your shoes on."

She smiled and wriggled her toes. "I wanted to feel the carpet." Placing her weight primarily on her left foot, she traced a small pattern in the carpet with her right foot. "It's plush. I approve."

"Well that's a relief. Lord knows if you didn't I'd have it ripped up tomorrow."

Veronica stood firmly on her two feet. "You really take hospitality to a whole new level, Echolls."

She walked down the hallway, which was wide enough to leave a good six inches of space at either end of her fingertips if she stood in the middle with her arms extended, and reached the secondary staircase. He had designed the house so there was a staircase in the entranceway that led to the top floor and another staircase that could be accessed from the entrance by the garage that also led upstairs.

She held the bannister, peered below, then turned around so she was leaning on the railing and gestured to the walls. "So, if I were to say I thought the walls would look better green?"

Logan snapped his fingers. "Tomorrow, liquid avocado would be slathered from floor to ceiling."

"And if I thought this hallway could really use a trapeze."

"I'd applaud you for reaching new levels of kink and contact my trapeze guy."

Veronica laughed and placed a hand on her cheek shaking her head. "Only you would have a trapeze guy." She turned around again and leaned over the railing. "Your contractor bills must be astronomical if you renovate at the whim of every guest."

She expected an immediate response from Logan, and when she got none she looked at him, concerned she had said something wrong. He stood with his hands in his pockets, staring at his feet.

"Yeah, well, some guests are more important than others."

*And we're back to the Logan Echolls M.O. From joking to sincere in five seconds flat. How does he do that?*

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and then immediately regretted it, knowing that Logan
would recognize it as a sign of being nervous. She didn't want him to notice how much she wanted –
and needed – to still be important to him.

Logan cleared his throat, and looked at his watch. "Come on, we're on a schedule. I'm supposed to
have you poolside in exactly thirty minutes."

The first rooms she saw were the two guest rooms closest to the secondary staircase. One was
painted a light blue color and held a queen sized bed with white four-poster bedframe. A white end
table was on either side of the bed, and a white dresser was against one wall. The room was
relatively small, and decorated simply. The only décor was a lamp on each end table, a couple potted
plants in the window sill, and black and white framed photos on the dresser.

The other was painted a warm yellow and had white crown molding around the perimeter of the
room. All of the furniture was light natural pine, and there were two red armchairs near a fireplace
that Veronica was considering trying to hide under her dress to take home with her. All along the
fireplace mantle were photos of Lynn and Logan and a few of Lynn with friends. A series of three
16' x 20' black and white framed photos on one wall were the only other decoration.

She touched a hand to the wall and glanced at Logan. He was standing in the doorway, leaning
against the doorframe, but he stood up straight when she deliberately noticed the paint color.

"For your mom?" she asked.

Logan nodded, clearly moved by the fact she had remembered.

As she walked around the perimeter of the room, she'd occasionally touch her finger to a windowsill
or a piece of furniture, leaving additional traces of her presence. Stopping at the photos on the wall,
she let out a small gasp and felt her heart rate speed up. "Who took these?"

He ran a hand through his hair, and walked to stand beside her. "I did." She could hear the
trepidation in his voice. To stop herself from reaching out to take his hand, she placed both of hers in
the pockets of her dress.

"It was another one of Thomas' assignments." He pointed to the first photo. "Dog Beach. Home to
some of my lowest lows, and highest highs. The highs make it worth remembering." He pointed to
the second photo. "Kerry State Park. The one and only time I tried camping."

"I told my dad you weren't an outdoorsy kind of guy. Guess he needed to see it to believe it."

Veronica looked at him and smiled, feeling a few goose bumps rise, she hoped imperceptibly, on her
arms.

You have two objectives here, Veronica. Friendship, and closure. Stick to the plan.

He pointed to the final photo of the quad at Hearst and leaned over to whisper in her ear. "If those
trees could talk, am I right?" She felt more than saw his smug smile, and the warm burn of memories
joined the goose bumps on her skin.

Memories of study sessions that turned into competitions to see who could tease the other into a state
of sexual frustration first. Memories of her one and only foray into a semi-public rounding of second
base.

Some of our best memories relegated to a psychological exercise in Logan's guest room. Maybe
that's all they are now; monsters he needs to face before he moves on. His form of closure.
Backing away from his close proximity, Veronica put a hand out to clutch the dresser, seemingly to appreciate the craftsmanship, but really to steady herself. This was all a mistake. The conversation she needed to have with Logan should not have happened whilst in his house, being assaulted by memories. She sat down in one of the chairs by the fireplace and waved a hand around the room.

"This is all for your mom, isn't it?"

Logan sat down in the other armchair and scooted to the edge so they were close enough for their knees to touch. He didn't answer immediately but, rather took a moment to scrutinize her expression.

She swore she used to be better at hiding what she was really thinking and feeling from him. Now it took everything she had to not look away and in so doing betray that his presence was affecting her.

He took a deep breath and then started to roll the hem of his shorts between his fingers. Veronica wasn't certain if Logan was purposefully grazing her knee with his fingers as he fidgeted, but she knew if he was made aware of the charge that was shooting up her spine each time he did, he wouldn't stop.

She didn't know if she wanted him to.

"Some days I hate her," he said. "Other days I love her. Every day I miss her." He turned his face up to look at the photos on the mantle and attempted to discretely wipe something from the corner of his eye.

"Some of her friends from our LA days sent the pictures. It's nice to have something of her in the house."

Not sure if she was overstepping, but knowing she wanted to offer some sort of comfort, she leaned forward and placed a hand on Logan's knee. If Logan’s accidental touches sent small charges, her purposeful action was a full on jolt. She wondered if Logan's creased brow and the way he started tapping his foot was a sign he felt the same thing.

"Some days I hate my mom too," she said, rubbing her thumb back and forth on his kneecap. She stopped as soon as she realized what she was doing.

He turned his eyes downward and placed a hand on Veronica's knee, mirroring her own gesture.

"And other days?"

"I love her." Logan's thumb moved move back and forth, and she took a deep breath before continuing. "But every day, I'm mad at her."

Logan cocked his head to the side, his eyes turned away from her face.

"Veronica, we're different people. We don't have to feel the same." He knew. Somehow he always knew.

His posture shifted, and Veronica thought he was about to stand up, but instead of giving up contact he began tracing the lines of her kneecap, occasionally moving his index finger an inch higher on her knee.

"What about me?" he asked. "Do you miss me every day, or are you mad at me every day?"
She couldn't think. Not when he was touching her like that. And not when the order of their knees and bare feet were alternated in the way they were. Her leg. His leg. Her leg. His leg. They were too tangled up, and her thoughts were getting fuzzy. He always made her thoughts fuzzy.

She scooted back a few inches in the chair, dislodging his hand so it fell to the side of her leg. "Depends on the minute, I guess."

He looked up at her, and she couldn't read his expression. Annoyance? Frustration? He rested his elbows on his knees and leaned forward. "Veronica, we should talk."

_He stole my line._

Being confronted by a Logan who clearly had things he wanted to say was unexpected. Though she had come here with the intention of having this conversation, it wasn't supposed to happen in the midst of an emotionally charged moment. She had planned for it to be calm and rational, like an exercise in grade school manners: his turn, her turn. And his hand was not supposed to be anywhere near her knee.

She stood up quickly and moved towards the door. "Let's walk and talk. Don't want to make Heather mad, do we?"

Now his expression was clear. Disappointment. She just needed a little more time and a lot more distance.

She walked out of the room and poked her head into the guest bathroom, almost floor to ceiling white, with the exception of the granite tiles in the stand-up shower, and then moved down the hallway to what she presumed was Logan's bedroom. It was dangerous territory. She understood that keenly, so she held back and let Logan take the lead. His jovial mood when she had first arrived was gone, and there was no trace of the emotional intensity from the guest bedroom. Now he was somewhat detached as he pushed his bedroom door open and waved her in with one arm.

_Come on, Logan. I'm still here with you._

She wasn't perfect. She still didn't relish in having hard conversations, but despite leaving the bedroom, she wasn't running away. Standing in front of him, she ducked her head to meet his eyes.

"Don't give me the silent treatment," she said. "Be mad at me if you want, but don't do that."

He took a deep breath and then exhaled. Through almost gritted teeth, he softly said, "I am mad at you."

She slapped his chest in an attempt to bring lightheartedness back to the moment. Ah, crap. There was that charge again. Maybe Logan's house had a higher concentration of static electricity? "Well, of course you are. I used to be a PI, you know. I have astute powers of observation."

He smiled a little, and it caused the tension in her chest to recede. "Yeah, I think I heard something about that."

Backing up a few feet so she was almost in the center of the room she gave him a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. When the kids leave, we'll have plenty of time to share with one another why we're mad."

He raised his eyebrows and put his hands behind his head, staring her down. "You're mad too? What did I do?"
"Guess you're going to find out later," she sing-songed, and then turned around to face the floor to ceiling windows that she guessed in the daytime would give a sweeping view of the California hills. "Well, your view sucks."

She expected him to stand beside her, but instead he moved behind her so that while he was seriously invading her personal bubble, he didn't actually touch her. He leaned down to whisper in her ear, and she bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from shuddering. "Not real. It's a green screen."

_Mad at me. But not so mad to keep himself out of easy groping distance. Interesting._

"Hmm. What else in the room is an illusion?" She walked to the tall venge stained dresser, ignoring the way her body instantly cooled down by stepping away from him, and knocked twice on the wood. "Particle board?" She moved over to the matching headboard and knocked again. "No, wait. It's definitely plywood."

Running a hand over the white duvet cover with diamond-slashed openings that revealed contrast blue, she could tell it was incredibly high thread count cotton, but frowned anyway. "Polyester, Logan? You know, occasionally it's okay to splurge a little bit. Buy yourself something nice."

"You're an elitist, Veronica Mars." She closed her eyes in relief that he joked back. When she opened them, she found Logan had moved to the opposite side of the bed and was standing across from her.

They were in his bedroom, she was touching his bed where he slept every night, he was staring at her, and the thought came unbidden as to what the sheets would feel like on her skin. It all felt too intimate.

"So, what do you think?" He was standing a full six feet away, the width of his king size bed between them, but when his voice got low like that, it was as if he was speaking directly into her ear.

"I like it. A lot, actually." She touched each design element as she gave her feedback. Duvet. "This looks cozy." Headboard. "The dark wood makes it you." The wall color. "And the grey was a good choice."

Her eyes scanned the room, taking in the framed photos on the dresser, the window seat with an end table stacked high with books, and then they rested on a large framed photo she hadn't noticed. It was bright, dynamic, and something that while she wouldn't expect to see in Logan's room, wasn't entirely out-of-place.

She liked that he was allowing color back into his life. Wallace had joked once in undergrad that he only ever saw Logan wearing colors that could be found on a tree. But today, Logan was wearing blue, and the picture on the wall didn't contain a single shade of brown.

She moved to take a closer look. Glancing over her shoulder at Logan, she flushed when she was met with his resolute stare.

"Mac wouldn't have said anything, right? The 'no mention of Logan Echolls' rule has been firmly in effect for the past two years."

"I found it when I was there last year. I guess he's an up and coming artist, or something. I just liked
how he took something I've seen a million times, but somehow made it different." Veronica smiled at him again. "Why do you keep smiling? It's a little creepy."

_He reads me better than almost anyone, and he doesn't even realize he's doing it._

She shrugged and looked back at the photo. "Mac and I had a conversation about kaleidoscopes a couple of years ago."

His fingertips brushed hers as he came to stand next to her. "You two talked about kaleidoscopes? How esoteric of you."

She looked down at his hand which had just brushed hers, and saw he was drumming his fingers against his thigh in a constant pattern. When they dated before senior year of high school, she used to get him to stop fidgeting by placing kisses on his knuckles. He had always assumed the gesture drove her crazy, but really she just liked having an excuse to touch her lips to his skin.

She moved closer to the photo to see the way the familiar skyline was colored, and flipped, and rearranged to look entirely different. It was LA, but it was sharper. More vibrant. And she knew the actual LA skyline was forever ruined for her.

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**FLASHBACK**

"Is he dating anyone right now?" Veronica asked, cradling the phone between her chin and shoulder.

_Mac groaned at the other end of the line. "You know he is. That Jenna girl."_

"Oh. That's still a thing?"

"Remember when you used to pretend to not have feelings? Any way we could go back to that?"

"Not tonight. I had two rum and Cokes, and I'm feeling chatty."

_Mac groaned again. "This is god's way of punishing me for befriending Logan. I knew it was a bad idea."_

Veronica laughed and kicked her feet up in the air, letting them bob back and forth as she lay on her stomach. "Yeah, well, he's pretty hard to resist."

"Okay, so this may sound like a dumb question…"

"Probably because it is, but ask it anyway."

"Why do you think that is? About Logan being hard to resist, I mean. Obviously he's got the whole tall dark and handsome millionaire thing going for him, but there's got to be more to it than that."

_Veronica sighed, rolled over onto her back, and then rested her feet flat on her bedroom wall. "It's the Logan Echolls effect."_

"He's so charismatic there's a name for it?"

"Well, it hasn't been trademarked or anything, but it might as well be." Mac snorted, and Veronica continued to explain. "Logan's always been like that. Even when we were kids and we were just riding bikes and swimming every day, everything felt more real around Logan. Lily, too, I guess. They were the same that way. The air around them seemed to almost hum with their energy."
Veronica let out a dreamy sigh as she remembered.

Mac giggled loudly. "Oh god, you're drunk."

"Seriously, Mac, you have to have noticed this." She slowly walked her feet up and down the wall, feeling the cool paint under her toes. "Being with Logan is like looking at the world through a kaleidoscope. It's twisted and turned every which way, but it's color, and life, and it just radiates off of him."

She heard Mac sigh, and suddenly she was embarrassed. Drunk dialing Mac so they could girl talk was clearly a mistake. She hoped Mac would just let her drunk ramblings lie.

"So, what's the view like in LA without the Echolls effect?"

Veronica stared at the wall, and slid her feet down so they fell on the mattress with a light thump. In a voice so soft she almost didn't recognize it as her own, she responded, "It's grey. Grey as far as the eye can see."

END OF FLASHBACK

"This is perfect," she said, gesturing at the photo again. "It suits you."

Logan smiled and rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. He made a move to grab her hand, but then pulled back and ran his hand through his hair.

That, more than anything, was what proved to Veronica that things were radically different between the two of them. It wasn't the lack of sex, or the geographical distance between Neptune and Chicago, but the way it was no longer okay for them to touch, even casually. Logan clearly saw the guest bedroom knee massage as a fluke. She ignored the voice that sounded a lot like Mac's, telling her she was being an idiot, and swallowed down her dissatisfaction at her and Logan's new arrangement.

She was clear on the rules now. Touch to comfort a friend was okay. Touch just because it felt good was not.

He gestured to his bedroom door with a nod of his head. "We're on a deadline. We'll have to take another tour later if you want to see the master bathroom. I have a Jacuzzi."

"Of course you do."

Logan sped them through the living room, the dining room, and the kitchen, pointing out his favorite features of each. He promised to show her the downstairs media and game room after dinner.

She knew the house had probably cost a large sum of money to build, but nothing about his home felt ostentatious. From what Veronica could tell, Logan Echolls was wasting an opportunity to turn his home into a shrine dedicated to his own brilliance. And she loved it.

The final room on the main floor was Logan's office. Between the Kane estate and the original Echolls home, she had previously seen two different offices belonging to millionaire men. The only resemblance those offices held to Logan's was the presence of a desk and books.

Logan's was decorated with a peculiar combination of oranges, greens and blues, that somehow all
worked together to make it one of the most comfortable rooms in the house. The tall bookcases were overflowing with Logan's impressive collection, and she expected he had read every one of them.

And, holy shit, there were knick knacks. Large colorful vases holding sticks and twigs, and picture frames decorated several of the shelves of the bookcases.

"This room looks like it was on the receiving end of a woman's touch." She was aware her observation came out sounding like a criticism.

"Two women. Melinda and Heather."

"Ah." The fact that his relationships with those two women were completely platonic only made Veronica feel marginally better. They were still two people who had more access to him than she did.

She picked up and smelled a candle she saw on one of the bookshelves, smiled, then put it back down.

*Lemon verbena. So, that wasn't a sexy time candle he purchased at the drug store after all. Unless Logan does 'sexy time' in his office. Okay, now you're imagining sexy time with Logan in his office.*

She continued to wander around the room, picking up various items, examining them, and then putting them down. She knew Logan was lingering in the doorway, inspecting her like she was inspecting his possessions, but she took her time.

Unlike her absentminded wandering in the guest rooms, she was now purposeful in her actions. This was the room in Logan's house that she imagined he spent most of his waking hours, and she wanted to commit it all to memory.

When she turned around to compliment Logan on the space, her eye caught a familiar picture on the wall closest to the door. It was the photo he had purchased more than two years prior during his visit to LA.

If she hadn't been standing where she was in front of whom she was, she would have let herself cry at the sight of her artwork on his wall. She didn't know if it was out of joy, confusion, or anger at the mixed signals he was throwing at her.

He noticed her perusal, and shifted in the doorway so he moved a little closer to the photo. "Melinda went crazy over this when she saw it. I refused to give it to her, so she demanded I hang it up, or she was taking it."

She swallowed a lump that had developed in her throat and ran her finger along the top of picture frame.

She remembered everything she had felt when she first took the photo, and then again when she had it printed. It had caused a series of memories to surface. A couple with Duncan the first time they dated, one with Piz when she thought he was what she needed, and dozens with Logan. Memories of utter contentment while with one's partner. Despite appearances, the couple kissing wasn't showing off, or being gratuitously demonstrative of their affection for the other. They just wanted to kiss, and it didn't occur to them to pretend otherwise.

The presence of this photo, which spoke more to her about peace than passion, framed and hanging on her ex-boyfriend's wall, was causing her to feel unhinged. The irony was not lost on her.

"Melinda sounds like a real ballbuster."
"That's because she is." Logan ran his hand up and down the wood of the door frame, occasionally shooting looks at Veronica from under his eyelashes. She could see him out of the corner of her eye, but didn't acknowledge the attention.

"And it's not awkward between her and Dick?"

"No more awkward than it is when you and I interact." She didn't know how to take that comment. The Logan Echolls snark cocktail was always a mixture of cutting and cute, and she didn't know what the intended blend of that remark was.

He was fighting to keep a straight face, his eyes kept darting to hers to see how she'd respond, and he was running his fingers up and down the doorframe. She let her body relax: 70% cute, 30% cutting.

"So, it's incredibly awkward then," she said.

"Pretty much." Logan stood up straight in the doorway. "I'm hosting FFC this year, if you want to meet her."

Her focus had been on the photo, but his invitation to an event she had never heard of before brought her attention back to him. "Am I supposed to know what FFC is?"

"Forgot you haven't been around for that little holiday tradition. It's our 'Fucked-Up Family Christmas' celebration." Logan spread his hands out in the air as if the words were written on a marquee in the sky. "Melinda hosted two years ago, Dick hosted last year. I'm hosting this year."

"You made that a tradition?" She crossed her arms and faced him, but her eyes kept darting to the photo on the wall.

Logan shrugged, and leaned against the doorframe, crossing one foot in front of the other. "We figured we all got screwed in the family lottery. Pretending around the holidays makes it a whole hell of a lot more depressing than it does to just acknowledge it and move on."

Veronica was again confronted by a piece of evidence that Logan Echolls had grown up. No one would have blamed him for using the holidays to wallow, but he was intentionally choosing to celebrate instead.

"Who's coming?"

He ticked off each member of the guest list on his fingers. "This year it's me, Dick, Melinda, Heather, Casey and his fiancé. Mac said she might make an appearance, and the DP from Dick's series is probably coming, too. Don't know what the story is with him, but Dick says it's a doozy."

She hated this. She hated that he had Christmas traditions with acronyms that she wasn't a part of. It was to the point where she didn't know who to blame anymore. Was it his fault or her fault they were no longer clued into the details of one another's lives? When she remembered the unanswered letter, her skin got hot with frustration.

Definitely his fault.

One of the spaghetti straps of her dress had apparently slid down her shoulder during the tour, but she hadn't realized it until that instant. She pulled it back up, and then adjusted the halter straps of her bathing suit, distractedly running her fingers over her skin as she counted to ten and talked herself out of swearing at Logan Echolls. She looked up from adjusting the bodice of her dress and noticed Logan watching her. His eyes had gone dark, and she had a moment of inner triumph that she could still get him to look at her like that.
It was short-lived, however. "I think we have family stuff with the Fennel's planned on both Christmas Eve and Christmas."

Logan shook his head in mock disappointment. "Your family is getting awfully close to the middle class dream. I'm not even sure you'd qualify for FFC this year."

"I think I can muster up enough abandonment issues to qualify me." Veronica reached up to pull her pigtails tight and turned to continue her inspection of the room.

Logan cleared his throat to bring her attention back to him. "I have to go grill the burgers, but I'll be back in 15 minutes. Think that'll give you enough time?"

"Enough time for what?" She picked up a photo from his desk of him and a couple of guys she didn't recognize with surfboards.

"To finish poking around my office. I saw you eyeing my desk drawers. Don't you want to take a peek?" He raised one eyebrow and failed to keep the smirk from his lips. She fumbled as she put the picture frame down, and cursed herself for letting his words surprise her.

_He thinks he's so damn smooth._

She had no idea what he was trying to accomplish. "What makes you think I have any plans to do that?" She moved to face him and mirrored his body language, but added a popped hip.

"Hey, you put a fish in an aquarium, it's going to swim."

Aside from the whole, 'tracking his car' incident three days prior, she thought she'd been making an effort to do things differently with Logan. She asked outright for him to tell her what was going on with him, apologized without any pretense, and had been honest about the fact she still cared for him.

He didn't care. He still saw her as the damaged 19-year old who had to act unnaturally to get herself to trust people. "I think I should go."

She headed towards the door but Logan stopped her by backing his body up into the doorway. "Shit. Veronica, no, don't leave. I didn't mean that in a bad way."

Okay, so I thought about it for a second, but not seriously. _Only half seriously._

"There's nothing in here I'm trying to hide from you. I just...I just wanted you to know that."
Veronica had every intention of keeping her eyes averted, and then sneaking away when he went out to the patio. But, Logan snapping his fingers in her face and repeating her name made that more difficult.

He questioned the sanity of a man who actually looked relieved when he was fixed with a glare.

"Veronica, I have so many secrets that sometimes I forget which things I'm hiding, and which are things I'm supposed to tell people. I'm not hiding anything." He backed himself up towards the door. "I'll be back in 15 minutes."

The moment he left, Veronica sat down on the bench seat across from his desk. She was going to sit there with her hands in her lap for the 900 seconds it would take for Logan to return. She didn't care what his secrets were. If he wanted to tell her, great, but she wasn't going to snoop it out of him.

She groaned and rolled her eyes at her inner indignation, then stood up; the invitation proving to be just too damned tempting. There was nothing she really wanted to find, but she wasn't Veronica, and
this was an unattended office. Plus, Logan expected her to, and she'd hate to be a disappointment.

When she opened the bottom drawer of his desk, things got interesting. Bound together by several rubber bands was a stack of letters, all addressed to Charlie Stone, all unopened and marked 'Return to Sender.' Veronica pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and took a picture of Charlie's address, filing the information away. She returned the letters to the bottom drawer, and made the decision to let Logan know she saw them.

If Logan was laying his secrets bare, she could let him know they had been discovered.

She looked at the time on her phone, and figured she had another 400 seconds before Logan returned to find her. Each of those remaining seconds would be spent sitting on his bench seat like she had originally planned.

She rearranged a few of the pillows and noticed the bench seat had a slight lip that jutted out half an inch at the top. It seemed an unnecessary feature in a house where everything felt purposeful. She lifted up under the edge and found the bench seat was hollow, being used to store photo albums, multiple sets of poker chips, and a few shoe boxes.

Veronica held the lid up a couple extra inches and pulled out the shoe box on top. She closed the lid and sat back down on the seat, curling her feet up underneath her. When she removed the top of the shoe box and looked inside, she felt bile form in her throat, and she instinctively put a hand to her mouth. On top of the stack was a letter with her own neat print facing up.

Well, at least I know it didn't get lost in the mail.

She picked the letter up and wondered if it was her imagination that caused it to feel so heavy. She felt a wave of embarrassment roll over her when she remembered exactly how many pages she had written and how many admissions she had made. And then white-hot anger that he still had the letter in his possession, and simply didn't care enough to do anything about it.

Under the letter sat every postcard she had sent Logan, in almost perfect reverse order of how they had been sent to him. She quickly flipped through the stack of postcards. The Pablo Neruda quote which at one time seemed tragically romantic now depressed her. Flip. James Dean's smirk mocked her. Flip. Paul Newman was gloating. Flip. The banks of the LA River looked dismal. Flip. What the fuck did William Shakespeare know about love? Flip.

"I shouldn't be surprised you found that, I guess." Logan's voice startled her, but she recovered quickly. He was standing only a few feet away from her, staring intently.

The fact that he could stand in front of her, and look hurt that she had been searching through his stuff, when he had basically told her to do so, made her furious. She felt hot, angry tears, begin to form in her eyes and she wiped them away.

She sat the box beside her and tossed the postcards back on top. The letter remained in her lap. "It was unintentional, actually. Somehow being given permission to snoop took all the fun out of it for me."

"That's talent, Mars. Uncovering secrets even when you're not trying." He rubbed the back of his neck with one hand and Veronica clenched her teeth. His attempt to look adorable and abashed was unacceptable.

She waved the letter in the air. "Yeah, sometimes it just takes me a while." She stood up and tried to move past him. "You can keep the postcards, but I'm taking my letter."
He almost grabbed her arm, but pulled back at the last second. "No. That's my letter, and I want to keep it."

A bitter broken laugh escaped her, but she tried to remain calm. "Why? So that in ten years' time you and whoever you wind up with can sit down and laugh about your old flames and how hard they fell for you?"

He backed away from her running a hand through his hair. A familiar gesture, but the emotion he had paired with it wasn't. She ignored the pained look in his eye. What right did he have to look so uncomfortable?

"Keep your secrets, Logan. They're none of my business."

Logan ran in front of her, pressing his back up against the door, preventing her from leaving. She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms across her chest, content to wait him out. He was staring her down, and she could see him trying to figure out where he had gone wrong. Why finding the words she had written him set her off. He moved an inch closer to her and threw his hands up in the air in defeat.

"Fine, do your thing Mars, run along. But if you get to take your letter back, I want mine back too."

The dig about her past history of running, she expected. His request was a different thing entirely.

"If you're talking about that lame ass postcard you sent quoting the Barney theme song, it's been shredded into a million pieces and is currently biodegrading in a landfill in LA."

This conversation needed to end. Her anger was giving way to hurt, and she needed to leave before he could see that. She took a step towards the door, but Logan didn't move. He was still blocking her escape route.

"Why'd you shred it?"

*That's it. Now I just need him to leave me alone.*

"Maybe because I sent this letter," she waved the letter in his face again, "that catalogued almost every thought and feeling I've had towards you since I was 15 years old, and you sent me the lyrics to the theme song of a fucking children's show!"

Whatever control Logan had maintained fractured, and he took a large step towards her before she could back up. They still weren't touching, but his intensity and her anger held them there, neither willing to move away first.

"I sent you that postcard because I thought I had freaked you out and wanted to take it easy. Let you know I was okay with taking things slow."

"So, I say 'I love you' and you quote Barney." She rolled her eyes to try to disguise the way he was getting to her. If she could keep acting dismissive, he might let her go.

"You're missing a couple steps there, Veronica, and your selective memory is working against you. You said, 'I love you,' I asked you to move in with me, you ignored me for weeks, I sent the purple-fucking-dinosaur to break the ice."

*And now he's reinventing the past. What a bastard.*

"I don't know what language you think you're speaking, Logan, but in the English language, in order
to communicate you want someone to move in with you, you need to use actual words to get your
point across." She side stepped to move around him, but he countered her action so they were still
face to face.

"You want to pretend I wasn't clear, that's your choice." He wiped his hands together and held them
up to show her they were empty. The gesture was clear. This was Logan washing his hands of their
relationship. "Send it to me whole, or send it to me in pieces. I don't care, but if you still have it, I
want my letter back."

The level of their voices had risen with each accusation they had lobbed at one another, to the point
she was now yelling. "What letter, Logan? You never sent a letter!"

Realization of something seemed to flash in Logan's eyes and she heard him mutter the word 'shit'
under his breath. He rubbed a hand across his face and reached out a hand to touch her shoulder. Veronica slapped his hand away and backed up.

"Veronica, I sent a letter." He moved cautiously towards her, and she blamed her knees, which now
seemed to be shaking with the effort of holding up her 105 lb frame, for her inability to move away.
"I sent a letter," he said, lowering his voice. He kept repeating the words, his voice getting lower
each time he spoke. It only took one additional step for him to reach out and pull her to his chest.

His close proximity had snapped her out of whatever trance she had been in and she started
struggling against him as he hugged her. "No, you didn't, Logan." She tried unsuccessfully to unpin
her arms and hit him. "You didn't, because if you did. Because if you did, then...then, fuck, Logan!"
She was no longer fighting, but she wasn't looking him in the eye. "Then where have you been the
last two years?"

He repeated one last time what he had already made clear. "Veronica, I sent a letter."

Chapter End Notes

I am not normally a cliffhanger kind of girl, but when I wrote this it was either post now
or wait until I get back from vacation in a week. Lucky AO3 readers, though, who get
the next chapter right away :)

Scandalpants, deserves to be knighted, even nine months later, for the work she put into
this chapter. I ended up splitting this chapter in two (originally it was close to 12,000
words before it was even finished!), but between reading this chapter three times all the
way through, and various scenes sent intermittently, she probably read about 30,000
words related to this chapter. Also, I dedicate all emotional monologuing in this chapter
to ShanghaiLily.

ShanghaiLily also gave me one of my fave reviews ever that said she loved Vee as a
malfunctioning emotional robot. Made me laugh then, makes me laugh now.

And my girl lilamadison11 made the most gorgeous graphic in response to this chapter.
You can find it here on her tumblr. Her entire fanfic series is worth checking out.
The two of them sat on the bench seat facing one another, the shoe box that had prompted their outburst between them. They were both looking through the postcards she had sent, occasionally pausing to throw furtive glances at the other.

"I bet you're glad I'm a snoop now, aren't you?"

Logan laughed and held up the first postcard she had sent him after his spring break visit, flipping it around so she could see the Charles Dickens quote. "I didn't know what to do when you first started sending me these. It felt like we were going back to how things were."

Veronica's fingers traced the edges of the postcard she was holding. It was another she had sent him post spring break.

*For it was not into my ear you whispered, but into my heart. It was not my lips you kissed, but my soul. – Judy Garland*

She remembered how she struggled to add her own words to the notes she sent after he had visited, often settling for simply signing her name and allowing the quotes to speak for themselves. Sitting across from Logan, she still didn't know what to say, but the words of others had failed her previously so she figured she'd try her own.

"I didn't know what to say, Logan. That trip meant a lot to me and I was afraid of messing it up again."

"But you sent a letter."

*And I didn't sleep for days after I had sent it.*

She paused for a brief second before speaking; intentionally lacing each word she spoke with strength so he couldn't see how much this change of events had unnerved her.

"Yeah, eventually. And apparently you did too." Logan opened his mouth to say, what she didn't know, but she stopped him. "When I didn't hear from you, I guessed that maybe we weren't on the same page. That for once I was the one who wanted more than you were able to give."

The thought that maybe that's how things were now scared her more than sending the original letter had.

*Joanna tried to convince me saying goodbye to Logan was going to be harder than I thought. Even she couldn't have seen this coming.*

"Veronica, when have I ever not wanted what you offered me?"

She shrugged and at the same time pushed a memory aside of the two of them sitting similarly to how they were now. Then, they had been on her father's couch and the conversation ended with Logan being thrown out of the house.

"I expected a response right away, and then days turned into weeks and I still hadn't heard from you."

"Then I thought maybe you didn't want me to be any more than I already was to you."

"That's not it, Veronica. I..."

"What, Logan?"

"I..."

"Logan."

"I just didn't think we could be anything more. Not now. Not when things are..."
I thought about calling you and asking what was going on, but it screamed of desperation, so I just kept waiting. When I got that stupid Barney postcard, I thought you were making a joke out of the whole thing."

"No wonder you ripped it up." He sighed and rested his head on the wall behind him. His eyes kept searching the room and only settled on her for seconds at a time.

She wanted to demand eye contact by taking hold of his hand but settled for rolling the hem of her dress between her fingers and shooting glances his way when she knew his eyes were averted. A ridiculous push and pull and she didn't know who was responsible.

"Then when I visited Neptune before moving to Chicago -" The admission she was about to make got stuck in her throat and she inwardly rolled her eyes at how small her voice sounded. She swallowed and tried again, looking him straight in the eye. "Wallace told me he had mentioned to you I was coming into town. But I got there, and you had left for Mexico."

Logan groaned. "Which told you I was ignoring you."

"Because you were." She meant the remark to be lighthearted but Logan's pained smile told her it had come out harsher than she meant.

He held her gaze for another second, but then ducked his head down, picking at invisible threads on the seat cushion. "I couldn't be around you knowing you didn't want what I wanted."

"I really wish you had been there." She still didn't know how much she should share with him. Her heart couldn't seem to decide what it actually wanted, and her head, usually so helpful, wasn't contributing anything worthwhile to the conversation.

She watched Logan find an actual loose thread and wrap it around his finger, pulling it taught and then ripping it from the cushion.

What if this is the one time we want different things?

This was a Logan she hadn't seen in a while: unsure of what to say and even more unsure of what to do with his hands. He kept shooting quick glances to the door, back to her, and then down to his hands. She scrunched her brow, uncertain why his eyes continued that pattern. The door. Her face. His hands.

She scooted an inch closer to him and his body tensed as the hem of her dress entered his peripheral vision. They both sat with one foot curled under their bodies, the other hanging off the side of the seat which caused their toes to bump as their legs swayed.

"After you moved to Chicago I called Wallace to ask about you." He sighed and kneaded his forehead with his hand. "He told me you were off-limits. He said that we could be friends, but that you were his best friend and until you came out and told him what was going on between us, he wasn't going to talk about it."

Her focus was still on the erratic nature of his glance and it took her a second longer than it should have to respond.

"This is probably one of those situations where it would have paid off to have a less loyal best friend." She reached into the box and pulled out the Pablo Neruda card. "I sent this one as a last ditch effort to let you know the door was still open. That I still wanted you."

He took the card from her, his eyes shooting to the door once more, and read the quote. "And I
thought it was your way of saying you were giving up. That it was too intense."

"But you kept it."

"Glutton for punishment, remember?"

Veronica tried to laugh, but her voice wasn't cooperating and it came out as a weary half-sob. He still wasn't looking at her. His eyes again focused on his damn hands.

He shifted back so their toes no longer touched, and swung his legs around so they were both flat on the floor. His shoulders were hunched and he kept idly flipping the postcard over, reading first the quote, then her note on the other side: 'My dad can give you my new address.'

He was looking at her from his periphery, and despite the fact that he wasn't moving away, it felt like he was trying to put distance between the two of them. It was when she shifted in her seat and the action caused Logan to sit up straight and look at her with an almost panicked expression that she figured out what was going on.

*He expects me to stand up and walk out.*

The only way to prove him wrong was for her to stick this out.

"The odds were really against us on this one, weren't they?" he mused, repeatedly dog earring one small corner of the postcard and then flattening it back out.

She ducked her head down to try and meet his eyes. When she didn't speak right away, he seemed to get the hint and looked up at her. "What do you mean?"

"I mean between junior and senior year we mailed dozens of postcards. Of course it wasn't a quote by Dickens that got lost in the mail. No, it had to be my letter. Cue ridiculous domino effect."

While she had brought the evidence about her stalker with her, she had set aside any intention of actually filling Logan in about that part of her life when the events in his office unfolded as they did. Veronica shook her head, and placed the postcards and the letter back in the box, hoping he'd settle for a minimal amount of information. At least for the moment.

"I don't think your letter got lost in the mail." She attempted to deliver that piece of information with ease, but wasn't surprised when Logan reacted strongly.

He tossed the card he held back into the box and rotated his body to face her again. "What the hell happened to it then?"

She swallowed and looked up at him. "I think it was taken before I could read it."

*Not too many questions tonight, please.*

She mentally repeated the plea, willing Logan to understand she was reticent to give all the details. It was clear from the way Logan jumped off the bench seat and started pacing back and forth that his emotional antennae was not finely tuned at the moment.

"What the fuck, Veronica? Who was it? Alison?"

"It wasn't Alison. She wouldn't have done that." She toed the thread that Logan had tossed on the ground. "She knew how I felt."

*Or, rather, how I feel. Present tense.*
"Then, who?"

She looked up at him and almost smiled at the look of despair on his face. He seemed as devastated by the catalogue of newly discovered facts as she was. The difference was it was plain on his face, while she was still able to keep some of hers well hidden.

"It's a theory I'm working on. I'll let you know soon." Logan frowned and looked like he was about to argue. "I promise. I'll tell you soon."

He exhaled a heavy breath, laced his fingers together and cradled the back of his head with his hands. His pacing had slowed, but he was still in constant motion.

The tight embrace he had wrapped her in when she had tried to leave was the only time he had intentionally touched her while in his office, and he didn't seem to have any intention of repeating the action. Consciously or not he kept inching away from her.

She stood up, uncertain if she intended to move closer to him or further away.

When she stood his eyes went up to the ceiling, as if instructions for how the rest of their interaction was supposed to transpire were written above him. She almost looked up as well, hoping for inspiration of her own.

"We're idiots," he said. "Leave it to us to let the US postal system screw us over."

She laughed, although not from any actual amusement. There was more distance between the two of them now than when there were still secrets hidden. It all provided more evidence for her long held theory that some people couldn't handle all the facts.

"It's really kind of embarrassing," she said, choosing to stay rooted to her spot. "We could have called. We could have made Mac or Wallace spill. Our antiquated mating rituals really did us in this time."

He smirked and she almost breathed a sigh of relief at the way his face relaxed. But then her face got hot when she realized the implication of what she said. "I just meant -"

Logan laughed and interrupted her attempt to backpedal. "They didn't do us in. Just prolonged the foreplay."

She must really be losing it for an offhanded comment to almost cause her to burst into tears.

*If he doesn't actually mean that, I'm going to kill him.*

It could have been her acknowledgment that more had been interrupted by his missing letter than correspondence between friends. Or, maybe it was that she was still standing in the room despite her obvious discomfort. But in that moment, something caused Logan to stop putting distance between the two of them. His eyes now focused on her and they didn't waver.

He moved closer, but rather than hugging her or touching her skin, he twirled the hair of one of her pigtails around his finger. "I like the pigtails. Reminds me of high school."

She observed the way he continued to play with her hair and looked up at him. Taking a deep breath, she moved her head just enough to cause her hair to slip out from Logan's grip. "Why didn't you come to LA? When I didn't respond, I mean. Why didn't you show up and demand an answer?"

Logan let a puff of air escape his lips and wrinkled his brow at her. He didn't answer right away, but
reached up to run a strand of her hair through his fingers. The casual intimacy of the gesture overwhelmed her.

"Knowing everything I do now, I wish I would have, but I spent the three years you were in LA trying to prove to myself I was good enough for you. Making myself someone I thought you might love again one day." He dropped the strand of hair and it tickled her shoulder where it fell. "When, at the end of that, you still didn't seem to want what I offered, I didn't know what else to do. I had to move on."

Her face fell for a moment, but then she eased it into an expression of calm. That was it. What she had told her dad two days prior was true. She had missed her window, and Logan had moved on.

He brushed the hair off her shoulder, and rested his hand there for a moment. The heat from his palm radiated from where he touched and spread down her arm. Something wasn't lining up the way it was supposed to.

If he had really moved on, then what were they doing standing so close?

"But you've been you since I've been here." She looked to the bit of skin he had just touched for emphasis, and then back at his face.

Little touches. Flirty comments. Longing looks. The whole Logan Echolls package.

He rubbed the back of his own neck and then gave a little shrug. "I didn't say I was good at moving on. I tried, even came close a few times."

Out of his line of sight, she reached out her hand to grasp his. "I tried too."

She turned her attention to Logan's hand, which she grabbed by taking a tentative hold of his middle finger. She looked up to find him staring at her. He noticeably swallowed, but didn't make any move to either hold her hand or move his away, so she slowly inched her fingers up his palm and let them rest there.

There was absolutely no reason that simply touching fingers should cause one's breath to quicken, but her action seemed to have that effect on both of them.

"What would you have said?" Logan asked. His voice was low and all of his attention was on their not quite clasped hands.

"To what?"

She slid her fingers down his palm and rotated her hand so their fingers were lined up. All he needed to do now to hold her hand was to spread the fingers of his hand half an inch, and they would effortlessly fall together. As much as she liked to be in control, she needed him to take that step. To show her that this wasn't just her own wish fulfillment. That he still wanted her.

"In my letter I said I wanted to move to Chicago when you started med school. That I wanted to be with you. If you had read it, what would you have said?"

She prepared herself for his reaction to the sting of what she was about to confess. "I don't know, Logan."

Rather than drop her hand, he chose that moment to hold hers tightly, and she filed the moment away as a memory to relish. She had expressed uncertainty, but he hadn't been repelled by it. That fact alone made the task of saying everything else she needed to less arduous.
"I can't tell you what Veronica two years ago would have said, but I know she would have wanted the chance to figure it out with you."

She felt him relax slightly, his attention still on their hands. "What about Veronica now? If I said I was still in love with you. That I've read that letter you sent more times than I care to admit, and that I hope you still feel the same." He raised their hands and kissed her knuckles. "If I said that I would pick up tomorrow and move to Chicago to be with you, what would you say?"

She tried to maintain an indifferent expression, but she could feel the corners of her mouth tugging up into a small smile. His words had caused an overwhelming amount of relief to wash over her, but it was unlike any relief she had ever felt before. Rather than bringing a sense of calm, it caused her body to burn hot with anticipation.

She had always hated that damned Colbie Caillat song, but she did in fact feel bubbly all the way to her toes.

She put her free hand in the pocket of her dress and began to drum her fingers on her thigh. A move she had picked up from Logan. "Is this a hypothetical?"

"No."

"Then, I'd probably have to say, I don't know." He nodded and tugged lightly on their clasped hands to bring her an inch closer.

"Of course, now that I need distance to think, he brings me close."

"Logan, we can't pretend the past two years haven't happened. I mean, both of us let the other person walk away." The drumming of her fingers picked up speed as she spit the words out. "But, I want the chance to figure it out."

They were such simple words, but their impact on Logan was startling. He let out a huge sigh, his entire body noticeably relaxed, and a large grin broke out across his face.

"Me too."

There was more they needed to say. She wanted to tell him about Skyler. Maybe let him know that she had been in therapy too, but the way he was smiling at her made it near impossible for her to broach any subject with even mildly negative overtones. Those things would keep.

"What are you smiling at, Echolls?" To her ears, it sounded less like she was speaking and more like she was laughing.

"You. You make me happy."

She raised an eyebrow as she creased her forehead, her look incredulous.

He laughed. "Okay, most days you make me happy."

She threw her head back with a laugh and didn’t notice his free hand had moved until it came to rest on her shoulder. The new sensation of touch prompted her to bring her focus back to him.

"So, it's you and me, figuring this out together?" She was momentarily embarrassed by how vulnerable she sounded, but Logan's enthusiastic nod as a response told her it was the right question to ask.
She took a deep breath and Logan's expression transformed to one of intense study as he inspected
the way his five fingers and palm connected with her shoulder. She looked up at him and frowned in
mild confusion.

*What is he thinking?*

Slowly, Logan ran his short fingernails along her shoulder blade and down her upper arm. She knew
he could see the way his action caused goosebumps to break out on her skin and she took another
breath to calm herself.

She looked at him and kissed the knuckles of his hand which she still held, repeating his earlier
gesture. Instead of dropping their hands, she moved his to rest on her other shoulder and looked up at
him. It was both a challenge and an invitation.

He pressed down with light pressure, and then drifted his fingertips across her collarbone and back
around to her shoulder blade. She smiled and closed her eyes for a moment, letting herself enjoy the
sensation.

*I remember this. Moving on probably would have been a lot easier if I hadn't.*

He let out a slow breath, pressed his forehead to hers, and then pulled back. A soft smile tugged at
his lips as he looked down at her. Veronica's breath hitched when she realized what was coming and
she fought like hell to keep her eyes open.

*I know that face. That's Logan's 'prelude to a kiss' face.*

She wanted this. She wanted to be pressed up against his chest. She wanted to play with the hair at
the nape of his neck. But, what she really wanted was for him to move things along a little more
quickly.

She stood there, her skin buzzing everywhere Logan touched, and she waited.

After ten seconds of measured breathing she realized he had no intention of moving quickly. When
another fifteen passed, it became clear he actually wasn't going to make any move at all.

He touched his forehead to hers again, planted a light kiss there, and then slid his hands along her
arms until they found her hands. He held both of them against his chest for a few seconds and then
stepped back.

"We should go out to the party. Our time has been up for a while now." He wasn't even looking at
her anymore. Instead his eyes were focused over her shoulder.

As soon as she could speak again she was going to launch into a rant that was laced with so much
fury that he'd feel the aftershocks well past Christmas and into the New Year.

Veronica didn't try to hide the annoyance at this radical shift, and rolled her eyes as she took her
hands out of his grasp. "Yup, let's go do that. Sounds like fun." She shook her head at him and
stepped away to collect her shoes from where they sat near the bench seat.

*Great to see his brand of dumbass hasn't been discontinued. It's just been repackaged so I almost
didn't recognize it.*

He groaned, and she heard him breathe out the word "Shit" as she put on her shoes and moved
towards the door. Then just like the last time she had tried to leave his office, he moved to stand in
front of her, only this time his hands rested on her waist.
She looked from his hands to his face and quirked an eyebrow, wondering if he could read the words 'Fuck You' in the way she stared him down.

The single burst of laughter he let out told her he more or less understood.

"Guess I'm sending some mixed signals, huh?" He tightened his grip on her waist and while she didn't move away, she crossed her arms across her chest to close herself off to him.

She narrowed her eyes and opened her mouth to let loose a litany of insults and expletives that only he ever seemed to inspire.

He laughed again and preemptively interrupted her. "Veronica, it's pretty simple. If I start kissing you right now, I'm not going to want to stop. And there are five teenage girls less than three hundred feet from us that could come inside at any moment."

That she wasn't expecting. And while it was an admission that he had some decidedly indecent intentions, there was also an element of sweetness that she was moved by. She smiled and shook her head at him, this time with more admiration and less annoyance. She put a finger to her mouth and tapped her lips a few times, thinking.

"Is holding hands okay?" she asked, and moved her hands to where his still rested on her waist.

He blew out a puff of air, in what she assumed was relief, and nodded. He pivoted so they stood side by side, and took hold of her hand, placing a kiss on her wrist.

*Hello contentment, my old friend. Where have you been?*

She smiled and held in a small sigh she wanted to let out. No need to let him know just how much he affected her. "And I've mentioned responsible Logan is sexy, right? Because that's still true."

*Dammit. I said that out loud.*

She was surprised that her admission wasn't met with a smirk and waggle of his eyebrows. Instead he rolled his eyes skyward as they walked out of his office and then kissed her temple.

"I can probably get them out of here in twenty minutes, thirty tops."

"You can try." When they reached the patio, Heather was the first to spot them, and her eyes immediately went to their hands. She screamed and jumped off the ledge of the pool she was sitting on, and into the water to swim to the opposite edge where Logan and Veronica were standing. "But I think Heather has other plans."

Logan looked helpless as Heather climbed out of the pool, a stream of water following her as she kept repeating, "No frickin' way," and came to stand in front of them.

She grabbed their hands and inspected the way they held on to one another. "Ohmigod!" She screamed the words and then launched herself at Logan, giving him a sopping wet hug.

Heather let go of Logan, and took Veronica's free hand and pulled her away from him. "Veronica, I want my friends to meet you. And then you're going to tell me about how you and Logan got back together. And I need your advice on who I should invite to Sadie Hawkin's next month."

Veronica looked over her shoulder at Logan, and he just shrugged taking a few steps back in the direction of the kitchen, a smile on his face. She returned the smile and took a breath. She used to be a teenage girl; she could do this.
After dinner, Heather and her friends sat in the hot tub, drank virgin margaritas, and giggled nonstop. Logan and Veronica were stretched out on a lounge chair, his arm wrapped around her shoulder, drinking the alcoholic version of the same beverage the girls had. After a particularly loud burst of laughter from the hot tub, Veronica turned her face to look at Logan.

"You sure the margaritas you gave them don't have any alcohol?"

"You kidding me? You think I'd let a bunch of 16 year olds drink?"

Veronica laughed and sat her drink down on the ground. "We did."

"Yeah, but I also had sex as a 16 year old and Heather's not having sex until she's at least 25. We've discussed it."

"I'm sure that went over well." She snuggled into his side and took a small breath in, trying to imprint and catalogue the ways he smelled both the same and different from the last time they had been this close. "We're not even 25. Should we wait to have sex again until we are?"

He flicked her nose and she crinkled it at him. "The difference is I want to defile you." He gestured at Heather with his free arm. "I want to put her in a human size hamster ball."

"Used to be a time when you wanted to buy one of those for me too."

"Still do, but I'd make sure it was roomy enough for me to have plenty of space to defile you."

Never thought I'd see a day where hamster balls became sexy.

"There's a concept for a nightclub in there somewhere."

She began rubbing small circles on Logan’s stomach, a move he used to like quite a bit, and something he apparently still enjoyed, if the way his breath hitched was any indication.

Veronica wasn't entirely certain what they were doing. She knew in the physical sense they were lying on a chair together, bantering at Logan’s house. Her confusion came from the fact that a few hours prior she had come to Logan’s to get answers about their relationship that she had assumed would lead to them parting ways amicably.

There was no permutation of answers that she’d thought Logan could give that would lead to the two of them lying poolside, with Logan nobly trying to keep the arm behind her from touching her ass.

I kind of thought this torch I was carrying around would be properly extinguished by the end of the night.

She usually hated being wrong. But if being wrong meant she got to be pressed up close enough to Logan so that she'd leave his house with the scent of his cologne on her skin, then she figured she could get used to the idea.

"Uncle Logan!" Heather called out to him as she got out of the hot tub. "You still have Ben and Jerry's left from our movie night?"

"In the house, but if you drip on my floor…."

"I know, I know, they'll never find the body."

Veronica sat up and crossed her legs under her. "She calls you 'Uncle Logan'?"
He sat up too, and turned her around to sit in the space between his legs so he could wrap his arms around her waist. "Telling people she was the little sister of my friend's ex-wife made them look at me like I was Woody Allen. They seem to be able to get their heads around uncle."

Veronica watched as Heather ran out of Logan's house, holding five spoons and two pints of ice cream and got back in the hot tub. She opened both pints, handed out the spoons, and the girls passed the ice cream around in a circle.

Logan placed a kiss on Veronica's shoulder and mumbled into her skin. She wondered if he was even aware of how close they were now sitting.

*Seems like the margaritas he's had has lowered his inhibitions just enough to want to cuddle. Totally cool with it.*

"What was that?" she asked.

"I don't know how Aaron did it," he repeated, and she felt her body tense at the change in subject.

She looked back at him and then followed his gaze to the hot tub. "Lilly was Heather's age when Aaron -" His voice trailed off and he continued to place kisses on her shoulder. Some were quick pecks while a few lingered. She knew he was trying to provide them both with comfort as he spoke. "I know we all acted like we were grownups but, fuck Veronica. She was just a kid."

Logan buried his head in her shoulder and breathed deeply. It had been years since she had really talked about what Aaron had done. She had gotten close with Joanna, skirting over the specifics to talk about residual feelings of loss she felt with Lilly, but hadn't allowed herself to go there yet. It surprised her the way hearing the two syllables of his name made her feel nauseous.

"We were all just kids, Logan. And we dealt with some twisted stuff. The fact that you and I are here, semi-functioning members of society, is a miracle, honestly."

"Well, you had your dad. There's no way he would have let you screw up your life."

*I came quite close a few times.*

She leaned back into his chest and placed her hands over his. She hated being reminded of exactly how much of life he had done on his own, without any support. "You didn't screw up your life either."

His silence told her he didn't quite believe her.

"I visited his grave a couple months ago." He tightened his grip around her waist and Veronica sucked in a breath. "It was Lilly's anniversary."

"Why'd you go?"

He shrugged, and while that gesture sometimes came off as dismissive, she knew that in this case he honestly didn't know.

"When I got there, I just started screaming at him. I made my way to the caretaker's shed, and found a shovel and a hammer. Aaron's fans have planted flowers over the years and I ripped them all up. I bashed in the front of his grave marker and didn't stop until I started to chip away at the stone. I got home that night and drank until I passed out. The cemetery called me the next day to tell me his plot had been defiled and I just laughed."
He let go of Veronica's waist and slid back to put distance between the two of them. "Some things really don't change, right?"

*Note to self. Margaritas also put Logan in self-loathing mode.*

Veronica turned around so she was facing him and put a hand to his chest. She wanted to avoid any platitudes that would come off as trite, but wasn't certain exactly what he needed. Their intimacy was a little rusty. She took a deep breath and put her other hand over his heart, feeling the rhythm under her palm.

"You're not perfect, Logan. Think about just how badly that night could have gone." She reached up and lifted his chin so he looked her in the eye as she spoke. "You could have driven drunk, you could have beat someone up. Considering the options, you did pretty good."

He looked away from her, but a small smile ghosted his lips. Seeing the way he listened, and actually seemed to hear her, made her breathe a little easier.

*Oh my god. We're actually doing this.*

His smile grew when she picked up his hands and put them back on her waist. "I like your hands better here," she explained, giving him a little shrug.

He leaned forward and placed a kiss on the tip of her nose and hugged her close to him.

"Kissing still not allowed?"

This had to have been the most amount of time they had ever gone between reconciling and making out. While she was impressed by his self-control, she was also starting to worry that his restraint was an indication that his feelings had cooled.

He looked over her shoulder at the girls nearby. "I don't think it's a good idea," he said, placing a soft kiss on her cheek.

She wondered if he realized how his words and his actions didn't quite line up. He had now kissed her on her temple, her nose, her shoulder, and cheek. His resolve was definitely weakening.

"You're wrong. I think it's a very good idea." She moved her hands under the edge of his t-shirt and ran her fingernails lightly on the skin of his lower back, certain that she wasn't going to let it go further with a hot tub of teenage girls nearby, but enjoying Logan's reactions all the same.

And if it got him riled up enough so that he kissed her senseless the moment the girls left, so be it.

"Veronica…"

A giggle a little too close to their lounge chair and Heather's voice interrupted them. "Uncle Logan, can you stop groping Veronica long enough to help me set up a movie downstairs?"

Veronica laughed and tilted her head up to whisper in his ear. "If she thinks this qualifies as groping, she really is nothing like you as a teenager."

He smirked at her and pulled far enough away from Veronica to look at Heather. "What time is it?" Heather shrugged, so Veronica pulled out her cell phone and showed Logan that it was just after 9:30 PM. "No movie tonight. It's too late and you all need to get home."

"You're just showing off because Veronica is here. But fine, we'll go. We'll use my room to change."
She waved her friends out of the hot tub and they came out one by one, waving at Veronica and Logan and giggling as they ran inside.

Once they got off the lounge chair, Veronica headed straight to the kitchen to give Logan privacy as he played the protective uncle role.

She opened the fridge and found a large pitcher of cold water and poured herself a glass. While she was 95% sober, she wanted to get to at least 97% before heading home. She sat on a stool at the island in Logan’s kitchen, drinking her water, and swinging her legs back and forth.

*This feels good, and right, and damn comfortable.*

Before the door closed behind the girls, she heard Heather ask Logan, "Where's Veronica?"

Seconds later Heather was running into the kitchen and pulling Veronica into a messy hug, her arms pinned at her sides. The move startled her, but as Heather gripped her tighter, Veronica found herself touched by her sincerity.

"You okay, Heather?"

"I like it when you're together. He's more him when you're together."

She didn't know why Heather was so certain her words were true. She and Logan hadn't ever dated during the time Heather was in his life, but her tone didn't waver, and Veronica knew she believed the words she spoke.

"Can we hang out when you're in town?" Heather asked, pulling back from the hug.

"Like I'm going to deny Logan's best girl anything." Heather beamed at the compliment. "You have my number. Call me anytime."

Veronica stood up to give Heather a real hug and spoke in her ear. "I'm more me when we're together too."

*Snarkier. Sometimes moodier. But most certainly more myself.*

Heather pulled back and grinned at Veronica and then walked out of the kitchen, passing Logan as she did. He held up his hand for a high five, which she responded to immediately, and Veronica laughed as their hands effortlessly connected in a blind low five behind their backs.

Earlier in the evening, watching that silly gesture that bespoke of how well Heather and Logan knew each other, would have only made her aware of how much of Logan's life was closed off to her. But now, while she still didn't know it all, Logan was inviting her back in.

"Lock the door behind you," Logan called out over his shoulder.

"Do I look dumb to you?" Another burst of giggles, and then Veronica heard the door close and lock.

"She has her own key?"

Logan shrugged and walked over to the freezer, pulling out another pint of ice cream. He grabbed two spoons from the drawer and then held the pint out to Veronica.

She wondered if all those years ago she had made him a Chunky Monkey fan, or if he had bought the ice cream for her, knowing she was coming over. When Logan noticed her perusal of the pint
and gave a little self-deprecating shrug, she knew it was the latter.

"The blue room is practically hers. And her mom remarried to a real douche, so she stays over from

time to time. If she stays over on a weeknight, I have to leave for work before she goes to school. It

seemed easier."

He leaned over to take a bite of ice cream and then put his spoon on the counter. "I have to go get

something from my office. Save me some ice cream."

Veronica already had a large spoonful in her mouth and she fluttered her eyelashes at him, but didn't

say anything.

When he left the kitchen she swore to herself that she absolutely would not time how long it took for

him to get back, but when she heard the door to his office open and close and her mental stopwatch

hit 22 seconds, she groaned.

So much for playing it cool.

Logan closed the office door behind him and took a deep breath.

Holy shit.

Those two words seemed to be on a repeated loop in his brain. The loop started the moment the final

pieces of information came together regarding what had actually happened between him and

Veronica. It sped up a frightening amount when she started touching him by the pool. And now it

seemed to be backed up by the kind of music they played in movie trailers for fantasy films. It was all

operatic vocals, driving rhythms, and timpani drums.

He couldn't seem to convince himself to just enjoy the moment. No, he had to go and let his damn

insecurity convince him that Murphy's Law was going to get the last word in this whole scenario.

His reconciliation with Veronica was just a sneaky way for the world to convince him it was on his

side before it fucked him over.

He sat down at his computer and began searching through files, clicking on absurdly titled document

names.

Mac hated his old filing system, but he had insisted that naming them in such a unique way would

ensure he would always remember the contents. It hadn't worked. He had spent a considerable

amount of time renaming many of them, but there were still hundreds left to sort.

After clicking on one titled 'Clichés and other b.s.' that ended up being an e.e. cummings poem he

read at a friend's wedding, and another titled 'Go ahead, waste your life' that was a list of books and

movies he intended to buy one day, he almost gave up.

But then he found a document titled 'Obligations, pacts, and pledges' in a file labeled 'Misc.'. All

synonyms for the word 'promises.' Damn him for being a sentimental, masochistic fool.

He double clicked on the document and his eyes scanned the five pages of single spaced writing. He

had expected to feel embarrassed as he read over the words he originally penned close to two years

prior. He hadn't expected for so many of them to still ring true.

I don't know whether to be pissed it took us this long to figure things out, or just grateful we finally
did.
He was pretty sure that exact thought had flitted through his mind whilst they were in his office earlier.

*I can't date you casually. I can't see just see where things go. If we kiss again, I'm a goner, and I can't be a goner when you're not even aware of what you're signing up for.*

Okay, that was admittedly a touch melodramatic, but he could still stand behind the intended meaning.

It hit him then that Veronica was still unaware of everything he had put on the line all those months ago. Before they went any further, he needed her to know.

He printed off a copy of the letter and folded it in half, slipping it into his back pocket. While some of what he had written sounded like it was from the mind of a goth kid who had been given his very first feelings journal, he still wanted her to read it.

And now all he had to do was go out to where Veronica was sitting and convince her to slow down their reunion.

*Holy shit. She's going to kill me.*

When Logan finally came back into the kitchen, Veronica was licking her spoon clean. She smirked at the dramatic double take he gave her when he saw she had eaten more than half of the pint.

"You've known me since I was 12. This surprises you?"

*It also serves you right for being gone 384 seconds.*

He sat on the stool next to hers and took the pint away. Rather than fight him for the ice cream, she placed her spoon on the counter and angled her body towards him, scooting her stool a couple inches closer.

She frowned when she saw his jaw tense just the slightest amount. Something had changed in the time he had gone into his office, but she decided not to spend too much time mulling it over, and instead went for their tried and true method of reconciling. She leaned forward and placed a kiss on his neck, smiling against his skin.

*I think I'm making him nervous. God, that shouldn't make me as happy as it does.*

She placed another kiss on his neck and Logan swallowed the bite he had in his mouth. It didn't escape her notice that it seemed to take a little more effort than it should. She kicked her flip flops off her feet and ran one foot up and down Logan's bare calf, and then pressed her lips to his neck a third time. Logan jumped off his stool and took several steps back, his spoon clattering to the ground as he did.

*Okay, that hurts a little.*

"What's wrong?" She understood needing to keep it PG with the girls around, but now it was just the two of them.

"Nothing - I just - I just need to give you something, and you're distracting me." He picked up his spoon and placed it on the countertop, then pulled out a stack of papers from his back pocket, and held them out to her.

She took it with a creased forehead. "What's this?"
"It's the letter I wrote you."

Veronica's eyes went wide when she realized what she was holding. They went even wider when she unfolded the pages and saw just how much he had written.

As her eyes drifted from the letter to his face, Logan shrugged. A faint blush warmed the apples of his cheeks and he tugged at the edge of his sleeves. "I had a lot I wanted to say."

She nodded and set it down on the countertop, trailing her fingers across the granite as she walked to stand in front of him.

He looked at her and pointed at the letter. "Don't you want to read that?"

She smiled and moved closer to him. "I'll read it when I get home." Standing in front of him, she pressed her hands to his chest. "So, it's just you and me now."

Now that she knew why he had been acting so strange, she was sure he was just as eager as she was to eliminate the distance between them.

Logan swallowed and nodded. He placed his hands on her shoulders, his elbows slightly bent, but not enough to bring her close.

She slid her arms around his waist as she took a deep breath. They were four hours into their reconciliation, and in the past he would have already had her pinned up against a wall, kissing as much of her skin as he could reach. She was a little confused as to why he was working so hard to stay in control of the situation.

He kissed the top of her head, but didn't make any effort to pull her closer, so she repeated her actions poolside, slipping her hands under his shirt and running her fingernails along his lower back. She was barely touching his skin, but it was as if his back was charged, shooting sensation into her fingertips and through the rest of her body.

*Let's see him try and maintain control now.*

If he didn't make a move soon, she was going to snap with the tension his restraint was causing.

*How can he be so damn calm?*

"Veronica –"

"That's me," she said, rising up on her toes and placing a kiss onto his Adam's apple. When she saw the way he swallowed and raised his eyes upward she chuckled. It was all a façade. He wasn't nearly as collected as he appeared to be.

*Maybe he just needs a little push.*

"You know, you could pull me closer. I wouldn't mind." She smiled up at him but then frowned when she noticed that his eyes were screwed shut. She gave a quick rap to his chest to get his attention. "You with me, Echolls?"

He looked down at her and grimaced. "Don't hate me."

"Has there ever been a conversation started that way that has ended well?" His words instantly made her anxious, and she wondered if he could hear the way her speech shook.

The familiar prick of tears was in the corner of her eye and she began to plan how she would
backtrack in order to come out of this whole scenario unscathed. She took her hands out from under
his shirt, but kept them firmly on his lower back.

She heard him mumble, what she assumed was an explanation, but his voice was so low she couldn't
hear him.

"Come again?"

He groaned and looked down at her. "I think we should take things slow."

I wasn't aware that this was fast.

She frowned as he put a few inches of distance between them.

"Duly noted." She dropped her arms from around his waist and backed up to give them even more
space.

She silenced the timid voice inside her head that insisted she ask him what she did wrong. Screw that
voice. Another voice piped up and told her to give him hell. Now that voice she could get behind.

"I was kind of hoping for a kiss." She crossed her arms and shook her head when she saw how
bereft he looked at their total loss of physical contact. "But, it's painfully obvious that's not going to
happen." She tried to keep her tone even, but the way she sharply accented each syllable betrayed
her.

Logan groaned and tried to respond, rather unsuccessfully, several times. His sentence ended up
expletive, he held his head in his hands.

If she hadn't been wound up from the potent mixture of confusion, anger and self-doubt, she would
have found Logan's inability to string a coherent sentence together quite amusing.

He wiped his hands over his face and took a series of short staccato breaths, and then finally
managed to get out half of an explanation. "I mean, it's only been four hours. Maybe we should take
things –"

She put up a hand to stop him from continuing. "Slow. You said that already." She turned her back
on him to collect her flip flops from where she had kicked them off, and slid them back on.

When she turned around, he looked at her with a pained expression and opened his mouth to speak
again, but then snapped his jaw shut.

When we dated I couldn't get him to shut up, and now he can't put two words together.

It was taking every ounce of energy she had to make herself stay where she was. "What happened to
'I won't want to stop kissing you'?"

He took a step towards her and she shook her head to stop him. "Please don't touch me right now,
Logan. You need to stay in that spot and tell me what the hell is going on." If the sharp tone of her
words failed to communicate that this wasn't open for discussion, the expression on her face certainly
did.

He took a step back and exhaled a heavy breath. "When I was looking for that letter, I started
thinking –"
Veronica interrupted him. "And this train of thought led you to the conclusion that kissing me would be bad?" She shook her head with exasperation. "Boy, you sure know how to charm the ladies."

"Dammit, Veronica. You wanted me to explain, and I'm trying." He picked up the letter from the countertop and shuffled through the pages, holding it up for her to see. "Ridiculous length aside, there's a lot of things in here that I need you to know. Before anything else happens between us."

She frowned, trying to understand. "What else do I need to know? I told you I wanted this."

He folded the letter back up and slid it a few inches closer to her. "I just want to be sure about us before —"

She winced at Logan's words and looked around the room for a place to focus her eyes. Anywhere besides his face.

"Oh, god, Veronica. I -" He trailed off and rubbed a hand over his face.

Veronica's pursed her lips and nodded in false understanding. "I thought you were sure. Clearly that was my mistake."

He put out a hand to touch her arm, but seeing that he was too far away to do so without stepping closer, he stopped himself. He settled for drumming his fingers against his thigh.

He took a breath. "Look, you say you would have responded to my letter if you had gotten it two years ago, but how do you know that?"

She narrowed her eyes at him and shook her head. "Because I know, Logan. I know what I felt then."

Logan opened his mouth to respond, but she cut him off. He huffed in frustration and ran a hand through his hair.

"Dammit. I thought you knew that about me? If I want something, I go for it. Yes, there were times in the past when what I wanted was the worst thing for me, but those were my mistakes to make."

She wrapped her arms around her waist to comfort herself and shot him a resolute glare. "And that isn't what is happening here. Screw you for thinking otherwise."

Logan's mouth was slightly agape as she spoke, but he tightened his expression into a grim smile. He closed his eyes and blew out a steady stream of air.

With his attention elsewhere, she rubbed her eyes, preemptively wiping away any tears that dared form. Part of her wanted to demand an apology, but the other part recognized his uncertainty had a lot more to do with him than it did with her.

I feel like I've been two seconds away from losing it this entire conversation.

Logan threw his head back and looked up at his kitchen ceiling, then down at her. She could see his nervous energy in the way he repeatedly rubbed the thumb and middle finger of one of his hands together. "Do you get where I'm coming from? At all?"

Despite her previous attempt to get rid of any evidence to the contrary, her eyes were watery.

"Sure. I get it." She wiped at them, settling her face into an expression of calm. "Do you get where I'm coming from?"
He nodded and stilled his hands, crossing his arms across his chest.

She grabbed the letter off the countertop, wanting nothing more than to rip it up, as if it was to blame for the way the evening had gone. The moment she got to her dad's house, she was going to camp out on the couch and watch *Kill Bill Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2*.

*No way Uma Thurman would stand for this shit.*

She wanted to walk out now. But, Logan had already stopped her from leaving twice that day. It wasn't fair for him to keep her from going a third time.

She settled for picking the spoons up from the counter and throwing them in the sink. It was childish, but she enjoyed the way the noise startled him. "Can you walk me to my car, please?"

As she passed by, he grabbed her hand and brought her palm to his lips. If she had been quicker, she would have pulled her hand away before he could reach her. But ultimately she was thankful for the way the thick emotions of the evening had slowed her reaction time. He wasn't rejecting her.

His stare didn't waver as he spoke. "I am sure of you, I promise Veronica." He lowered his voice, and ran his thumb along her wrist. "I'm just not sure – do you really want to be with me?"

*There goes the myth that therapy fixes people. Looks like some of that insecurity is still there.*

She took a finger of the hand he kissed and ran it along his jawline, meeting his sad eyes with her own, and making a decision while she did. She would give him as much damn time as he needed.

"I guess we're both still works in progress, huh?"

He nodded and touched his forehead to hers.

She saw him clench his hands to stop himself from wrapping his arms around her waist, and while she craved more contact, she was touched by how hard he was trying.

They left the kitchen, their hands not quite touching, but occasionally brushing up against one another. He picked up her messenger bag from the entryway and held it for her as they walked to her car.

Logan opened the door and she slid into the front seat, but then turned so her legs still hung outside.

"Do you think this will go down in history as the worst reunion of all time, or do The Spice Girls still hold that honor?" She smiled and raised an eyebrow to let him know she was mostly joking.

He let out a small laugh. Just that little bit of levity released much of the tension between the two of them.

She tilted her head and raised her cheek up, inviting him to kiss her.

He smiled, placed a light kiss there, and then pulled back. "Can I take you out tomorrow night?"

She returned his smile and nodded. "Pick me up at 7:30?"

"See you then." He kissed her on the cheek again.

*It's not frantic makeup sex, but this is good too.*

This time when Logan pulled back from kissing her cheek, his brow was furrowed. She reached up
and smoothed out the wrinkle between his brows, prompting him to smile.

"You're not mad at me?" He brought his hand up to her cheek and hesitated before tucking a strand of loose hair behind her ear.

"My feelings are a little hurt. And, if we're still having this conversation thirty years from now, I'll be upset. But I can take things slow if that's what you need."

*Look at us actually being grown up instead of just playing at it.*

Logan's rested his hand on her shoulder and she could feel him drumming his fingers lightly against her skin. She looked up to ask him what he was doing, but when she saw the look of concentration on his face, she thought maybe he was trying to memorize the feeling of her skin.

"Logan?" Her voice brought his focus back to her face. "I'll read the letter, and I'll see you tomorrow."

He nodded and moved back, allowing his fingers to slowly trail from her shoulder to her fingertips. "See you tomorrow."

She started the ignition and pulled out of his driveway, watching from her rearview mirror as his gate closed behind her. Maybe she'd just watch *Vol. 1* when she got to her dad's. She'd save *Vol. 2* for the next time Logan pissed her off.

She smiled as she drove. Knowing him, she'd probably get to watch it before the weekend was over.

Chapter End Notes

Nothing to add here, except I love you all for reading. Thanks for doing that whether it be your first time or second time. It means a lot!
As Veronica pulled into her dad's driveway, she was overcome by the desire to see if she could still do a cartwheel. The summer before Lilly died, the two of them had spent hours perfecting their cartwheels and roundhouses, but it had been years since she felt like flipping.

And as long as dad doesn't watch from the window, no one will know.

She jumped out of her car and tossed her flip flops and messenger bag on the grass, then stood at the corner of the yard. Moving her right foot to be a few inches in front of her left, she put her arms up in the air and took a large step forward, and then flipped herself over.

Her vision was blocked for a few seconds as her dress fell over her head, but it righted itself as first one foot, and then the other, came to land on the damp grass, which chilled her toes.

The drive to her dad's house had done her good, allowing the vast majority of the initial hurt she felt at Logan's perceived rejection to subside. Now, her entire body was practically humming. Logan had once initiated their breaking up because of how intensely he felt for her, but he had never before wanted to take things slow for the same reason.

Everything is different this time around. That should scare me more than it does.

Veronica did another cartwheel, enjoying the feeling of her legs scissoring through the air, and then collected her belongings before heading inside.

From the front window she could see the living room lamp was on, which meant her dad was still awake. As she entered the house, she called out to him. "Lucy, I'm home."

"I'm in here, Ricky."

She dropped her bag and shoes down in the entryway and walked around the corner to find her dad reading a book, his feet propped up on an ottoman. Looking at her watch, she flopped on the couch, curled on her side to look over at him. "I'm twenty minutes earlier than I said I'd be."

He smiled at her and then folded down the corner of one of the pages, setting the book aside. "You want accolades? A treat?"

"Some appreciation for my very considerate behavior would be nice."

"Sweetie, you do realize that you're a grown-up now, right? You don't actually have a curfew." He stretched as his mouth opened into a large yawn.

Not certain if I believe him. This feels like a trap.

She shrugged which, from how she was laying down, brought her shoulders up to her ears. "I just don't want you to worry."

Furrowing his brow, he cocked his head. "Since when?"

She picked up a pillow and threw it at him, but her position on the couch prevented her from aiming well, or throwing it with much force. "Shut up."
While Logan’s conclusion that she had wanted to spend the holidays in Neptune to keep her dad distracted was correct, this current moment made her exceedingly grateful her dad had gone for it. Not only did the change of plans enable her to reconnect with Logan, it was these times with her dad she missed the most. The quiet exchanges where she was reminded of how rare it was to have a parent who was also a close friend.

*I wonder how much I'd need for a bribe to get him to move to Chicago for the next three years.*

He laughed, caught the pillow easily, and tossed it back to her. "So, what exactly were you doing, again?"

Veronica yawned, and rested her head on the pillow. "I helped Logan chaperone a high school pool party." She hadn't done anything wrong, and so she refused to sound guilty.

Her dad's look, with his lips pursed and his head still cocked, caused her to shout. "What?"

He shook his head with, what she assumed was false solemnity. "I just never thought I'd see the day when you and Logan Echolls were the responsible adults chaperoning anything."

She sat up quickly, her knees pulled to her chest. "I should be offended by that."

He shrugged as he stood up, grabbing his book as he did. "But you're not, because you're a little shocked too." Before turning to leave the room, he placed a kiss on Veronica's head.

*Odd that the forehead kiss is a go-to move of both dad's and Logan's. Freud would have a field day with that.*

"You're on your own for dinner tomorrow. It's date night for me and Alicia." He flipped one of her pigtails off her shoulder and smiled when she shot him an annoyed look.

She stood up to follow him down the hallway, stopping to turn off the living room lamp, a faint glow from the hall light illuminating the room. There was no reason for her to be nervous about telling her dad that she and Logan had tenuously reconciled. In fact, given a few choice conversations since her arrival in Neptune, she hazarded a guess he would actually be quite pleased.

Still, her dad had been privy to almost all of the bad elements of her previous relationships with Logan, and very few of the good ones. Which probably accounted for the pinprick of hesitation she had broaching the subject.

"Actually, I won't be on my own." She cleared her throat, and shoved her hands in her pockets. "Logan and I are going out tomorrow night."

He turned to face her, his expression hard to read in the dim lighting, and patted her shoulder. "He is the long delayed but always expected something that we live for."

She quirked an eyebrow at him and he smiled in return.

"It's Tennessee Williams. The Glass Menagerie." He pulled her into a hug and she wrapped her hands loosely around his waist.

"You've been spending too much time with Logan," she mumbled into his shirt. 

*And I haven't spent nearly enough the past two years. How's that for a role reversal?*

He pulled back and narrowed his eyes, inspecting her. She stood still, allowing his appraisal. He
hadn't immediately told her she was making a foolish mistake, and she took that as a good sign.

"You happy, kid?" She nodded her head and he sighed, but it didn't sound like from exasperation. "Yeah, I thought so."

He rotated to drape an arm around her shoulder and steered her into the kitchen, where she guessed the two of them would be partaking in the Mars family tradition of late night snacking.

She pulled two glasses from the cupboard, and by the time she turned around, he had already gotten the milk out of the fridge and uncovered the plate of cookies.

He poured them both glasses, and they stood in silence, dunking their cookies before biting down and sending crumbs cascading onto the countertop.

After a few seconds, Keith took a large gulp of his milk and sat the glass down, leaning forward so that he and Veronica were almost eye level. She avoided his gaze, knowing that he was warming himself up for a round of dad advice, and unsure whether she was ready for it.

When he cleared his throat, causing her to meet his stare, she realized he didn't really care if she was ready or not. She waved her hand at him and rolled her eyes. "Just get on with it already."

*Be kind, dad, please.*

A few days earlier her dad had mentioned that he felt he understood Logan now. She hoped he also understood just how much Logan actually meant to her. If he didn't, she admitted to herself, it was probably her fault for keeping that part of her life hidden from him. It had never been her intention to keep Logan and her dad apart, but her ability to compartmentalize knew no bounds. She knew that wasn't going to work anymore.

"Do I need to have a talk with this fellow about his intentions?"

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and then pulled out a stool to sit down. "Why don't you run the talk by me, and I'll let you know." While she had suspicions as to the contents of this talk, she wasn't about to let her dad lob any curve balls at Logan. They had enough to try and work through without her dad unintentionally adding to Logan's inferiority complex.

Then maybe *I can slip Logan the questions in advance so he has time to prepare.*

Keith brushed the crumbs off his hands and smiled at her. "Well, first I'd tell him that he needs to respect you."

She placed a hand over his and squeezed the tips of his fingers. "He already does. Next."

"Then I'd tell him not to rush into anything, because the mistakes we make as adults tend to be harder to fix than those we made as kids."

This was enough to give her pause for a second. Was her dad actually saying he thought it was a mistake for *Logan* to want to be with *her*?

She replayed his words in her head just as they were spoken and concluded that he was actually advising both of them to be careful for the sake of the other person. Which she supposed was advice with merit because, not even half a day reconciled, she already felt more wrapped up in Logan than she ever had. Not that she'd ever admit that to her father.

*Yeah, that wouldn't be an awkward conversation to start.*
"Well, dad, you'll be pleased to know Logan actually suggested taking things slow." She lifted up off her seat to lean forward and grab another cookie. Her mouth half full, she made a face at him indicating he should continue. "What else?"

"I'd conclude by mentioning that while no one will ever love you more than I do, you deserve someone who will fight to come in a close second."

She ducked her head, a light blush warming her cheeks, more than a little embarrassed that her first thought was that Logan would most likely try and fight him for the top spot.

Her dad ran his thumb over her knuckles, kindly ignoring the tears that had gathered in the corners of her eyes.

They were as much a result of his reminder of how much he cared about her as from how, without saying as much, he had given Logan his stamp of approval. She couldn't manage to open her mouth to get any words out and instead patted his hand and slid him the plate of cookies.

_It's official. I won the dad lottery. Four out of five Veronicas agree. As for that fifth one, she's a bitch anyway._

She shrugged, doing her best to look unaffected by her dad's words. "I'll give him the Cliff Notes version." Ticking the points off on her fingers, she summarized. "Respect me. Don't screw up. Every guy is second best to my dad."

Wrapping an arm around her shoulder, he laughed. "That about sums it up."

She hopped off the stool and the sensation of her bare feet hitting the cool kitchen tiles caused goose bumps to break out onto her skin. "What time are you going into work tomorrow?"

He picked up the empty glasses from the island and put them in the sink. "Thinking I was going to let myself sleep in until eight o'clock, try to get in by nine thirty."

"Want to push that to ten o'clock and have breakfast with your daughter?"

Clutching his chest, he stumbled back dramatically. She rolled her eyes, knowing that her dad was messing with her, but also delighted that this was one of those moments she was reminded she was absolutely her father's daughter.

"You mean you'd get out of bed before ten o'clock for me? I'm so touched."

"I'm not even going to dignify that with a response." She started to stalk out of the kitchen and then swung around. "But if I did respond, it'd be witty. Like, the epitome of wit."

He nodded emphatically, his eyes disbelieving. "Of course it would."

She wasn't sure if it was from the amount of sugar she had consumed a couple hours earlier or the multiple pendulum swings her emotions had done over the course of the day, but sleep was not coming easily.

Logan's letter was still in her bag, and like the telltale heart, she could almost hear it calling out to her. However, rather than a 'thump, thump, thump', it was Logan's voice taunting her: 'Read it, read it, read it, you dork.'

_Our terms of endearments would sound like insults coming from anyone else's lips._
Rolling over onto her stomach, she flicked on her bedside lamp. She reached her messenger bag in only a few steps, pulled the letter out, and then settled back under the covers. Before reading it, she flipped through the pages and a small laugh burst out from her throat.

Logan always did have an obsession with words. The letter was single spaced and close to five pages written out; it all felt so absurd.

_Reading a love letter from my maybe boyfriend._

She didn't feel worried or nervous about what the pages might contain, because she was fairly certain she already knew a vast majority of what was written therein.

_Dear Veronica,_

_First off, I would like to say this is dumb. Not the talking about our feelings as much as the fact that I am being forced to try and articulate what I feel for you, write it down, sign it, seal it, and then wait for a mail carrier to deliver it to you. (Everything I know about the US Postal Service I learned from Stevie Wonder.) If I had it my way, instead of writing a letter I'd be in LA, and Allison would be knocking on your bedroom door demanding we keep it down in there. But, whatever, we can do things this way. I guess it builds anticipation, or whatever. All I'm saying is, we could be having sex right now. Just in case that wasn't clear._

Her laugh started as a giggle, but it continued until tears were streaming down her face and her stomach cramped up. It was possibly the most unfocused and rambling start to a letter in the history of the English language, but it made her gleeful all the same. The letter read like he had allowed the words to pour out of him without self-editing.

_This is pure, unbridled Logan right here._

It had always scared the hell out of her, the way Logan needed her. She had felt she was too young, too damaged herself, to have someone make her their world. She couldn't be the person that someone rested their hopes on.

But now, though Logan was still far from perfect, he was more settled. It had hurt like hell at the time, but she had a feeling the past two years, with them separated and him in therapy, had done that.

_Maybe it did all work out the way it was supposed to. Fuck, he's turning me into an optimist._

She vaguely remembered that in her letter to Logan she had listed out several things that she was sorry for and several that she wasn't. A good portion of Logan's letter was devoted to doing the same thing.

He was sorry for hiring the bodyguard without telling her, but not for trying to keep her safe. He was sorry for beating up Piz, but not for being the type of guy who reacted strongly when she was hurt. Sorry that the Madison thing happened, but not for the fact that hiding it from her kept them together for an extra two weeks.

_Funny. That doesn't even a sting anymore. So much for never getting past it._

A rather melodramatic section of text, something about him kissing her and being a goner if he did it again, made her smile, and she put the letter in her nightstand drawer before grabbing her cell phone. He was nothing if not intense.

It was after midnight and, while Logan had to work the next day, she suspected that he was having as difficult a time sleeping as she.
After only two rings he answered the phone. "Did you read it?"

"Most of it." He groaned and she knew he was going to fight her on that, but she cut him off before he could. "I owe you a story."

She heard the sound of rustling sheets and smiled at the thinly veiled annoyance in his tone. "I'm a little old for bedtime stories, Veronica."

"No one is too old for bedtime stories. You'll like this one, I promise."

"Is it about a hot young babysitter named Veronica and a pizza boy named Logan who ended up delivering a lot more than the daily special?"

A burst of laughter escaped her lips, and its volume surprised even her. She couldn't hear Logan laughing but, without closing her eyes, she could picture him lying on his side with the phone cradled to his ear, smiling his beatific grin.

Great, now even pizza feels dirty.

"I thought you'd like to hear about the first time I ever wanted to kiss you." When he didn't try to interrupt her again, she took that as a sign to continue.

"It was a couple months after that day we got caught in the downpour, when you wanted to kiss me. I was hanging out with Lilly and she decided to give me a makeover. She did my hair and makeup, and gave me this black lace halter dress for me to wear. I had just told her that Duncan and I hadn't done more than kiss, and she told me I needed to shake things up a bit."

A strained groan came through the phone line. "Veronica, do I really want to hear this?"

She smiled to herself and nodded, though he couldn't see her. Duncan was probably always going to be a little bit of a sore spot between the two of them. "You do. After Lilly was done, you and Duncan got there. Duncan saw me all glammed up, and kind of started to laugh. He tried to hide it, but I saw. Do you remember?"

Me in a black lace dress. Logan a teenage boy. He definitely remembers.

He sighed, and she could hear the smile in his voice as he spoke. "Vaguely. Maybe you should describe the dress to me? Help jog the memory."

She stifled her laughter with her hand, but a small snort managed to escape.

"Of course I remember, Veronica. Lilly got pissed at Duncan, right?"

"Yeah. She said something like, 'no wonder she won't let you get to second base.' I was pretty embarrassed, but played it off."

"Why?"

She shrugged, feeling a light blush form as she remembered. "I thought I looked good."

God, was there anything I didn't let Duncan get away with?

"But, instead of saying anything, I just played it off and told you guys I had to go get cleaned up before my dad came to get me." She paused talking to take a quick drink of water from the glass on her nightstand. When she spoke again, her voice was quieter. "You found me sitting on the bathroom floor a few minutes later, washcloth in hand."
"I made fun of you, didn't I?"

She smiled at the light hint of guilt in his voice, like he had recently done something wrong. "At first, but you stopped when you saw I was crying. And then you sat with me and helped me wipe the makeup off my face."

His voice sounded breathy in her ears. "Yeah, I've always been smooth like that." From remorseful to egomaniac in three seconds flat. It was the Logan Echolls way.

*I need help if I'm actually finding his smarm act charming.*

"Oh, bite me." She grimaced at the opportunity for innuendo that opened up to Logan, and was surprised when he didn't take it. Despite his earlier protest that he had no interest in a bedtime story, he was clearly riveted by the turn this one had taken.

"So, what happened next?"

She wasn't certain if he really didn't remember, or like her so many years ago, just wanted to hear her tell it. "You kissed me on the nose, and then told me that I looked beautiful, but to not worry about being like Lilly. That I should just be Veronica." Flipping the covers over her head she burrowed down under the blankets. "If my dad hadn't shown up, I probably would have kissed you."

There was a few seconds of silence as Veronica allowed her words to drift through the phone line. All she was sharing was a memory of a time when things were decidedly more simple, but even her light-hearted remembrance was tinged with signs that not everything was as it seemed.

Letting Logan into that part of her life, the part before Lilly died, when everyone assumed she was perfect and never did the wrong thing, made her feel vulnerable in a way that was unfamiliar.

When he finally spoke, she could hear the way his voice was thick with emotion. "Did I really say that to you?"

*Figures he'd remember what I was wearing, but not the part of the story where he's the hero.*

Laughing, she flipped the blankets back from her head and brushed a strand of hair from her eyes. "I think your language was a little more colorful. Something about Lilly being a vampire named Trampy McTrampenstein and that if I wasn't careful she'd turn me."

"Ah, we must have been in an off-period." The sound of Logan shifting was loud through the phone. "So, why tell me all this, Veronica? It's a great story, and tells me what I long suspected, which is that you've always had a jones for my bones, but -"

"The point is that this thing between us is not going to go away. It was there when we were twelve and you thought I was hot, and when we were fifteen and I wanted to kiss you. And it was still there tonight when we couldn't keep our hands off each other by the pool. It's always there."

*Visions of us being evicted from our retirement home for having sex in the game room are dancing in my head.*

She flipped over to lay on her other side and faced the opposite wall, her eyes falling on the postcard Logan had given to her.

"And the reason you haven't read my letter is?" She thought she heard an edge to his tone, and worried about how he was interpreting the fact she hadn't read it.
"Because I don't need to read what you wrote me two years ago to know that it's still there. And we're different people now. You've been in therapy, I've been in therapy - "

He cut her off with a laugh that she was fairly certain contained a good amount of disbelief. "You've been in therapy?"

_Fair question. Talking about my feelings with those closest to me is hard enough._

"Kind of."

"Only Veronica Mars could 'kind of' do therapy. So, we're doing this? The whole relationship shebang."

"Of course we are, dumbass." There was no feeling of dread that accompanied that statement. The fact was she had lived years of her life pretending she didn't care about Logan and then a couple more feeling rejected. And now it was time to reap the benefits of admitting to herself just how much she did care.

"Smartass, jackass, dumbass. Someone is overly fixated with a certain part of my anatomy." He cleared his throat, and she burrowed further under all her blankets, finding herself peculiarly warmed by the simple sound of him breathing on the other end of the line.

"My dad threatened to give you the 'be good to my daughter' speech."

"Threatened? You mean he's not going to?"

"Nope. I told him you already are."

She may have been imagining it, but she thought she heard a note of contentment in his exhale.

"Shit, Veronica. I really thought that given enough time I'd get over you." The happy tone of his voice was the only thing that prevented the words from stinging. His sentence sounded unfinished, like there was more he wanted to say. She held her breath as she waited for the 'but' that reverberated in the air to land.

"But, turns out I love you just as much as I ever did."

For some reason, she wasn't prepared for that. Logan had asked to take things slow, which she thought meant that any declarations of love would wait. Because who says 'I love you' when they haven't even really kissed?

_Since when did we ever follow the most tread-upon path of romance?_

"Veronica?"

She felt guilty, making him wait for her answer like this. While she was certain she felt the same thing, it was in both of their best interests for her to take the extra fifteen seconds required to check off her mental inventory and make sure.

She lay in bed and waited for Logan's words to trigger the nausea that seemed to settle in her stomach whenever someone spoke the words 'I love you' to her these days, but it never came. And then she knew.

"Yeah, I'm here." Inhaling until her lungs were fully expanded, she held the breath for two seconds before exhaling slowly. "And me too, to all of it."
"Really?" His voice cracked on that one word, and it almost caused her to break. How could he make one word sound both so desperate and hopeful?

"Yeah, you wiseass." The image of Logan in his kitchen only a few hours prior, his head hung low, begging her to be okay with taking things slow, flashed in her mind. Merely echoing his words wasn't going to cut it anymore. He needed her reassurance. "I really love you."

It was out there now. The words floating in the ether of both their bedrooms. He had said them first, and yet a little piece of her was scared that he wouldn't reciprocate. That, now that she'd stopped playing hard to get, he wouldn't want her.

Somehow he could sense that the significance of those three words, even spoken into a phone, would unnerve her. "Well, now that we got that sorted all out, want to come over?"

Her laugh was almost effervescent. "Not a chance."

Except, absolutely I do. Ask me again.

"Give me one good reason."

"I'll give you three. It's way past midnight, you have to wake up in five hours, and I'm not going to be your booty call."

"Spoil sport. I'd be yours. In fact, your room is several doors down from your dad's, right? We can make this work."

"Oh, god, you're an idiot. We're not having reunion sex in the guest bedroom of my dad's house."

"Fine." He huffed out a breath, and she could almost imagine the way his lower lip was jutted out to form a pout. "Would it make me too much of a girl to say I don't want to hang up?"

"Yeah, but I get the sentiment." She sat up, in part to reassure herself that she was awake and this moment was happening. She'd find some way to punish herself, and maybe Logan, if this ended up being a figment of her imagination. "Thank you for the letter."

He scoffed, and she smiled at the familiar sound. "The letter you didn't read?"

She leaned over to the nightstand and pulled out the letter, flipping through the pages as she spoke. "I read most of it. Logan two years ago was a bit melodramatic, let me tell you."

"Meh. He wasn't that bad."

Actually, I'm starting to think I'm helpless to resist each and every permutation of Logan.

Her eyes fell on a passage of the letter wherein he shared his perspective on why exactly they hadn't worked out in the past. The amount of time he had clearly put into thinking it through was heartening. Still, it was late. No need to make things more serious at the moment than needed. A little levity was needed. "But this new model is even better."

"Just wait until you take him for a test drive."

She barked out a laugh, and covered her mouth, concerned she would wake up her dad. Had he always been this funny? "This is going downhill."

"Obligatory comment about where I'd like to go down."
That deserved an eye roll and she was a little disappointed that they weren't having this conversation face to face. Her eye rolls were really best appreciated in person. "Oh, god. You're like a gremlin, except rather than food after midnight your trigger is anything even vaguely sexual."

*A skill that we will definitely be putting to use at a later date.*

"Hey, what are you wearing -"

"Logan." She tried to muster up the appropriate amount of warning in her voice, but wasn't entirely sure it had come through.

"- to dinner tomorrow night. Sheesh Veronica, get your mind out of the gutter."

Laughing she rolled over to her side, and ran a hand along the spare pillow, feeling the coolness of the pillow case under her hand. "Casual or dressed up?"

"Let's keep it casual." He cleared his throat, and she recognized the way that sound often led to him bringing up something he specifically wanted to address. "And maybe I can tell you what your dad is helping me with? If you still want to know."

They may have changed a lot over the years, but her wanting answers and him wanting to confide in her hadn't. "If you still want to tell me, I still want to know."

*And then it'll be my turn to share a whole host of details about my life. Wonder whose life has gotten more complicated in the time we've been apart?*

While his sigh told her that he may have hoped she'd decided against knowing, he was likely relieved to have someone take a vested interest in him and his life. "Goodnight, Veronica."

"Night, Lo." Clicking off the phone, she cuddled the pillow into her side.

Things were already different. She could feel it.

The next morning she awoke to the sound of her dad stubbing his toe, and letting out a string of 'Keith curses'. Not quite swear words that seemed to communicate the force of their meaning well enough. She was under no illusion that her dad didn't swear, but it was one of his policies of chivalry to not swear around women.

*He'd probably be horrified to hear the colorful combinations of swear words I've come up with while in Chicago.*

She hopped out of bed, grabbed a sweatshirt from a drawer, and put it on as she padded down the hallway.

Musing over how the little hair her dad had could manage to look disheveled after a night's sleep, she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and made a beeline for the coffee pot.

"How'd you sleep, kid?"

She bobbed her head side-to-side. "Can't complain. How's your toe?"

Her dad grimaced. "Heard that did you?"

Rather than respond with words, she clucked her tongue, and took a drink of her coffee. "Go shower. Pancakes will be ready by the time you get ready."
He frowned at her, moving backwards to leave the kitchen as he did. "Are they going to be edible?"

Shooting him a glare as she opened the fridge, she shrugged. "Mine will be. Can't make any similar
claims about the ones you'll be eating."

*Like I can really mess up Bisquick. Oh, fuck a flounder fish. I think I just jinxed myself.*

As she began to mix the ingredients for breakfast together, her mind was already on the details of her
own case. It was on her agenda to spend a good number of hours that day poring over the sketches,
the words, and the timeline of when they'd been received.

The post office, the art supply store; nothing was turning up any leads. She had a feeling that this
morning wasn't going to be any different.

Maybe she'd take them to Hearst and see if an art professor could give her any insight into the
composition. Or she could send the newest package to Agent Baxter. Perhaps the fact that her stalker
had broken the pattern would uncover details that had up until now been nonexistent.

That feeling of being out of control, of being a passive observer to things in her own life, was
overwhelming her. She understood why Erin advised her to tell her dad, or someone else close to
her, but what could their involvement possibly turn up that her investigation hadn't?

It was this train of thought that her dad's return to the kitchen interrupted. His boisterous greeting,
"Dish 'em up! Papa Mars is hungry," startled her, and she waved the spatula at him disapprovingly.

Once they were settled and eating, her lack of conversation became more noticeable and her dad
gave her an appraising stare. She ignored it, focusing all her attention on her pancakes.

"What's wrong, kid?" His tone made her want to tell him everything right then, but she was still more
concerned than she should have been over what the news would do to him.

*You'd think I'd have learned my lesson by now. But I don't know if that need to hide the bad things
from him will ever go away.*

She didn't want to lie to him, so she made the decision to settle for vague half-truths. "I'm working on
a case that has stalled. I've exhausted all my leads, and I know I'm missing something, but I can't get
my hands around it."

It looked like he intended to push the subject a little further, but she kept her gaze down, moving a
bite of her pancakes into a pool of maple syrup and then swirling it around the plate.

*Stupid Veronica. Lack of appetite is always a giveaway with him.*

She cut off a large bite, and chomped down on the pancakes, still keeping her eyes averted. The
sound of her dad's stool scooting back made her look up.

"I have something that might help." Without further explanation, he left the kitchen, and she didn't
know if he intended for her to follow him or not. She figured if he did, he'd bellow for her from the
other room.

Her dad returned a few minutes later, his hands behind his back, obviously hiding something from
her view.

Narrowing her eyes, she cocked her head to the side, waiting for him to reveal whatever he thought
he had discovered. She took a sip of her coffee, and he unceremoniously laid a magnifying glass in
Her expression betrayed all of her thoughts, chiefly that she was unamused, and even more so, unimpressed at his attempt of humor.

He ignored her discontent and shrugged his shoulders. "Until you tell me more about what's going on, this is the best I can do."

The understanding that she was still keeping some elements of her case secret, and that he knew it, passed between them. He wasn't going to ask additional questions, and it was clear she wasn't ready to volunteer more information.

*I don't want to lie to him. I just need a little more time to see if I can figure this out on my own.*

She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. "Thanks dad." The fact that it wasn't really the magnifying glass she was thanking him for was evident to both of them.

After her dad left for the day, she sank comfortably into the small routine she had made for herself during her time home. She went for a run, cleaned the kitchen, and took a shower.

As she vacuumed her dad's entire house, dusted the living room, and wrapped the presents she had purchased at the mall a few days prior, she told herself she was not procrastinating about working on her case. She was just being a good house guest.

The periodic text messages she received from Logan throughout the day weren't helping her resolve to stay on task, either.

*I wish I could just sleep through this day and have it be tonight already.*

The only other time she had felt this level of fear about an investigation was when she was trying to uncover who had raped her. That, too, was a time when she had delayed investigation fearing the answer would be worse than the not knowing.

It was as she was unloading the dishwasher that she realized just how late it had gotten. If the day wasn't going to be a total wash, she had to confront the facts of the case; even if the fact ended up being that she was in need of help.

Retrieving the envelopes from the hiding place in her room, she returned to the kitchen. She spread out the sketches on the counter of the island, some turned over so the words were face up, and others so it was her own image looking back at her.

She started to make another list of facts about what she knew: The packages were all mailed to PO boxes, usually postmarked from the same city they were sent to. The exception was the one which she most recently received in Neptune which was postmarked from Chicago. The images of her weren't sent in chronological order.

As she wrote that note down on a piece of paper, something else occurred to her. She picked up each sketch and noticed that not a single one of them showed her with her hair styled as it was before Lilly died.

*So, what does that mean? Does this guy just not like girls with long hair?*

With a frustrated groan she threw the stack of papers she held onto the counter. The force of the movement pushed the magnifying glass her dad taunted her with off the counter and onto the kitchen
"Shit." The last thing she needed to deal with at the moment was shattered glass.

She hopped off the stool and was grateful to find that, while the handle had chipped, the glass was still intact. Tossing it on the counter, she left her investigative post for a moment to get a soda from the fridge.

Getting to concentrate on something other than the mess of details before her, even if it was just filling a glass so the liquid reached the rim without spilling over, was a welcome distraction. She grabbed a bag of pretzels from the cupboard and sat back down at the island.

The previous year, when she'd resolved to figure all this out, she'd assumed that her past experience would equip her to solve it quickly. But this was different than almost every other case she had solved. There were no witnesses, no evidence tampering, no cover up schemes. Just her and a stack of envelopes.

Her eyes raked over the scattered pages and fell on the magnifying glass, which was now focused in on a group of words on the back of one of the sketches.

She had told Erin, a few days prior, that what was startling about the newest sketch was the way the accompanying note was cogent and make sense. All the other notes were a series of fragments that didn't coalesce into a logical order. She had searched for each individual phrase online and turned up nothing. The sentences were clearly from the mind of the stalker.

Based on her original profile, she had come to believe that he wouldn't ever move beyond sending her letters. But the newest note, and her suspicion that he may have had something to do with Logan's letter going missing, had thrown off her profile.

Whoever was sending them, while clearly fixated on her, might be more clearheaded than she had previously thought.

The phrase the magnifying glass was focused on seemed to mock her: 'Blue is the hue. A magic unknown. I love you.' The words were familiar, but the tiny pinprick right above the 'a' in the word 'magic' wasn't.

She ran her finger over the dot, thinking it might be a piece of fuzz, or a cookie crumb, but it remained.

Holding the words up, with the magnifying glass purposefully put over the speck, she saw that it was written in the same ink as the phrase itself.

*This doesn't mean anything. Most likely it was an accidental mark made by the pen. And yet.*

Despite that real possibility, now that she had found a thread, even a very thin one, she wanted to follow it to see where it led.

Picking up another paper, she flipped it over and held the magnifying glass over the phrase. 'The roughness of the sea. The light dim. I love you.' The small dot she hoped to see was over the 'i' in the word 'light.'

Ripping a page out of her notebook, she cleared a space to work. A familiar feeling settled in her, making her brain whirr and her heart thump. She sorted the papers to be in the order in which they were received and methodically worked through them, searching each phrase for the small dot.
She chastised herself for not noticing them sooner, but when she removed the magnifying glass they almost disappeared. They were only visible if one knew what to look for but, now that she noticed them, they were all she could see.

*Daddy Mars comes through again, even when he doesn't realize he's doing it.*

Writing down the letters on the piece of paper, in a straight line in all caps, she was uncertain whether she'd find a sentence, more nonsense phrases, or a message to be unscrambled. She stared at the letters for a few minutes before a pattern began to reveal itself. Placing lines between presumed word breaks she ended up with: 'When you're ready for me to love you, I w'.

"Oh god." The bile from her stomach rose quickly and burned her throat. She jumped off the stool and ran for her bathroom.

Emptying the contents of her stomach into the toilet she sank down onto the floor, and pulled her knees up to her chest. *This is what I wanted, right? Leads. Answers.*

While this didn't bring her any closer to figuring out who was actually sending her the packages, it helped sharpen the profile she had formed.

He wasn't crazy in the traditional sense. He had strung her along for years, and had waited for her to discover the meaning behind the images he had sent. He had fixated on her, trusting that her obsession with investigation would lead her to uncover the message linking the notes.

In light of all this, the fact that he changed up his pattern concerned her even more now. "He's getting tired of waiting." With that realization, new tears stung her eyes. She allowed herself the indulgence of sitting on the floor for a few minutes longer, her head resting on the wall behind her.

When her breaths evened out, she stood up, brushed her teeth and then returned to the kitchen to hide away the evidence before her dad returned home. *And the day started off so well.*

Veronica's ability to successfully compartmentalize was tested when her dad got home from work that evening. She was grateful that his date night with Alicia started considerably earlier than hers did with Logan.

It took her a little longer than it should have but, when he told her he was leaving at 6:30 PM, she mustered up a quip about him and Alicia not being as young and spry as they once were.

She got ready for her date quickly, and then spent the remaining time waiting for Logan intent on occupying her hands, and in so doing, keeping her thoughts away from her current predicament. All she wanted to concentrate on was dinner, hearing what Logan had to tell her, and not crying at the smallest provocation.

If this hadn't been their first date in a good number of years, she would have called him to cancel. She hoped her makeup hid the pallor of her skin, and that Logan wouldn't notice that she couldn't stop shaking. A part of her wanted them to stay at her dad's house, irrationally concerned with leaving the safety of his walls, but she refused to be scared by a threat that had yet to materialize.
You're fine, Veronica. Mr. Creepy Stalker isn't anywhere near you, and you're going to be with Logan. You're safe.

She never thought too long and hard about the fact that she didn't actually know where her stalker's base of operations was. Agent Baxter thought it was most likely that he had used an online service that helped hide the location a letter was sent from. It was relatively inexpensive, and the services were so sketchy that it'd be almost impossible to trace where the letters originated from.

Erin believed the fact that the letters were always postmarked from the city that Veronica lived in were probably a manifestation of the stalker's desire to feel like he was a part of her daily life.

When Logan knocked on her dad's door, almost 7:30 PM on the dot, she was in the midst of alphabetizing his DVD collection. She had already reorganized the cupboard where he kept his coffee mugs and drinking glasses.

She took a breath before answering, which calmed her heart long enough to realize she didn't know how she and Logan were going to greet one another.

Aside from some cuddling the night before, they hadn't kissed. But, when they'd talked on the phone, Logan seemed to have decided that the 'I love yous' paved the way for physical intimacy. For all she knew, he'd choose to give her a high five, and then she'd spend the rest of the evening wondering if he had just put her in the friend zone.

Opening the door, she found Logan standing on her dad's doorstep, holding a single flower that looked mysteriously like those on her dad's chrysanthemum bush in the front of the house. She took it and arched an eyebrow at him.

He laughed and screwed up his face, a little embarrassed she had found him out so quickly. "Long day at work. I didn't have time to get to the store."

"Good thing my dad likes you. He's very protective of his mums."

Even more protective of me. Which is why he can't know how much trouble I might be in.

She chastised herself for letting her thoughts wander back to the topic she had forbidden them from resting on.

Handsome man in the entryway, Veronica. Focus.

She turned around and laid it on the console table near her dad's door, not super concerned with keeping it carefully preserved. The awareness that she and Logan hadn't even touched since she'd opened the door seemed to occur to both of them at once.

Taking a step towards him, she rolled her eyes and grabbed a fistful of his shirt to pull him close. "Man up, Echolls."

The fact that the kiss was a little awkward at first actually thrilled her. If it had felt like it always had, it would have been too easy for them to pretend that nothing had changed. While she expected that they'd eventually get the spark of their physical relationship to smolder again, it was kind of nice that they might have to work at it.

But then Logan seemed to come awake to the fact that she was kissing him, and he went from passive participant to an active one, wrapping an arm around her waist to pull her closer.

And there goes my theory that we were going to need a warm up period.
Both seemed to agree that they didn't want to push things too fast while standing in her father's doorway. He ran his tongue lightly along her lower lip and then pulled back, releasing a small puff of air from his lips as he did. His arms were still wrapped around her waist, and hers now clutched onto his arms.

"So, it looks like that still works okay." His voice was low in her ear, and produced a tingling effect up her spine.

Before letting go of her waist, he brushed a strand of hair behind her ear, and the familiar gesture almost upended her.

This isn't fair. He's all mature and self-assured, and he's just going to get sucked back into my vortex of drama.

Despite that awareness, she admitted to herself she wasn't noble enough to push him away. She stepped around him to turn off the entryway light and turn on the porch light, and he followed her out of the house.

He stood close enough to be almost pressed up behind her, a hand resting on her lower back, and she smiled over her shoulder at him before focusing her attention on locking her dad's door.

"Well, now that the whole kiss thing is out of the way, where are we going?" She turned around, and his arm moved to encircle her waist, just like it had hundreds of times before.

After the tumult of the previous evening, it was nice that this felt so familiar.

"I thought we could do breakfast for dinner." He looked down at her to read her expression, and gauge whether or not this was a welcome idea.

She smiled at him and nodded, her excitement clear. "The Hurricane?"

He scoffed, and bumped her hip with his own. "Like there's anywhere else."

On the way to the diner, Veronica fought to keep her mood upbeat, and thereby conceal how unnerving parts of her afternoon had been. She focused all of her attention on the sound of Logan's voice as he regaled her with the details of his day. When her mind began to drift, she grabbed his hand from where it rested on the gear shift and turned it over, tracing the lines of his palm with her finger. The combined action of focusing on Logan talking and the sensation of her skin touching his hand eased some of the tremors in her body.

She became aware that Logan was no longer talking and she turned her face up to see that he was stealing glances at her in between focusing on the road. His expression was inscrutable as he brought her hand up to his mouth and kissed her wrist.

"You okay?" He continued to look at her out of the corner of his eye, and she could tell he wished they weren't in a moving vehicle so he could inspect her features fully.

Nodding, she held his hand in her lap, trying to organize her thoughts in such a way that she could give him an honest answer. "I'm just really tired. Being home, a lot of stuff is hitting me at once."

Vague, but honest.

He laughed and gave her hand a squeeze. "Hmm. I can't imagine what you're talking about."

She smiled back and shifted her hand slightly so their fingers interlocked. As she moved her thumb
in small circles along his, her mind turned over several of the events of their senior year of college. She mostly believed it wasn't worth playing the 'what if' game, but sometimes she couldn't help it. This time, her mind was arrested by a question she had long since forgotten she ever had.

"Who wrote that one postcard?"

*It's like my thoughts are pinging around my brain and I don't know exactly which ones are going to be spoken until I open my mouth.*

He looked down at her, his brow furrowed, and Veronica realized that she had zoned out as he was speaking and interrupted him mid-thought. "Huh?"

She shook her head at herself and gave a little self-deprecating shrug. "After I started sending you the famous author quotes, you started sending me postcards written by authors you knew, but one wasn't signed. Who wrote it?"

His mouth opened slightly to form the shape of a small 'o' and he finally huffed out a heavy breath before looking at Veronica, his face screwed up. She recognized this as a rare moment in which he was embarrassed, and knew that if he wasn't driving, he'd be running a hand through his own hair. "I wrote it."

She didn't know why her first reaction was to punch him in the shoulder, but it was. Apparently that wasn't the reaction he was expecting either, because he shot her a quick look that was nothing but incredulous. "What was that for?"

"Why didn't you sign it, you asshat?"

He laughed, obviously remembering their conversation from the previous evening, and lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug as he steered the car into the parking lot of The Hurricane. "Because I got all mushy. If you hated it, I didn't want you to mock me."

She rolled her eyes and unbuckled her seat belt, biting the inside of her cheek. "Here I was, all proud of myself for writing that letter; being the first one of us to out and out tell the other how they felt." Trailing off, she looked up with him with a degree of affection that surprised even her.

The streetlights were just bright enough to illuminate his smug expression. "And I beat you to it."

"You beat me to it." She grabbed his shirt again and placed a hard and fast peck on his lips before jumping out of the car.

He came over to her side of the vehicle, his jacket thrown over one arm, and laced their fingers together pulling her into his side. She heard him mumble the words, "I love you" into her hair after kissing her temple.

She tried to smile, but the simple declaration which she had reveled in hearing the night before, now seemed tainted by the events of the day.

Clinging to Logan's side, she burrowed her face in his chest and inhaled deeply.

*This is love. And whoever this asshole is doesn't get to ruin that.*

Before they walked into the restaurant, Logan put a hand on each of her shoulders so he could look her square in the eye. "Veronica, what's going on?"

She took a few measured breaths and returned his stare. "I love you." Resting her head on his chest,
she wrapped her arms around his waist and held him close. "I'm just not on my a-game right now."

They stood like that for a full minute, with Logan rubbing his hand in circles on her lower back, and Veronica keeping her grip on his waist. When she loosened her hold and let out a small sigh, Logan rotated his body so they could walk side-by-side again, draping an arm over her shoulder as they entered the diner. She could tell he wasn't buying her excuse in its entirety, but his nod told her he was accepting it for now.

Knowing Logan, he'd wait until she was a little more at ease, and then the whole complicated story would almost effortlessly fall from her lips.

*He always has had this way of making me want to tell him everything. Maybe I'll actually trust that impulse this time.*

They both ordered French toast, bacon, and eggs, opting for orange juice instead of coffee. Logan kept one of the menus and stole a sharpie marker from the hostess stand, then spent the next twenty minutes renaming all of the house omelets. The mushroom became the fungi feast. The ham and cheese became the Ode to John: Hamm and Cleese, which he thought was terribly clever and just made Veronica groan.

The waitress scowled and took the sharpie away as she served their post-breakfast dessert, apple pie and coffee, but left him with the defaced menu. The look on his face at being properly chastised made Veronica grin, and a bit of the tightness in her chest caused by the weight of the secrets she was keeping receded.

"I can't take you anywhere, can I?" She tried to look serious, but his mock-offended face caused her to split into another grin.

"In my defense, you didn't take me here, I took you."

"How is that a defense?"

He sucked up a few drops of water in his straw and before she could actually protest, he blew them at her.

She picked up the first thing she could find, an open jam packet, and threw it at him. It hit his cheek and a droplet of strawberry jam stained his face. "Behave," she reprimanded.

He wiped the jam off with his thumb and sucked it clean. "Says the woman throwing condiments."

Holding her hand out, she looked up at him from under her lashes. "Truce?"

He nodded, and took her extended hand, but then tugged on it to bring her towards him across the table, placing a soft kiss on her lips. As she tilted her head to invite him to deepen it, she heard the sound of something slapping down on the table.

She pulled back, expecting to see the waitress glowering down at them, but all she saw was a manila envelope, presumably the one her dad had given Logan the day he was at Mars Investigations.

*Where was he hiding this? Must have hid it under his jacket. Seems like he's picked up more of my tricks than he let on.*

She picked it up and shook it back and forth like it was a Christmas present. "What's this?"

He rolled his eyes and kissed her wrist. "You know what it is, but it's cute that you're pretending not
Taking it from her hands, she saw that he seemed to be shaking a little now, and it made her wonder even more exactly what was going on with him.

"I told you I'd tell you." He sighed and opened the envelope, then laid the contents on the table, pushing a few plates aside.

The sentiment was so simple, but it was heavily laden with meaning. They had both made promises to each other the past couple days, and this was just the first of many that was being made good on.

Veronica picked up a photo of what looked like a bed and breakfast, complete with wrought iron balconies, and ivy growing up the side of the stone face of the building. "What is this, Logan?"

He smiled and took a large gulp of water. He rubbed his hands up and down his pant legs several times, and then picked up his fork and began to push the remnants of his dinner around on the plate, separating the leftover eggs from the bites of French toast and then drawing designs in the syrup.

"My mom and I used to take a trip together every summer, just the two of us. We always played this game where we imagined what our lives would be like if we lived in whatever city we were visiting." He set down his fork and Veronica focused all of her attention on Logan's movements. While his voice was calm, and almost casual in his speech, his hands were moving erratically, now shredding a paper napkin.

"Oh, this isn't going to be good.

"Our favorite place to go was Italy. One trip we took, we ended up in this small little town called Levanto, and stumbled on this bed and breakfast that was almost in a complete state of disrepair. When we imagined our lives there, my mom decided she would run the bed and breakfast, and I'd help her." He tossed the remains of the napkin on the table and gestured to the photo Veronica held.

"Anyway, that's the bed and breakfast."

She met Logan's gaze and then looked down at the photo, examining each detail. "It doesn't look like it's in a state of disrepair."

He laughed, but it was without any humor. "Yeah, well, I went there last year just so I could see it and, I don't know, feel close to her again. It was exactly how she'd always described she wanted it to look. Down to that damn ugly orange color on the exterior, and the white flowers out front." A shaky breath escaped his lips, and he squeezed his eyes shut. "The owner apparently didn't live in Italy, so I couldn't speak to him or her, but when I pressed the manager for more information, I was told that the owner was an American named Lyle Sternn."

Veronica held in a gasp, remembering the Lyle Sternn community center that he had named in secret tribute to his mom, and nodded, trying to make it clear with just her eyes that she understood the significance of what he was saying. "Why that name?"

Taking another drink of water, he looked up at the ceiling of the room, and then ran a hand through his hair. "She used it a lot when we checked into hotels. She said that in her imaginary life she'd be a man, because men were freer than women." His voice got low, and he began rearranging the silverware on the table to be in the proper order of fork, knife and spoon.

"So, what does this all mean?" She sat the photo aside and began flipping through some of the other documents which included, what she guessed was, the real estate contract, a series of work orders for repairs, and copies of check stubs, all signed by Lyle Sternn prior to the date of Lynn's death.
"Your dad is trying to help me figure that out. It might be a coincidence." His tone indicated he didn't really believe that, but she couldn't tell whether he wanted it to be true or not.

If his mom really bought and purchased property under an assumed name, what does it mean?

A thought came to her unbidden, and she worried her lip, uncertain if she should even ask.

"What, Veronica? What are you thinking?"

Knowing she might have had parts of a secret life must already be painful enough. I don't want to make this any harder on him.

She gave, what she hoped, was a reassuring smile. "Do you think that she could still be - "

He cut her off, which told her that not only had he known what she was going to ask, but that he had entertained the possibility himself.

"No, I don't. But I still want answers." He ran a finger up the side of his glass, collecting the condensation, and then wiped it on his jeans. "Your dad thinks it was a likely a passion project of hers that she secretly funneled money to. He thinks it was probably a way for her to try and focus on something positive in the midst of everything."

Taking hold of his hand, she brought it to her lips and placed a kiss on his knuckles. "What do you think?"

"I'm trying not to think about it. Because -" He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with his free hand. "Honestly, I'm a little scared of what your dad's going to turn up." He squeezed her hand, his eyes still closed. "I thought it wouldn't hurt as much anymore."

Now probably isn't the time to tell him that it never stops hurting. Something about a mom leaving is never okay.

Still holding his hand, she stood up so she could sit next to him on the same side of the booth. He opened his eyes as he felt her move, his gaze questioning.

She didn't say anything, just turned her face into his side, and wrapped her arms around his waist. It was a peculiar place to be in the throes of such an intimate conversation, but history had taught her that sometimes you just had to seize the moment, no matter how inopportune it was.

He rested his chin on her head, and the way his chest was heaving indicated he might be crying, but she never felt tears fall onto her skin.

It shouldn't have been romantic. They were sitting in a red vinyl booth, parts of the vinyl patched with duct tape. They weren't dressed up, had stomachs filled with apple pie, and were being chased by specters. Logan, by the specter of his mom, and Veronica by the specter of a villain who had yet to materialize.

And yet, something about the way Logan held onto her, and she held onto him in turn, while not perfect, felt like it was at least okay.

"You don't have to believe me, Logan, but this will all work out."

She felt him nod, his chin still resting on her head, and his grip around her tightened. "You want to tell me what's bothering you?"
If I'm waiting for us both to have our shit together to lay this on him I'll be waiting a long time, but I won't complicate his life even more.

Shaking her head, she ran a hand up his back. "Not tonight. Let's just finish dessert."

She pulled back, and though he was scowling at her, he nodded. She picked up her fork and alternately fed herself and Logan bites of apple pie, never moving back to her side of the booth.

Chapter End Notes

Big shout out to my beta, Scandalpants. She's the best and any remaining mistakes are mine, all mine. As Joyce Carol Oates said, "A good, sympathetic review is always a wonderful surprise." So, leave me one (if you want...no pressure).
On the way back to her dad's house, Veronica sat in the passenger seat of Logan's car and allowed herself to be calmed by both his presence and the sound of the tires humming along the road. Interlacing their fingers, she rested their clasped hands on her knee.

"So, riddle me this Batman," she said, drawing small circles on his wrist with her thumb.

He shot her a quick glance, a frown on his lips, and then turned his eyes back to the road. "Hmm?"

"What was up with the wild goose chase I went on Saturday? The drug store. The seedy bar."

Logan's face broke into a wide grin, but he tried to school his expression into one of innocence before meeting her eyes. "Hmm?"

She dropped his hand and flicked him on his temple. "You know exactly what I'm talking about, dumbass."

"Can we please go one night without you talking about my ass? I'm starting to feel objectified."

She rolled her eyes at his answer, which while amusing, avoided her original question. "You were so secretive when you left dad's office. I assumed -"

He shook his head at her and, while his expression was blank, his words were laced with amusement. "And what do people say about assuming things?"

_I'm not the ass in this relationship. But, he may have a point._

Rolling her eyes again, she held her thumb and middle finger up so they were in his line of sight as he drove. "Don't make me flick you again. My fingers are deadly weapons."

He waggled his eyebrows and looked down at his crotch and then back up again. "Don't I know it."

"Talk, Echolls." Her mind was still reeling from what Logan had revealed at dinner as well as the discoveries she had made earlier about her own mystery. It was nice in this moment to forget about all of that. Even if her boyfriend was being a little pervy.

"Fine. But I object to the way you are robbing our relationship of any and all mystery." When he stole another glance at her from his periphery, she raised an eyebrow, her arms crossed.

After giving a final sigh, he started drumming the fingers of one hand against the steering wheel. "I'd like to remind you that in one of the worst cases of failed communication in the history of the world, I thought that you had blown me off two years ago." The hand that was drumming stilled long enough to grip the steering wheel tightly and then relaxed. "Your dad told me last week that you were coming back into town, and I knew I wanted to see you, but I wasn't sure if you would want to see me."

She frowned at him, taking his hand in hers again. "But what were you doing at The Copper Cart?"

He squinted an eye at her, and screwed up his face, pretending to recall the facts of the day in question.
"I may have messed with you." He took his hand from hers and held up his thumb and index finger so there was only a quarter inch of space between them. "Just a little. I got your dad to call me when you left the office, and I drove around town for a while to see if you'd follow me."

She flicked him in the temple again, this time hard enough to make him yelp and he ran his fingers over the sting. "You baited me!"

"I didn't bait you. I tested you."

She was annoyed. Definitely annoyed, but he just laughed at the look she shot him.

"When Veronica Mars cares about you, she leaves no stone unturned." Pulling up in front of her dad's house, he parked the car at the curb and turned off the engine. He ran a finger along her jawline, and then cupped her cheek with his hand. "I just wanted to see if I was still on that shortlist of people." He leaned forward to kiss her, but before their lips could touch, she pushed him back, shaking her head.

I think he's telling me I'm predictable. Not even one week back together and the mystery is gone.

"So you're not involved in shady dealings at a bar at the edge of the 02 zip?"

Shaking his head, he leaned forward again. "Nope."

"And you hung out at a drugstore for close to thirty minutes because?"

"I wanted to give you the chance to catch up to me. Also, I was out of toothpaste and shave gel and wanted a snack." He gave her a quick peck on the lips.

She ran a hand along his cheek and nodded her approval at the feeling of smooth skin under her fingertips. A direct result of him using said shave gel. "Feels like a clean, close shave." Leaning forward, she breathed in the faint hint of aloe that still clung to his skin, even after their hours at the diner.

Their lips almost touching, she turned her head at the exact moment he went to kiss her again, causing his lips to graze her cheek. She unsuccessfully tried to stifle a laugh at the sound of his frustrated groan. "Why weren't you mad I tracked your car?"

His hand came up to frame the other side of her face. "Are you kidding me? I was fucking relieved you took an interest." He kissed her lips, a hard fervent peck, and then pulled back. "And it turns me on to see you all PI'd out."

Laughing, she ran her hands up his chest, and then gripped his shoulders. "Didn't used to."

He brushed his lips over her forehead, and then ran his thumb along her cheekbone. "Actually, it always did. I had to stop myself from jumping you in the pool house that night junior year when you infiltrated my poker game."

So I didn't imagine that little smirk of appreciation thrown my way that night.

She closed her eyes as he kissed his way along her jawline and up to her ear.

"But you hated me then."

"Doesn't mean I didn't want to jump you."

She pushed him away, a faint smile on her face, and earned another groan from Logan. Torturing
him wasn't her intent. She just needed a few more answers. A few more assurances that this steadier Logan, coupled with what she hoped was a steadier version of herself, were flesh and blood and sitting in his car.

*And maybe I'm getting off a little on torturing him.*

He hung his head, looking up at her from under his lashes. "Veronica, I'm pulling out some of my best moves here. Work with me a little."

She scrunched up her forehead, her head cocked to the side. "*These* are your best moves? Man, you've really lost it."

His head snapped up and at the dark look in his eyes, she pressed a hand against his chest to get him to focus for just one more moment.

"One last question and then I invite you to try and impress me." At his glare, she threw her head back with a laugh. It felt good to poke and prod at each other without the intention of trying to do harm. "Why did you switch to Crest ProHealth toothpaste?"

"I like the way it makes my mouth tingle."

Logan made it clear at that moment that the time for mild interrogation was over, his lips finding hers. He seemed content with keeping things light at first, just gentle kisses, and a hand tangled in her hair. But then he was kissing her neck...then back to her lips...then *shit*, he bit her shoulder and soothed the sting with his tongue.

*We cannot possibly have sex while parked outside my dad's house. Wait, is that a hard and fast rule I made for us?*

His mouth found her earlobe and he began to nibble at it, sending a shiver down her spine.

*Okay, woah. Maybe it was more of a guideline.*

Her range of motion was limited by the seat belt she had yet to unbuckle. She managed to release the seat belt without separating from Logan, but when she tried to throw back the shoulder strap, she got a little tangled. His self-satisfied smirk at how flustered she was made her want to simultaneously kiss and smack him.

She pulled him closer and felt his chuckle against her shoulder as she tugged at the hair at the nape of his neck. She just knew that he was primed to make a comment about how much she seemed to be enjoying his moves now, and she considered pulling back to preemptively tell him to shut up.

When his hands started moving under her shirt, she pushed him away firmly, becoming aware for the first time that he had removed the elastic from her hair and that her hands were under his shirt.

"Nuh uh."

His face was all confusion and he parroted his own words back to her. "Nuh uh? Why 'nuh uh'?"

*There are a million reasons for 'nuh uh.' Okay, I'm having difficulties thinking of them right now, but they'll come to me.*

Straightening out her shirt, she scooted over in her seat a few inches to put some distance between them, her brain searching for a reason. She settled on, "It's getting late, and I've got a full day planned for tomorrow." Combing her fingers through her hair, she looked over at him. "And we're parked in front of my dad's house."
His head fell back on his seat and he sighed, but she saw a smile play on his lips. "Are you reading that dating book The Rules? Because you're a pro at the whole 'leaving them wanting more', thing."

"Compliment?"

"Mild complaint phrased to sound like a compliment."

"Clever."

Jumping out of the car, she grabbed her bag, and then came over to Logan's side, opening his door.

"Be a gentleman. Walk me to the door."

He hopped out of the car and took her hand. While he shook his head at her again, she could see that he wasn't legitimately upset.

There was something quite amusing about being in their mid-twenties and making out in a car in front of her dad's house. She allowed herself the indulgence of another few minutes of kissing before they made plans for Logan to cook her dinner at his place the following evening, and she went inside.

_I just want this part to last a little longer. We never got to have this part for very long._

As she stood in the doorway of the house, a small smile on her lips, she mentally prepared herself to be on the receiving end of a string of complaints from her dad. She understood why her being out three nights in a row might make him snappy but decided she could probably bribe him with pastrami sandwiches the next day.

She woke up the following morning to find she was already the recipient of a text from Logan. A fact that made her far more gleeful than she thought it objectively should.

_From Logan Echolls – 8:28 AM_

_Would it make me the girl of the relationship to say I can't wait to see you tonight?_

She laughed, rubbing sleep from her eyes and willing her synapses to work a little faster so she could generate an appropriately snarky comment in response.

_From Veronica Mars – 9:09 AM_

_No. But the amount of hair products you use would._

Tossing her phone on the pillow beside her, she sat up in bed, and turned on her bedside lamp. She reached for her messenger bag, pulling out her dayplanner and a pen. As she flipped to the current date, a half sheet of paper ripped from a notepad fell into her lap. She picked it up and saw it was the to-do list she had made on her first day in Neptune:

1. Catch up with Mac.
2. Bake snickerdoodles for Alicia and the family.
3. Closure.

The third item on the agenda was almost unreadable because of the number of times she had crossed out and rewritten it.

_Number one will have to wait until Saturday. Number two can be accomplished today. And as for number three – not a chance in hell that's happening. What a difference five days makes._
Sticking the list back into her dayplanner, (Logan would certainly find it amusing) she started a new list that would serve as a guide for the day. Over the years, Veronica had discovered that the best way to deal with emotional and mental complications without breaking down was to eliminate any gaps in her schedule. By eliminating the gaps, she eliminated any time for self-reflection.

The result of that day's plan was a tightly ordered series of events. Some had to do with her ongoing investigation, but she also remembered to make time for her dad and Wallace.

She limited herself to only two hours' time for ruminating on her own case. She hoped her eyes were refreshed enough to capitalize on the amount of new evidence she had uncovered.

With a strangled groan, she got out of bed and began to get ready for the day. As she was brushing her teeth, she had to acknowledge she was close to exhausting her own investigative options on her case.

She needed help, especially now that she was aware of just how much this guy had altered his pattern by sending her a package while she was in Neptune for break: the message not only made sense in a way the others hadn't, it had been postmarked from Chicago but received in Neptune.

The person besides herself who knew the most about her investigation was on the other side of the country, and had made it abundantly clear how foolish she thought Veronica's actions were.

*I may need to concede defeat on this one.*

After getting dressed, she texted Wallace an invitation to come over before her date with Logan so she could load him down with snickerdoodles. Between spending time with Wallace, torturing herself by looking at the sketches one more time, and bringing lunch to her dad, she ensured her day would be full enough to avoid any times of solitude sans task.

Camped out in her dad's living room with a pot of coffee and a bowl of cereal, her attempt to uncover new information was fruitless. She was used to an investigation taking longer than she wanted, but having so little to go on was new to her. The thought of having to return to Chicago after Christmas, no closer to solving her own case, was almost crippling.

*How long is this going to go on?*

In an uncustomary sign of frustration, she let out a little breathy growl of anger, and brushed all of the sketches off of the table in her dad's living room, scattering them across the floor.

She hated whoever was doing this, and the way he was causing her to feel out of control. She had tried to be positive the night before, but without any indication as to the identity of the sender, her more natural bent towards cynicism was emerging.

She didn't bother to put the sketches away in their individual envelopes, and simply tucked them under her dad's coffee table, intending to deal with them when she got back from lunch.

On her way to pick up lunch, she convinced herself to call Agent Baxter to fill her in on the newest development in her case.

*Step one in the 'I have a martyr complex and think I'm invincible' recovery group: ask for help.*

They were in agreement that the message contained within the sketches, 'When you are ready for me to love you, I w', was more than a little ominous. Erin also acknowledged that discovering that element was a crucial break.
It also served to reinforce Erin's belief that Veronica needed to clue her dad in to what was happening. "He has tools, resources, professional expertise and the time to dedicate to this, Veronica. You need to tell him."

*I hate that step one inevitably leads to step two: listen to advice. Damn step one.*

Gripping the steering wheel as she drove, she did her best to remain calm. "I told you I would."

Veronica heard Erin's exasperated sigh come through the line. "Actually, you didn't. You promised me you'd tell someone, but you never said it'd be your dad."

"It would kill him to know this, Erin."

"More than if something actually happened to you? Something he could have helped prevent?"

She wanted to squeeze her eyes tight against the words but couldn't while driving, so settled for biting her lip.

"Veronica, are you still there?"

"Yeah." Taking a deep breath, she held it in her lungs for several seconds, and then let it out. "I'll tell him."

*Look at me forging new patterns. Admittedly my hand was forced a little, but that's just semantics.*

Erin's relief was palpable, even through the phone line. "Oh thank god. When?"

"Soon." At her noncommittal time frame, Erin groaned, but Veronica spoke before she could vocalize her complaint any further. "I promise. He'll know by next Thursday. Just give me some time to see if I can make something of these leads. I want to have something positive to tell him when I do."

"Do you have any idea how exasperating you are?"

This pulled a light chuckle from Veronica's lips and despite being alone in the car, she nodded in agreement. "Some."

The previous evening, her dad had been more amendable to the offer of a long lunch at his office than she thought he would be. She showed up to Mars Investigations, sandwiches and fresh coffee in hand, and reconfirmed he was okay with her going out that night. It wasn't until she prodded him a little more that she discovered that earlier in the week he had made plans to take Alicia to see *The Nutcracker* in San Diego.

"And when were you going to tell me, young man?" The finger wag might have been overkill, but she liked getting to reverse the roles.

Her dad hung his head, and shrugged his shoulders. "Right now?" He rested his chin on his hands, and fluttered his eyelashes. "Please Veronica, can I go to San Diego and play with Alicia?"

Throwing her napkin at him, she crinkled her nose at him and shook her head. "Never say that again. Will you guys be home tonight?"

"Yeah, but it'll be late. Around midnight." He tossed the remnants of their lunch in the garbage can behind him and stood up from his desk, which Veronica took as a sign that it was time for him to get back to work.
"You going into the sheriff's station today?" She stood up and grabbed her bag, heading for the front entrance of the office with her dad following behind her.

"No, just working from here." Looping an arm around her shoulder, he pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. "Have fun today, kid. I'll see you tomorrow."

It occurred to her as she stood there that this was part of the reason she had such a hard time confiding in her dad when she was in trouble. When she was in control of a situation, like when she investigated Lilly's murder, or the bus crash senior year, her dad was her champion. He never thought she was incapable of accomplishing anything. However, despite the fact that they worked on those cases together, at the end of the day she wasn't his co-worker or his partner: she was his kid. When things got too intense, he didn't hesitate to withhold information from her.

He'd do anything for her, and she didn't want him to deal with knowing that there were parts of her life too broken for him to fix. Maybe she wasn't giving him enough credit, or maybe she just liked that in spite of everything he still saw her as a kid.

Before she left she threw her arms around her dad's neck, and hugged him tight.

"Woah, kid, everything okay?"

She nodded against his shoulder and then pulled back. "I love you dad." She cut him off from asking additional questions by turning around and heading back out of the office.

This is going to kill him. Knowing that I'm in trouble. That he might not be able to fix it.

As she got into her car and pulled away from Mars Investigations, she checked all of her mirrors – both out of habit, and to ensure that no one was following her.

Enjoy it while you can, Veronica. The second you tell dad what's going on, you'll be lucky if you don't have a permanently assigned security detail.

By the time Wallace came over to collect his cookies, her dad's kitchen was spotless. Not only did she sweep and mop, she disinfected the countertops, cleaned the light fixtures, and reorganized his pantry. She hoped he'd take it as another sign of her considerate behavior, and nothing more.

She glowered at Wallace, snapping him with a towel as he poured himself a glass of milk. "Your ass is grass, Fennel, if you get any crumbs on my freshly mopped floor."

"Why can't you be this committed to cleaning our place?" He took a long gulp of milk and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

She handed him a napkin, rolling her eyes. "Everyone knows it's more fun to clean someone else's."

Don't worry, roommate. I have a feeling our place will be on the receiving end of a deep clean the moment I get home.

He took another couple of cookies from the plate on the counter, and she swatted at him. "Paws off my dad's cookies. I gave you a plate of your own." She picked up the other plate of cookies, removing the aluminum foil, and slid a couple cookies back onto the plate Wallace had just taken from. At his groans of protest, she raised an eyebrow. "I can easily take the whole plate away. I'm sure Logan would appreciate them."

She inwardly cringed when she realized what she had just done, bringing up Logan's name for no
particular reason. The way Wallace's face lit up with amusement told her that he wasn't going to let that go without being commented upon.

"Interesting. So, you and Echolls are a thing?"

"It's called a relationship, Wallace. You might consider trying it one day."

"Oh, I've considered it a lot. I just feel it would be a crime against humanity to limit all this," he gestured up and down the length of his body, "to one woman."

She grimaced, wrinkling her nose up in distaste. "Oh, god. What did you do with nice Wallace? Wanna-be-playa Wallace, please go away."

He threw an arm around her, and squeezed her shoulder. "Don't hate the playa, V, hate the game."

Further evidence that Wallace is the best friend a person could ask for. Teased me just long enough to gloat without requiring that I go into excruciating detail about Logan and me getting back together.

Laughing, she pushed him away from her and towards the living room. "I'm going to choose the one less traveled and express derision for both."

He took a few steps backwards, laughing as he did and then suddenly stopped moving, his lips downturned into a frown.

"What?" For a moment she wondered if the 'if he ever hurts you' speech that she expected to come from her dad was going to be delivered by Wallace.

The way he was doing his best to look innocent and impish did not bode well for what he was about to say. Finally he sighed, and looked up at her. "I was just wondering how much trouble I would get in if I asked you to make me a sandwich."

Shaking her head at him, she picked up a cookie from the plate and threw it at him. He fumbled it, but picked it up from the ground and bit down.

"I will not make you a sandwich, but I can probably scrounge up some chips."

"That'll do."

Frequent were the days wherein Veronica wished that some part of her teenage years hadn't occurred. But she also acknowledged that the easy familiarity she had with Wallace was something that developed because of many of those events. It was odd having a best-friend who was a man, but it also felt natural.

Meeting Wallace, letting someone into her life again, was really the inciting incident that allowed her to feel even half-way okay about her last high school years.

And for that reason alone she would tolerate his request to make him a sandwich. It helped that she knew he wasn't being even halfway serious. She grabbed a bag of tortilla chips from the cupboard, a container of salsa from the fridge, and padded into the living room.

Martha Stewart eat your heart out.

Wallace had made himself comfortable on the couch, his feet extended in front of him to rest on the coffee table.
Her eyes shot to the stack of sketches and envelopes still out of sight, neatly stacked under the coffee table. It wasn't like Wallace to snoop, but what he was holding was unmistakable. It occurred to her that in her earlier flash of frustration, when she scattered the sketches across the room, that she could have easily missed picking one up.

She felt a mixture of panic and relief that the decision to confide in someone about her case was being taken out of her hands.

I don't know if I want to breakdown and tell him everything or deflect like mad. Deep breaths now.

Hearing her enter the room, he flipped the paper around so it was her face looking back at her. In this one, her hair was pulled back into a low ponytail, her face seen in three-quarters profile, and she was wearing sunglasses.

Wallace, my dad, Logan. By the time this week is over I might as well post on Facebook that I have a stalker and see if anyone fesses up.

In a mocking tone, Wallace read the words on the back of the page. "The night drifts when she's away, and I'll smile and gaze 'till dawn's day." He flipped the page again, shaking his head, and then tossed it onto the table. "Is that what passes for romance nowadays?"

Not the reaction I was expecting. Definitely thought he'd go for something along the lines of, "this is some scary ass stuff, Veronica."

"Huh?" She was too busy trying to figure out exactly how to explain away the presence of some potentially devastating evidence to really make sense of his reaction.

"Echolls might do a bang up job of helping others that have talent, but if he tries to publish stuff like that he's going to get laughed right out of a job."

She let out a shaky breath and gave what she hoped would pass for a genuine smile. "Yeah well, let's keep that between you and me. Underneath that brooding exterior is a rather sensitive soul."

Who also has an insatiable need to keep me safe. This is something he needs to know, but not something that should be sprung on him.

Wallace scratched his chin, and then reached out to take the bag of tortilla chips from her. "Now, who does that remind me of?"

She scoffed, her eyes wide with faux offense, "I don't brood." Reaching into the bag, she pulled out a handful of chips, and then caught Wallace's eye. "I don't!"

The jokes and teasing were a comfort to her, which felt odd given the circumstances. Since concluding that the sketches were given to her by a stranger, she only ever felt anxious while looking at them.

He nodded, but the grin that remained on his face told her that it was only to appease her. "Well, you have to admit he's a sentimental son-of-a-gun. Did he draw you by candlelight?"

Truth. But I kind of like the sentimental. Speaks to my much repressed but never totally destroyed romantic side.

She opted to play along. Dismissing the significance of the sketch rather than dwelling on it seemed the best way to go. "Yes, actually. He wanted to recreate that scene from Titanic. You know where Leonardo DiCaprio draws Kate Winslet naked? I convinced him to save that for our second date at
He choked on the chip he had just bitten down on, and covered his mouth with his hand. She wasn't certain if he was actually gagging, or just pretending, but either way she hoped that the unsavory mental image he had conjured would convince him to drop any additional discussion.

For a few seconds, the only sounds were the two of them snacking, and she was foolish enough to think the matter of the drawing had been forgotten. But then Wallace picked up the sketch again. She had to stop herself from jerking it out of his grasp, knowing there wasn't a way to make that action convincingly nonchalant. Sitting there, watching him examine the page so casually, when it had been the source of so much distress for her, was more than a little unnerving.

*I think my heart is palpitating. That can't be good.*

"His poetry may suck, but he's not so bad at the whole drawing thing." He flipped the page to her again, so she could see. Her only response was to give him a tight-lipped smile.

Looking at the page once more, Wallace frowned, his features schooled into the same expression of confusion that they held when she had first walked into the room.

"What? Did he draw me with a pimple on my forehead or something?" She took it from his hands, and then tossed it on the chair beside the couch, actually feeling more at ease now that it was out of her sightline.

He waved a hand to where it now sat on the chair. "No, but I swear I've seen that picture before."

She looked at him, furrowing her brow as she shook her head. "How could you have seen it before?"

"No, not the sketch Echolls drew, the photo he based it on."

She stood up, grabbing the sketch from the chair, and looked at it again. "What makes you think he based it off a photo?"

"I just know I've seen it before. Figured that was probably why."

As she continued to stare at the sketch she momentarily forgot Wallace was there. It occurred to her that the sender could have her under surveillance, but it didn't completely work as a theory.

*If Wallace is right and this is based on a photo he's seen before, it couldn't be a surveillance photo.*

Her attention was stolen from the sketch by Wallace waving a hand in her face. "Woah Narcissus, want to focus on your best-friend for a second?"

She swallowed the lump in her throat that had formed as a direct result of all the questions that Wallace's simple observation had sparked. Looking up, she gave another tight-lipped smile and nodded. "Sorry, I'm here."

She set the sketch back on the table and sat next to Wallace on the couch, her body angled so she couldn't see her face staring back up at her.

*T here's something going on that's obvious enough for Wallace to notice within the first two-minutes of looking at that picture, but that I've missed even looking at it countless times.*

"How much ribbing of Echolls can I get away with?"
"Huh?" Pulled out of her thoughts, she was uncertain as to exactly what Wallace was referring to. As much as she loved spending time with him, this was a moment where she truly needed to be alone. But she knew she couldn't get away with dismissing him since she had invited him in the first place.

"You're a little slow today, V. Tomorrow's Friday. Remember? Logan and I are meeting up to get a beer."

The pieces clicked together, and she was finally aware of exactly what Wallace planned to do. Grabbing his hand, her tone was a little more urgent than she would have liked. "No, Wallace. You can't tell him you saw that. Promise me."

She saw the precise moment Wallace became aware that more was going on than she was telling him. She waited to see what he'd do with that realization. If he'd push her to talk about it, or if he'd let it go.

He opened his mouth to speak, but then clamped his lips together. Shrugging his shoulders, he did his best to look nonchalant, but his tone of voice was serious. "Sure, no problem. Wouldn't want to disturb his sensitive constitution. There's plenty of other things we can talk about."

She leaned into his side a little and smiled up at him. These days Wallace only gave her one free pass on any given topic, and then if it came up again, he forced the issue. It was his way of giving her space to tell him things voluntarily, without letting her get away with isolating herself.

Since being roommates, she'd concluded that was good for her. Hell, if he hadn't pushed the issue, she never would have told him all the details of the disaster that was her relationship with Skyler. And she definitely would have never started therapy.

Her guess was that if she didn't fess up by the time they left for Chicago, he'd make her tell all on the plane ride home. She was now working against several deadlines. She had a week to tell her dad, ten days to tell Wallace, and maybe that much time before Erin made good on her earlier threat to call the Chicago PD.

Logan hadn't given her a deadline, but she had promised him a couple days prior that she'd tell him of her suspicions and it was also implied with her words the night before. If everything was really going to be different this time, she had to let him be a part of helping her solve this.

Her eyes fell on the stack of sketches, still hidden away under the coffee table.

*I'll tell him tonight. I have to.*

It took Veronica twenty minutes to talk Logan out of picking her up for their date. No matter how many times she tried to explain that it made little to no sense, given that the date was at his house, he wouldn't budge. It wasn't until she mentioned that if he came to pick her up, she'd 'accidentally' let it slip in front of her dad that she might stay the night at Logan's that he conceded. The idea hadn't actually occurred to her until that moment, but there was a definite appeal.

Standing on his doorstep, she smoothed out the wrinkles in her sweater, and then reached up to knock. The speed with which he answered the door indicated that he had been standing close to the door waiting for her arrival. Taking in her outfit he grinned, and then frowned when he saw what she was holding.

She handed him the bouquet of flowers, a mix of yellow and white roses, and a bottle of wine, then side-stepped into the house.
"What are these for?"

*Chiefly my own amusement.*

With her back turned to him, she removed her jacket and tossed it on the chair, along with her messenger bag. "Well, the wine is to go with dinner. And the flowers are for you." Wheeling around to face him, she shrugged. "Because you're the girl, remember?"

His laugh was dry and he set both the flowers and wine on the console table. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he pulled her close. "You think you're so cute."

She shook her head, and looked up at him, angling her head back so their eyes could meet. "Actually, I know I am."

The glint in his eye and the slight smile on his lips told her that, while he shook his head, he wasn't really disagreeing with her. If that hadn't been evidence enough, the hitch in his breath before he kissed her would have confirmed her suspicions. He pulled away first, moving one hand from her waist, to take her hand. He grabbed the flowers with the other and she took it upon herself to pick up the bottle of wine.

Looking first at the flowers, and then at her, he frowned. "Not sure I actually have a vase."

"Please. Based on what Melinda and Heather did to your office, they've probably supplied you with more than one."

*It's not like I'm actually jealous that two women helped decorate his entire place. But I'm calling dibs on the next remodel.*

As Logan moved around the kitchen, opening and closing cupboards to find a vase, Veronica poured a glass of wine for each of them. Making herself comfortable at the island, she watched as he filled the large vase he'd found with water then unceremoniously dropped the flowers in, not bothering to remove the bouquet wrap or the rubber band.

It made her smile to see the ways in which Logan's attention to detail sometimes failed him. She wouldn't criticize, though. She needed him to stay in a good mood for as long as possible.

Taking what she assumed would be the first of several deep breaths that evening, she assured herself that this was going to go fine. Monsters were scary when hidden away in a closet, but in the morning they were often discovered to be nothing more than a trick of the light.

*Logan told me he hasn't punched someone in a good long while, but my guess is he's going to make an exception for this guy. Once we find out who he is. Which is not something I actually have a problem with.*

He took the wine glass she offered him and, as he did, wrapped an arm around her shoulder and kissed her on the temple. She thought she heard him breathing in the smell of her hair, but she couldn't be sure. Sitting there, she allowed herself the opportunity to enjoy the silence and the feeling of his arm holding her close.

As much as she wanted to, they couldn't just sit there all evening. And since Logan was unaware there was anything on the agenda besides dinner, she needed to move the night along. "What'd you make me?"

"Macaroni and cheese."
She looked up at him, her eyes crinkled, and tilted her head to the side. "You made macaroni and cheese?"

"Fancy mac and cheese." When she raised an eyebrow, he laughed, waggling his eyebrows. "It has many French cheeses in it." The way he used the promise of cheese as a seduction tool just made her laugh.

She took a drink of her wine and nodded in understanding. "Well, if I knew it had French cheeses in it."

He set his wine glass aside and angled his stool so he could face her head on. "Why roses?"

Looking down at their feet, intermingled as they dangled in the air, she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She didn't know why having to explain that she was also sentimental at times caused her to feel embarrassed. "No reason."

Tucking another errant strand of hair behind her ear, he leaned in to whisper to her. "Liar."

She exhaled a heavy breath and then looked up at him from under her lashes, not quite wanting to make complete eye contact.

This isn't that hard, Veronica. It is okay to gush a little around your boyfriend. No one would blame you.

"White roses, among other things, can signify new beginnings, and yellow roses friendship." She shrugged, still avoiding looking at him directly in the eye. "It seemed to fit."

With just enough pressure to get her to lift her head, Logan smoothed the hair back from either side of her face and brought her face up to meet his gaze. "So are you saying you just want to be friends?" It was genuine curiosity, rather than uncertainty that she heard in his voice.

She shook her head and sighed again.

In for a penny.

Ruffling his hair, she smiled. "Of course not. But I missed being your friend as much as I missed being your girlfriend. Some days even more."

His answering smile indicated that he not only knew what she meant, but had felt the same way. His hands were still on the sides of her face, making it easy for him to kiss her again.

With their lips separated only a couple of inches, he winged an eyebrow, an unmistakable glint in his eye. "You know, dinner has to bake for another forty minutes."

Not at all believing his innocent tone, she shook her head at him, and leaned back far enough to grab her wine. She smiled over the rim of the glass as she asked, "So, what are we going to do until then?"

Flashing a smile, he grabbed her hand again, pulling her off the barstool and into the living room. For the first time that night, Veronica registered that music was playing, and that the lights throughout the house were dim.

We're missing pathways of rose petals and candles, but I think I know what he's going for.

"Quite the seduction scene you've set up here."
"You've called me a girl twice today. Thought you could use the reminder that I'm all man."

Taking the wine glass from her hands, he sat it on the coffee table, and pulled her towards him.

"Did I offend your delicate sensibilities?"

"Nothing about me is delicate," he answered, kissing her just below her ear.

She ran her hands up his chest, and then took hold of his shoulders, looking up at him as she did. "What about dinner?" The breathy and low quality of her own voice sounded foreign to her ears, but she decided she could allow it. Logan was the only witness, and he was never one to kiss and tell.

Working his way down her neck, he placed one final kiss on the juncture between her neck and shoulder. "We have plenty of time."

"Plenty of time for what?" Just in case he was unaware that she was being intentionally coy, she batted her eyelashes.

The small growl that emitted from the back of his throat, coupled with his answering smirk, told her he knew exactly what she was doing. "Dancing?" He moved one hand from her waist and trailed it up her spine to rest at her neck, rubbing his thumb along her soft skin.

Logan excelled at the slow burn; light touches, and gentle kisses that eventually gave way to more. But clearly he had forgotten that she was just as adept at the technique. Her hands drifted slowly from where they rested on his shoulders and moved up into his hair. "And then?"

And then I should sit you down and ruin this wonderfully romantic mood you've set by regaling you with details of the psycho who has been in my life for the past seven years. Sound like a plan?

She saw him flick his eyes up to the ceiling and let out a breath through his. "And then, maybe we could do some horizontal dancing."

Her hands stopped the pattern they were raking along his scalp, and she pulled back to shoot him a disapproving stare. "Horizontal dancing?"

He laughed at her reaction and shrugged as he kissed her forehead. "Too far?"

Shaking her head, she moved her hands down his sides to take hold of the waistband of his jeans, walking backwards as she did until she bumped into a wall. "Nope. I just don't understand what's wrong with vertical dancing."

The rational part of her knew that this should not happen right now. That she should put a stop to this immediately. If things continued to progress in the manner in which they were, her carefully planned true confessions would be happening post-coital. As hot as Logan claimed he found her PI work to be, whispering theories about her stalker to one another could hardly count as foreplay.

What the hell. It'll do just fine as pillow talk.

Instead of putting a stop to it, she raised an eyebrow, a clear sign of challenge. Tilting her head back she saw that he was both amused and turned on by the subtle invitation her words provided.

He took a half step closer to her, wedging her between his body and the wall.

Slowly, she brought her hands up from his waistband to the top buttons of his shirt, unbuttoning the first two, and standing on her tip-toes to kiss his sternum.
Logan's hands were at her waist now, moving in small circles and finding their way just under the hem of her sweater. The sensation of his slightly chilled fingertips on her skin made her breath stutter, and he smiled at her reaction.

*I should be outraged that he just got the upper hand. And yet, my ire remains unraised.*

As she tilted her head back to rest it on the wall, Logan peppered kisses across her eyelids and down her jawline. The sweet, steady build of intimacy relaxed her enough so that the words from the song playing on his stereo broke into her consciousness.

*And I can draw the line on the first date*

*I'll let you cross it*

*Let you take every line I've got*

"This song is pretty sexy." She rolled her eyes at herself. It was a ridiculously simple observation, but as his fingers drifted across the skin of her stomach, she had convinced herself it was incredibly profound.

Rather than laugh at her, he met her stare and nodded. "Yeah."

She moved her hands back up his side to take hold of his neck, and pulled his head down so he would kiss her again.

When she pulled away, both of their chests heaving, she could still hear an inner nagging voice telling her this should not be happening. Groping each other in his living room while dinner was cooking, was not going to make saying, 'Hey honey, hate to bring this up, but I have a stalker,' any easier.

"Logan, maybe we -" she sucked in a breath when he bit down on her earlobe, and decided it could wait.

*What harm can a couple more kisses do?*

As focused as she was on alternately talking herself in and out of her current circumstances, she hadn't been aware that one of his hands had moved down to her leg, until he lifted it up and pressed her into the wall a little more firmly.

Her head hitting the wall again, she raised one more feeble protest. "What about dinner?"

He kissed his way from her ear to her lips. "I have a microwave."

*That's it. I'm helpless to argue with logic like that.*

She nodded, and then proceeded to resume unbuttoning his shirt. "Okay."

It was as she successfully unhooked the last button of his shirt, that she thought she heard the sound of someone opening Logan's front door. When she tilted her head to the side so she could listen a little more closely, Logan took it as a sign she wanted to be kissed again, and worked his way down her throat.

Pressing her hands firmly against his chest, she shook her head. "Logan, I think someone's here."

He stopped kissing her long enough to pull back to listen and, when he didn't hear anything right away, darted his head down to kiss her.
Turning her head to listen again, his lips grazed her cheek.

He jutted out his bottom lip, pouting. "Hey –"

"Hey Logan, you here man?"

Veronica groaned, Dick's booming voice effectively cutting through the mood, and she threw her head back to hit it on the wall a few times.

The two of them remained motionless staring at one another, until Logan shrugged, making it clear he didn't know what to do.

"Sexy music. Dim lighting. Is my boy getting his freak on?"

*The irony of a guy named Dick being a cock-block is not lost on me. But I think I can be forgiven for not finding that too terribly amusing right now.*

Shaking his head, Logan stepped away from Veronica so she could smooth out her sweater and hair as he buttoned up his shirt. "Your boy was trying," he called out.

"The Logan I know doesn't have to try. One intense look and breasts practically free themselves from bra cups."

Veronica crossed her arms, shooting Logan a hard glare, and then moving around him to pick up her wine glass, turning off the music as she did.

*Nothing like being reminded of what a himbo Logan used to be. Real romantic.*

"So, who's the lucky –" Dick stopped speaking as he came into the living room, taking in the sight of Logan buttoning his shirt, and Veronica pacing with a wineglass in her hand. "Ronnie?"

Dick put his arms out to the side, a panicked expression on his face, and darted his eyes around the room. "Holy shit, did I time travel? Is this five years ago?"

Veronica didn't respond at first, just blinked her eyes rapidly, and with a tight-lipped smile, nodded at him. Raising her glass, she made as if to toast him. "Dick, you're as charming as ever."

Logan punched Dick in the shoulder without warning, causing him to yelp and jump back, rubbing his bicep. "What are you doing here, Dick? I told you I had plans."

"You said you were having someone over for dinner. I thought, the more the merrier."

*Smart boy, knowing that Dick Casablancas wasn't exactly the first person I'd want to know we're dating again.*

With both of his hands pressed to Dick's chest, Logan moved Dick out of the living room and towards the front door. "You thought wrong."

As Logan worked to extricate Dick from his house, she sat on the edge of the couch, and took deep breaths to calm her still rapid heartbeat.

*Okay, that was a close one. Logan's ability to distract is unparalleled.*

From where she sat, she could hear Logan and Dick talking, but couldn't make out any of the words, until Dick raised his voice loud enough for her to hear.
"Ronnie, you think this time you can leave Logan with his balls at least partially intact?"

This is why people move away from the towns they grew up in.

It had to be a sign of personal growth that Dick's comments didn't even faze her anymore. It was all just white noise.

She heard the front door close, and seconds later Logan was back in the living room and moving towards her with a predatory look in his eye. She stood up, keeping the coffee table in between the two of them. "Dick has a key to your house?"

Logan shrugged. "He got a little offended when he found out Heather had one and he didn't. Pouted for days." He moved towards her and frowned when she countered his move. "We're not picking up where we left off?"

She smiled, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, and kept her gaze averted from Logan's. "Maybe we should eat first. Talk a little bit?"

It was foolish of her to think that Logan wouldn't hear the tremor in her voice. When she looked up at him, she saw his expression had already changed, making his worry evident. He ran a hand through his hair, smoothing out the parts that her hands had rumpled beyond their usually messy state.

He nodded, taking a step towards her and reached for her hand, interlacing their fingers. "Yeah, that sounds like a good idea." The way Logan kept shooting her glances from the corner of his eye told her that there'd be no repeat of their previous activities until she told him what was on her mind.

Nothing sets the stage for a serious conversation like sexual frustration and fancy French cheeses.

When they got back into the kitchen, Veronica poured herself more wine, chastising herself for how off-plan the night had already gone.

Despite her best intentions, she had almost been caught up in a Logan Echolls sex-haze. It occurred to her that Dick Casablancas, by unintentionally interrupting them, was actually a catalyst for the impending conversation. She didn't know whether to send him a thank you card, or add this to his already long list of grievous misdeeds.

While conversation flowed somewhat freely during dinner, the silence of things waiting to be said was palpable. It was heard in the way that Veronica laughed a little too loudly during Logan's anecdotes about work. And in how she'd lose focus from time to time, pushing around her food on her plate, and then look up to find Logan staring at her, waiting for her to respond to a question.

There were few things in this world that Veronica was afraid of, but something about letting Logan into this part of her life was more than a little terrifying.

Waving Logan's hand away at the offer of more wine, she pushed her plate aside.

Or, I could get rip roaring drunk and get sick enough to avoid this all together.

They sat in his dining room, him at the head of the table and her to his right, saving them from the awkwardness of either sitting next to each other while trying to talk, or being separated by an entire width of a dining table.

He pushed his own plate aside and then rotated his chair to face her. Veronica mirrored him, angling
her body towards him and allowing their knees to touch. She sat with her hands in her lap, her eyes focused just over Logan's shoulder at a spot on the wall. She knew his expression was probably schooled into one of intense worry, and she hoped to avoid it for just a few seconds longer.

"Thank you for dinner. It was much better than the box kind." Her eyes left the spot on the wall only to focus down on her hands.

Logan's sigh at her obvious attempt to avoid talking confirmed for her that despite her outward bravado, she was still a coward in certain aspects of her life.

*Buck up, Veronica. A relationship wherein you can't talk about the messes of life isn't going to work.*

She saw Logan shift in his seat, and his hand move from where it rested on his leg to cup her chin and bring her eyes up to meet his. "Veronica, what's going on?"

Internally, she made a bargain with herself. She'd allow herself the opportunity to deflect one more time. If Logan didn't go for it, she'd tell all, no additional self-made obstacles. It worked with Wallace, after all.

She shrugged, doing her best to appear nonchalant. "Not much. What's going on with you?" The false brightness of her voice didn't even fool herself. She wasn't sure if she was imagining it, but it also felt like her eyes had started to water.

Logan tilted his head back, his eyes rolling up to look at the ceiling, before returning to her face. "Not much. Just sitting here, listening to my girlfriend try and bullshit me."

"Girlfriend, huh?"

He ran his thumb ran along the ridge of her cheekbone, and she didn't know why exactly until she felt a tear fall on her other cheek.

*Guess I wasn't imagining the fact my eyes were welling up. Let's attribute this sudden bout of emotion to the two glasses of wine I've had.*

"Just tell me, Veronica. I can handle it."

She leaned forward to kiss him, not in an attempt to distract from the conversation, but in order to gather some modicum of strength from their physical connection. The kiss was slow and unhurried. When she pulled back, she cleared her throat, tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, and sat up a little straighter in her chair. This would not undo her.

*Treat this like any other case. Provide the facts. Don't get emotional.*

Logan noticed the change in her posture and mirrored it with his own, also sitting so his shoulders were back. He looked alert, ready to either actively listen or respond to whatever it was she was about to tell him.

She leaned forward to take Logan's wine glass, drinking down the liquid that remained. She flicked her nose with her thumb, like a boxer, and wiggled her shoulders back and forth.

Logan reached up to play with a strand of her hair, smiling at her. "Liquid courage?"

"Just a bit." Taking one last deep breath, she resolved to get through this quickly, and without shedding another tear. "There's a lot to tell. Believe it or not, it all started the first time we dated. Junior year of high school."
At the sound of his cell phone, ringing loudly, Logan frowned at her. "Calling my cell phone to get me off your trail? Very tricky, Mars."

She put her hands up so he could see that they were empty. "It wasn't me."

He reached into his pocket, silencing the call, and rolled his eyes at her. "Alright Shaggy. Please proceed."

Nodding, she threw her shoulders back. "The first time we dated, a package showed up for me on the doorstep of my dad's house —"

This time it was Logan's landline that interrupted her from continuing.

*Figures the moment I give up my avoidance tactics the universe decides to help me with them. Shitty timing, universe!*

He threw his head back and groaned. "Your machinations are thorough and quite detailed, I'll give you that."

She laughed at both the situation and Logan, whose face was scrunched up in a mixture of annoyance and awe at her ability to orchestrate both phones ringing at once.

Serving as a third obstacle was the sound of the doorbell ringing, several times in quick succession. She couldn't help the bubble of laughter that came from her throat. It became a swell of raucous laughter when his cell phone started to ring again, and she covered her mouth with her hand to try and silence it.

"I bet that's Dick at the door," he said. "Probably trolling for leftovers."

Once his cell phone stopped ringing for the second time, his land line started again.

Veronica stood up and with a shake of her head, headed towards the kitchen.

"Where are you going?"

"It's not my fault you're Mr. Popularity tonight." She turned around to face Logan, continuing to walk backwards. "You get the door, I'll get the phone."

He looked conflicted, uncertain as to whether or not he should agree to her plan, but after a few seconds, he nodded and stood. "Fine, but this isn't over."

She rolled her eyes at him, and tried to choke down her annoyance that he thought that she had somehow planned the series of distractions. Still, the fact he thought she was capable of it was a sort of compliment. "Obviously."

Logan's house phone started ringing again, the sound filling every room, and she walked a little quicker to pick up the line. Counting the fifth ring, she grabbed it, breathlessly holding it up to her ear.

"Echolls residence."

"Who am I speaking to?"

*Interesting way to start a conversation.*

"Veronica Mars. Who am I speaking to?"
"This is Rachel with Neptune Alarm, ma'am. Is everything okay there?"

It was odd for the alarm company to speak to anyone besides the home owner. Holding in a groan at what this probably meant, she slapped a hand to her forehead. Logan, the wonderful sap that he was, had listed her as an authorized contact on his alarm account.

*Moving on my ass. Deal with the alarm company first, and Logan later.*

"As far as I can tell. Is there a specific reason you're calling?"

"We got a report that two of the security cameras on the property were disabled."

*Shit.*

**SHIT.**

**SHIT!**

She gripped the receiver tightly and tried to keep her tone calm, even as she made her way to the front door. "Which cameras were disabled?"

"The one at the front gate entrance as well as the one on Mr. Echolls' front porch. Would you or Mr. Echolls be able to check the connection?"

"Of course." Holding a hand over the receiver of the phone, she reminded herself this could all be coincidence, but not truly believing it.

*Neptune doesn't do coincidences. Ever.*

"Logan, it's the alarm company. Something is wrong with your security cameras."

They met each other in the hallway, and at the sight of what Logan was holding in his hand, the breath in her chest caught and she felt all the blood rushing to her head.

*This can't be happening right now.*

Logan apparently didn't notice her reaction as he continued to stare at the manila envelope.

"Sugarmuffin, maybe you could ask me before you start to get mail delivered to my house." He ran a hand through his hair, his brow furrowed. "How did this even get delivered, though? We didn't buzz anyone in."

When she didn't respond to his teasing, Logan looked up. Her eyes were fixed on the envelope, one hand was clutching the receiver of the phone, and the other was clenched in a fist.

He took a step towards her, his eyes darting back to the envelope, obviously concluding that something about its presence had upset her. "Veronica, you okay?"

Logan's concern snapped her into action and she took off running down the hallway, dropping the cordless phone on the kitchen floor. When she got to his front door, she grabbed her messenger bag, feeling around for her taser as she did. She flung open the door, the taser gripped tightly in her hand and looked up at the porch security camera.

The wire had been cut and the two ends dangled lifelessly.

A part of her was vaguely aware that tearing down Logan's driveway while her stalker may or may not be on the premises was foolish, but with her adrenaline pumping, and the sound of her own pulse in her ears, much of her rational thought was drowned out.
She ran for the gate into Logan's property, eyes darting to each side in an attempt to remain aware of her surroundings. She should have called the sheriff's department, told Logan, and then searched the grounds with him, but instead she flew out of the house half-cocked without much of a plan.

The security camera at the gate was too far up for her to see clearly, but she was certain she saw the telltale sign of another cut wire.

As she took a step forward to get a closer look, two arms encircled her waist. Panic rose up in her chest, manifesting in a sharp gasp and then a scream. She started to flail, reaching in her bag for her taser, but the arms around her waist tightened and she heard Logan's voice in her ear.

"Veronica, it's me. It's okay." He continued to whisper the words to her, keeping his grip firm.

She turned herself around so she was facing him, and dropped her bag to the ground. Her arms were wedged between their two bodies and, at the feeling of his chin resting on her head, she let out a shuddering sob. After taking several deep breaths, she let go of the grip she had on Logan's shirt and took a firm hold of his shoulders, clutching at him almost desperately.

"You're okay." He continued to whisper soft assurances to her, his hold on her never loosening. "It's going to be okay."

"He's here." Her words were muffled against his shirt, and it didn't occur to her to explain exactly she was talking about. "He followed me."

She had initially meant that he followed her to Logan's house, but once vocalized it occurred to her that he hadn't just followed her to Logan's house. He had followed her from Chicago to Neptune.

Erin's theory was wrong. The stalker wasn't using a service to hide the city of origin from her. Everything she knew pointed to the fact that he wanted her to figure out it was him. The sketches were possibly based on photos of her. He had hidden a message in the gibberish. He always declared he loved her. It didn't matter if she had moved to LA, Chicago, or New York. He was intent on living wherever she was.

At the faint sound of paper crinkling, she pulled back from Logan, wiping the tears from her cheeks.

He held up the manila envelope, wrinkled from the way he had held onto it while hugging her. His tone was measured, and there was only a hint of fear in his eyes. He was trying to remain calm for her sake but she knew he was shaken by her strong reaction.

"Does what you were trying to tell have to do with this?"

She nodded, noticing that the envelope wasn't yet opened. Logan only knew the presence of the package had upset her, but still didn't have any idea what was happening.

Placing another kiss on the crown of her, he rotated his body so that he could guide her into the house. "Come on, let's get you inside."

*Careful, Logan. I might insist on making it my own fortress of solitude. Keep all of the bad stuff out for as long as possible.*

"Yeah." Walking towards the house, she shot a look over her shoulder at the gate.

He had been here. She couldn't downplay the seriousness of the situation any longer. Not only was he in Neptune, but he had been on Logan's property, thereby changing his pattern yet again. Whoever this person was had proven to be calculated in all his actions. But over the course of a
week, he had broken his pattern twice.

As they walked into Logan's house, him locking the door behind her and setting the alarm as he did, she felt herself calming down. While the change in pattern was scary, going off plan meant he'd likely start making mistakes. The more mistakes this guy made, the easier it'd be to catch him.

Logan's still held the envelope in his hands, and she could see the way he trying to keep his frantic energy under wraps. He was having a hard time standing in one place, and his fingers were drumming on the envelope. Taking a step towards her, he handed it to her.

She gave him a curt nod, opened the envelope, and pulled out the sketch.

In this one, her hair was just past her shoulders, styled in loose waves. He had drawn not only her face, but her shoulders as well, and put her in a halter top with a low neckline.

Flipping it over, she read the words on the back. While it was in the same hand-writing as all the others, she thought it looked just a touch messier than was typical. The words on the back again deviated from the regular pattern.

*Let us move forward with strong and active faith.* – Franklin Delano Roosevelt

*I love you.*

She held the picture up for Logan to see, and then stared at it again, frowning.

"Veronica, tell me what's happening. Please."

She looked up at his pleading tone and was almost thrown back by the force of his anxiety. She hadn't wanted this information to be sprung on him, and her hesitancy in confiding in him had caused that exact thing to happen.

*Now to figure out the best way to clue him in.*

She gave him the sketch and watched as he first inspected the drawing of her, and then flipped it over to read the words.

His jaw clenched as he looked up at her, making it evident he needed more than this. He needed her to explain.

This was one part of the evening that she hadn't planned. She hadn't actually decided how she was going to tell him. Her eyes dropped to the floor, staring at her feet. She wanted to sound confident, but when she spoke her voice sounded small. "I think I'm in trouble." Lifting her head, she met his gaze, and offered him a tremulous smile. "I don't know who sent me that. But it's been going on for a while."

"You've received things like this before? Someone's been stalking you?"

Something about him actually verbalizing the world 'stalking', calling it what it was, overwhelmed her. All she could manage was a head nod.

He sighed, and she caught the tail end of his breathy, "shit" before he folded her back up into a hug. She allowed herself to relax into his hold, the feeling of his hand running up and down her back calming her.

"The alarm company called the sheriff's department. They'll be here soon."
Pressed against his chest, she shook her head emphatically. "My dad doesn't know yet. I don't want him to find out like this."

He sighed again, and she wondered if he was going to fight her on this. Rather than push her away or chastise her, she felt him shift his hands so he could run one through her hair. He kissed her forehead, and mumbled against her skin. "We'll just tell them that someone tried to break in and have them search the grounds."

She gripped his shirt, and nodded. "Okay."

Running a hand down her arm and squeezing her hand, he looked down at her, his forehead knit with concern. "You have to tell him. You know that, right?"

Pulling away, she nodded again, and took the sketch from him. "I do. And you, too. I know."

Reading the words for the second time, she frowned.

This time the not so subtle dig at Logan was apparent, both in the way an inspirational quote had been incorporated, and in the advice about 'moving forward'. Something about seeing her with Logan again had aggravated whoever sent the package enough to make several very risky choices.

She handed Logan the sketch to look at again and crossed her arms over her chest. She was more than a little furious that this guy thought he could play with her life like this. That he could offer an opinion on Logan that she'd actually heed.

Clenching her jaw, she began pacing the length of Logan's foyer. The longer she stood there in the presence of this man, who she knew would do anything to protect her, the more she felt her fear giving way to anger. "I'm going to nail this son-of-a bitch to the wall."

Logan's head snapping up was what told her she had spoken the words out loud, and hearing them had an almost immediate effect on him. All concern dissipated from his face and his lip curled up into a smirk. He ran a reassuring hand up and down her arm and, unless she was much mistaken, she thought he looked proud of her.

Taking hold of her hand, he pulled her towards him. He folded her up into his arms once more and rested his chin on her head. "That's my girl."

Chapter End Notes

We're getting deeper and deeper into Veronica's mystery, and I'm really doing my absolute best to keep all the details straight. It's given me a lot more sympathy for Rob Thomas and the whole VMars writing team because - sheesh - it's hard! So, if you notice an inconsistency, please PM and I'll try to fix it. My beta is helping me keep it straight (three cheers for Scandalpants!), and I have a running document of details and dates mapped out, but sometimes I miss stuff.
Chapter Notes

Not my longest chapter, by any means. This chapter is a smidgeon expositional but it had to happen. For the good of the story! (I call it my 'Jane Austen Chapter.' Because while not much happens, I hope you still eagerly turn the page to see what not happens next.) Also, we're definitely more than halfway. It looks like this fic will end up being about 24 chapters.

There was little the sheriff's department could immediately conclude from the events of the evening. They confirmed that wires to two security cameras had been cut, an observation so obvious that it caused Veronica to roll her eyes. Pressing a calming hand to her lower back, Logan managed to cut her off before she could verbally attack the deputy.

Leaning close to whisper in her ear, he increased the pressure of his hand. "Play nice, Bobcat. These are your dad's guys." It triggered something deep inside Logan when she nodded and relaxed the slightest bit. Keith's words from a couple of nights prior rang in his ears, and he wondered if this was a piece of evidence that he did in fact make her better for other people.

_I know Mr. Mars said it wasn't the secret, but I'll take it as a positive sign all the same._

As the deputy watched the CCTV feed from the evening, Logan and Veronica stood close by, watching over his shoulder. All that was visible on the monitor was a person, presumably a man based on his stature, wearing all black clothing and a pair of black gloves. He was first seen at the front entrance gate, his face hidden by a scarf. Not too surprising, given the pains he had taken to hide his face, was his lack of attempt to discretely cut the wire.

"Your neighborhood watch program sucks, Logan." Veronica watched the video, her arms across her chest and a frown on her lips. "Seriously, how did no one notice this guy?"

The CCTV feed switched to the camera aimed at Logan's porch, but the angle meant that they didn't see the figure dressed in black until he was almost on Logan's doorstep. Nor could Logan see the manila envelope in his hand, meaning it must have been hidden away. The feed cut out, the result of another tampered wire, before Logan could scrutinize the footage further.

Scoffing, in order to sound like he was more put out by the tampered cameras than anything, Logan gestured to the screen. "What did this guy do? Scale my gate?"

"That or he knew the code," the deputy suggested.

Logan frowned at him, but before he could assert that wasn't a possibility, the deputy interrupted his thought process. "He's probably been watching the house for a while. Took note of the code when you entered it yourself. There's big money is this neighborhood, Mr. Echolls. It'd be worth the risk."

Veronica looked up at Logan, her head cocked, and the way he could actually see her trying to piece this all together was as endearing as it was impressive. "What was your code? Anyone's birthday? A significant event, maybe?"
He shook his head. "No, you always told me it should be a random sequence. It didn't mean anything."

She tried to hide the small smile that graced her face but, he saw it clearly. He wondered what it was exactly that caused that small smile to appear and thought he saw something akin to pride as she nodded at his answer.

*Her being proud of you is a good thing. You guys aren't the same kind of fuck ups you were five years ago.*

The deputy stood up, and made to leave the room. "We'll be looking over the footage at the station and waiting for the report from the alarm company. I'll let you know if we find anything else. In the meantime, you'll probably want to change your entrance code and alarm codes."

Logan nodded and followed the deputy out of the room. "I called the alarm company and they changed both already."

The moment the sheriff's car pulled out of Logan's driveway, the gate closing behind him, he locked the front door and set his alarm again, utilizing the new code. When he turned around, Veronica wasn't anywhere to be seen and he had to squelch the irrational surge of panic that rose in his chest.

*She's literally in the house. You haven't seen her for all of ten seconds. Get it together.*

Taking a deep breath, he made his way to the living room and found her sitting cross legged on his couch. She had cleared off the few books and coasters from his coffee table and spread out papers all across the surface. As he stepped closer he saw that there were at least two dozen sketches of Veronica staring back up at him.

"Shit, Veronica. What the hell is going on?" He sat down on the couch heavily, running a hand through his hair. Leaning forward to pick up one of the sketches, he stopped himself, and then looked over at her. "Is it okay if I touch this?"

She nodded and smiled but, it didn't reach her eyes, and that fact alone was enough for him to realize how serious this was. "Yeah, it's okay."

"This started junior year of high school?"

She nodded again, averting her eyes as she did so. While her posture was strong, sitting tall with shoulders back, she kept her eyes downturned.

"One day that spring, a package showed up on my dad's doorstep. It contained a PO Box key, but nothing else." Her attention shifted to the sketches on the table, and she sorted through, clearly looking for a specific one. "When I checked the PO Box, I found another envelope with this sketch in it."

The sketch she handed to him was one of her, clearly from junior year based on the length of her hair. He also recognized the print of one of the blazers she wore a lot in high school. While he knew it wasn't the appropriate time, seeing this image of her as she was when he first fell in love with her made him want to comment on how beautiful she was.

*Last thing she probably wants is me commenting on how beautiful she looks in something that is her personal equivalent of a boiled rabbit.*

"I'm assuming there wasn't a return address on any of them?"
She shook her head and then sorted through the stack again, picking up two additional sketches. "I went back to the PO Box every day. There wasn't anything for a month and then I got this one." She handed him another sketch, this one with her hair pulled back into a ponytail. "And then a month after that, I got this one." The third sketch she handed him had her hair down again, with her bangs pinned back from her face.

He looked up and gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile. Flipping over the photos, he noticed the words, moving his lips as he read them silently to himself. "This is gibberish."

*Focus on the details. Isn't that always what Veronica used to say about investigations?*

She sighed, and he wondered how much of a burden this had been for her over the years. He suspected, and knew he was likely right, that it was a burden she had been shouldering herself, and it had to be exhausting.

"That's what I thought at first. I'm sure that's what he wants me to think."

He knew there was probably more to that line of thought, something that had made her certain of that detail, but he decided to wait to question her on it until she finished her explanation.

"I didn't get one the following month, and then I got five additional ones sent to me. One a month, on the same day every month." She gathered the sketches she was referring to and handed the small stack to him.

He flipped through them silently and tried to make sense of what she was telling him. The facts she provided were spoken deliberately, leading him to believe that they were significant; although he was having a hard time discerning exactly what made them so.

She explained that there was another four month gap, and then handed him a stack of six additional sketches. Her hair was longer in some of these, like she wore it their freshman year of college, but occasionally one of her with shorter hair was thrown in.

"I don't get it. You're talking like I should understand what this means."

She sighed and shrugged her shoulders, pointing to the first stack of three sketches he had looked at. "I got those when you and I dated the first time." Pointing to the next stack, she went for the simplest explanation. "Duncan." When she pointed to the stack he held in his hands, he finished the sentence for her.

"Me again."

*It shouldn't make me happy that my two stacks combined are greater than Duncan's but, it does. It absolutely does.*

She nodded, and this time it was her watching him as he examined the sketches again, keeping the new information in mind.

He shook his head, and tried to still his knee which was now bouncing in an erratic rhythm. "So next is Piz?"

She sorted through the remaining sketches and handed him a stack of four. Clearing her throat, she kept her eyes on the table as she continued to sort and grab from the remaining images. "Then I moved to LA. I went out on the occasional date, but figured that whoever sent me the packages was still in Neptune and didn't have time to keep track of me." With that statement she threw him another pointed glance, making it clear that there was a hidden meaning behind her words.
Handing him another stack of five, she sighed before continuing. "But then I met Jared."

He didn't know what to do with the amount of information she had communicated thus far. Obviously, whoever had started to send her these packages had been deeply invested in her romantic life, enough to track her down in LA. "So you got another PO Box key sent to you?"

She nodded, pulling her legs up under her so she could sit cross-legged. "Once he and I dated for a few weeks, it showed up on my doorstep, just like the one here in Neptune did."

He sat the pictures down and rotated his body, sliding a few inches closer to her. Taking hold of her hands he ducked his head down to meet her eyes. "Are you okay?"

Because I am not okay and I've only known about this for two hours. The thought of this guy watching her – following her. Definitely not okay.

"I just want this to be over." She turned to face him and pitched forward so her head rested against his chest.

The remaining images on the table that had yet to be accounted for, as well as the gaps in his grasp of the situation, told him that there was more that needed to be said. However, he also understood her unspoken need to take a moment before she finished. The tips of her hair tickling his knuckles as she hovered over their clasped hands, he waited for her to look back up at him and continue, trusting that she would.

She let out a shuddering breath and then pulled back, reaching over his lap to grab six more sketches. "These were from when I dated Skyler, last year."

"I still can't believe you dated a guy named Skyler." Flipping over one of the sketches, just to see if the words on the back would follow the same pattern, his eye caught the second picture in his hand. The memory of where he had seen it was fuzzy, and the harder he tried the place it, the fuzzier it got. But he knew he'd seen it before.

Trying to maintain some semblance of calm as his mind was arrested by that single image, he took a deep breath. "But, I guess it shouldn't come as a surprise. You did date a guy named Piz."

I can do this. Wait for her to draw this out at her own pace, put her at ease by alternating between a joke and the truth. It might actually shred my nerves but, I can do it.

Setting all the drawings aside, except for the one he recognized, he looked up only to find that she had been watching him. And from the shrewd look on her face, she had noticed his reaction to the image he was still holding. He held it up for her to see. "I've seen this before."

She blinked at him a few times and then, shaking her head as she did, took it from his grasp. "Wallace said the same thing. Where did you see it?"

He tried to not let that little revelation sting. They were roommates after all. Hadn't gone more than three months without seeing each other in close to nine years. Of course he would know. "I don't know. I can't place it. What else did he say?"

"Nothing really. I haven't told him yet. He found it at my dad's and thought you had given it to me." She held the photo up closer to her face, her eyes flicking over almost every stroke of the black pencil. "What am I missing here?" Tossing it on the coffee table, she leaned into the back of the couch with a groan, covering her face with her hands.
"Let me see if I'm getting this. Starting when you were seventeen, every time you were in a relatively serious relationship some asshole would send a picture he drew of you, always to PO Boxes?"

Not removing her hands from her face, she nodded.

"Except for tonight, when he dropped it off on my porch?"

She nodded again.

"So whoever is sending you these knows we're back together?"

*Never going to get sick of saying that.*

She let out a muffled laugh. "It looks that way." Dropping her hands from her face, she turned her head to look at him. "There's one more thing." Sitting back up, she closed her eyes, and let out a shuddering breath before opening them again. "In the past couple days he's changed his pattern. Several times."

Picking up a sketch that wasn't grouped with any of the stacks of sketches, she turned it over so he could read the words. A simple holiday greeting had never sounded so menacing.

"I checked the Neptune PO Box the Monday after I got into town, it was that day I met you at the coffee shop, and this was waiting for me. He somehow knew I was coming home for break and sent it here. What he wrote makes sense. Which doesn't make sense. You said it yourself – he usually writes gibberish."

Logan swallowed, wondering if this conversation was going to be what killed him. "If you got a sketch, that means you were dating someone when you got here, doesn't it?"

He had the strangest urge to simultaneously hug and scream at her. Hug her because he knew she needed the comfort, even if she never asked for it, and scream at her for putting him in this position.

Her wide eyed look and slightly open mouth seemed to confirm his assertion. Right now it was just a sting, knowing she maybe had a guy waiting for her in the wings, but he suspected after she left that night it'd grow into a full blown, 'heart needs amputating' ache.

"When did you break it off?" He looked down at his hands, kneading them together as he spoke, trying to channel the tension in his shoulders out through his fingertips. "Before you came to my house for the pool party? After?"

"Logan." His name from her lips was at once comforting and a sharp reprimand, and both aspects caused him to look up at her. "Don't be an idiot. I'd never do that, and I'd especially never do that to you."

He needed to put the fact that her calling him an idiot made him smile on the list of things to talk to Thomas about at their next session.

*Of course she knows what I was thinking. Because she knows my hangups. She knows my history. Damn it, she knows me.*

"I wasn't dating anyone when I came here. Haven't dated anyone seriously since last year. That's part of what doesn't make sense about the timing. And then there's this -."

Reaching under his coffee table, she picked up a stack of manila envelopes to hand him. "The postmark always comes from the city I'm living in. My supervisor from the summer I interned at the
FBI knows most of what's going on, and she thought that maybe he does that to feel close to me. To feel like we're connected in some way. Except the package I picked up on Monday was stamped Chicago but received in Neptune."

"And now he's delivered one personally. Which means he's following you from place to place."

Smiling for a second, presumably at his accurate deduction, she nodded, her eyes falling from his face again to stare at her hands. "I came back here for the holidays because I thought that since this all started in Neptune, it'd be the easiest place to get answers."

Skipping over the fact I wasn't the reason she came back. My ego is strong enough to handle that blow.

He pulled her closer to his body, wrapping his arms around her waist, and kissed her temple. Once, twice, a third time, and then allowed his lips to linger. He knew kissing her wouldn't do anything to keep the stalker at bay but it was all he could think to do at the moment.

"I don't know what to do, Logan. There's no useable fingerprints on any of the packages he sends, the post office insists that I'm the one renting the boxes and has my ID on file, none of these facts match known stalkers in the FBI database. All I know is he's a psycho who follows me around, and very likely lived in Neptune at one point."

"A psycho who lived in Neptune? That doesn't narrow down the list of suspects all that much."

Wrapping her arms around his shoulders, she rested her cheek on his chest. "I shouldn't have come back here. I would have been safer in Chicago."

"God, all I want is for her to be safe, but if she had stayed in Chicago, I wouldn't be sitting here with her right now."

He ran a reassuring hand up and down her back, trying to figure out how to ask his next question so it didn't sound accusatory. "Veronica, this is some scary shit. Why didn't you start doing something about this years ago?"

She groaned, hiding her face in his shirt, clutching the fabric with both of her hands. "You just have to go and ask logical questions."

"This is more than a little embarrassing but, I thought you sent them." The sound of her speaking was muffled, but he managed to make out the words. Releasing his shirt, she looked up at him from under her eyelashes and took another deep breath.

He held in a gasp at that information. While he had a few theories as to why she had chosen to delay investigating, this hadn't even entered his mind as one of them. "Why me?"

He winced hearing how sharp the question was and grabbed her hand to play with her fingers before intertwining their fingers.

What's going on here, Veronica? It doesn't sound like you're accusing me. But it kind of sounds like you're accusing me.

"It seemed like a big gesture you'd make."

"But you got them with every person you dated, not just me."

She nodded, a half smile tugging at her lips. "I thought it was your way of saying you still cared
about me. No matter how fucked up things got between us."

He kept his grip on her hand but his eyes flicked to the stacks of drawings. Almost nothing she had shared with him that evening was making sense. This last revelation even less than the rest of the details she had thus far shared. "If you thought they were from me, why'd you keep them? Especially when you were dating other guys?"

"Maybe I liked thinking you cared."

Looking at her once more, he rested his other hand on her shoulder then slowly trailed his fingers up and down her arm, leaning forward to place a light kiss on her lips. "When did you know it wasn't me?"

Following his example, trying to be as close as possible as they continued to talk, she ran her free hand through his hair and then rested it at the nape of his neck. "Remember when you visited me for spring break how we went to that art class at the gallery and you got a little tipsy?"

He nodded, and then his eyes went wide as he understood what she was implying. "That was a test, wasn't it? You didn't need to test me. I mean have you ever seen me draw?"

"Well, there was a period of time in your younger years when I never saw you leave a party sober. Doesn't mean I didn't think you were capable of it."

Even when she's throwing barbs at me I can't get enough of her. I'm the poster child for being too far gone.

He twisted his hand which rested on her shoulder to take hold of a strand of her hair and give it a quick tug. "You think you're so funny."

"No. I know that I'm hilarious."

Scooting an inch closer to her on the couch, he took a few deep breaths to give himself some time to think. As he did, he catalogued several details of her features that had grown unclear in his memory during their time apart.

He'd missed the way she furrowed her brow when he just stared at her without speaking. He ran a finger over her cheek and down her chin, noting the small, almost imperceptible cleft in her chin. When she smiled at him he noticed the way the line under her right cheekbone was more pronounced than under her left. It almost felt sacred getting to look at her like this.

"I want you to stay here tonight."

"Logan." The words came out accompanied by a discontented groan as she pitched forward slightly so her head rested on his chest.

And there goes the moment. Probably for the best though. She never exactly thrived under a heavy cloak of veneration.

He wound his fingers into her hair and curled a single strand around his index finger until he reached her scalp, then released the strand only to do it again. "My name means something different every time you say it."

A puff of air as she laughed hit his chest and she pulled back to smile up at him. "What did it mean this time?"
"Well, you're annoyed but there was also a hint of appreciation that I'm worried about you."

Mashing her lips together, she bobbed her head to each side, letting him know that while she wouldn't concede the point verbally, he had guessed correctly.

"The last time I had to investigate something for myself, it ended badly."
While outwardly she smiled at the memory her expression was more melancholy than joyful. "My dad lost the election. You and I barely talked. I left Neptune. You ended up with half a dozen cracked ribs and a broken arm."

*I wouldn't change anything about going after that guy. Despite the fact there was blood in my piss for five days after he attacked me.*

"Don't forget the almost fifty stitches." Pushing the hair back from her face, he gave her a quick peck on the lips. "I wondered if you were ever going to bring that up again."

"We don't need to talk about it. I figured that Gorya made good on his promise to come after you."

He tilted her head back, placing a hand on each side of her face. "That was four years ago. He got his pound of flesh. Why are you bringing this up now?"

"I just thought we were done living our lives with targets on our backs." Pulling away from him, she stood up. His hands dropped to the couch at the suddenness of her movement.

"Look, you have a really good life. You've been doing just fine without me. And all of this -" she trailed off, waving a hand at the coffee table strewn with sketches, "isn't normal. I'm not going to ask you to be a part of it."

She began to gather up the papers from the coffee table. Logan knew she was purposefully avoiding making eye contact with him, but he saw her attempt to discretely wipe a tear from her eye with the shoulder of her long sleeved shirt.

"Babe." When she didn't stop moving, he sharpened the tone of his voice. "Ronica, where are you going?"

*I call a forty-eight hour freeze on either one of us acting like a damned martyr.*

"My dad's. I need to tell him everything. What happened tonight changes things."

Standing up just as quickly as she had, he moved to the other side of the coffee table and placed a hand over a stack she bent to pick up. The action simultaneously prevented her from putting the pages away and forced her to look at him. "Ask me."

"Ask you what?"

Taking the envelopes from her hand, he tossed them so they landed on a nearby chair. "Ask me to be a part of it."

"Logan."

"That one was all exasperation. We're a team now, Veronica. Ask me."

She allowed the remaining papers she held to slip from her fingers and fall in a slow cascade, back onto the table. Seeing her resolve to leave falter, Logan took hold of her hand and held it as he came around to join her on her side of the table. "Logan."

"Yes, muffin?"
She wrinkled her nose at him and shook her head, either dismissing his saccharine pet name, or steeling herself to ask for help. Maybe it was both. "Will you help me track down my psycho stalker?"

Placing a kiss on her knuckles, he tilted his head to the side, a purposeful imitation of the look that had gotten him to cave a time or two. "Why honey, I thought you'd never ask."

While eating their reheated pasta, Veronica provided Logan with the remaining information she had, specifically that which concerned the message hidden within the perceived written gibberish.

"You have a magnifying glass? I want to figure out the next part."

Wiping his mouth with a napkin, he pushed back from the dining room table, tossing the napkin onto his plate as he did. "Nope, but I have a pair of reading glasses you can use."

When her immediate response to his offer was a smirk, he stopped his exit from the room and raised an eyebrow at her. "What?"

Don't mind me. Just imagining how damn sexy you're going to look in reading glasses.

"Nothing. I just didn't know you wore glasses." The underlying sentiment that they had spent so much time apart that they no longer knew everything about the other person was obvious. At least she hoped it was obvious, because she didn't relish the thought of having to verbalize those feelings any further.

"Reading glasses." He backed up towards the door, his eyes fixed on her as he moved. "We know the most important stuff. The rest is just details."

She was a little disappointed that he left the dining room before he could see her complete look of surprise at his ability to read her so well. It was nice not having to say everything one was thinking but still be understood.

Oddly enough, I feel proud of him. Proud that he's still the kind of man who has the capacity to be so devoted. Probably something I should tell him.

Reaching over to take hold of the sketch she had received that evening, she ran her fingers over the neckline of the dress the picture depicted her wearing. As she did, Wallace's suggestion that the sketches could be based on photographs resounded in her ears.

"I remember this dress." She mumbled the words unconsciously, but as Logan came back into the room, he caught the tail end of them.

"What was that?"

Not taking her eyes off the sketch, she answered him. "I remember this dress." She held it up above her head, knowing that he was behind her, and invited him to take it from her.

"How?"

"I wore it to high school graduation."

"Hmm. Now that you mention it I recognize that deep, plunging neckline."

Leaning over her shoulder he placed the sketch in front of her, and handed her his reading glasses, kissing her cheek as he did. The simplicity of the intimate gesture did more to calm the swirl of her
thoughts than she thought possible.

Logan’s made me feel a lot of things in the past. Calm was never one of them. I wonder if I do that for him?

She picked up the reading glasses, smiling at the thin black frames, knowing she was right that they’d look damn sexy, and held them above the FDR quote written on the back of the sketch.

*Let us move forward with strong and active faith.* – Franklin Delano Roosevelt

*I love you.*

Moving the glasses over the words she searched for the same small dot she had found on all the others, and then stopped when she saw it placed over the ‘i’ in the word ‘with’. Setting the glasses down again, she scanned the room for her messenger bag.

"What are you looking for?"

At Logan’s question, she looked up at him and smiled, loving the way he could look both concerned for her and curious as to what she was discovering. "My bag. I don't remember where I put it."

"You mean after you tore out of my house like a maniac? I'll grab it from the entryway."

She didn't know if she actually said the words, 'thank you' but they were mumbled in her brain. Picking up the sketch and glasses, she honed in on the quote, noticing again how the handwriting was just a hint more disordered than normal. As she moved the glasses across the words, she noticed two additional marks. One over the 'l' in 'Franklin' and the other over the 'l' in the word 'Delano.'

Fuck. At this point this guy is changing up his pattern so much I would be more surprised by him acting consistently than him deviating.

It was the sound of Logan dropping the messenger bag that brought her back to the moment. Without looking at him this time, she dug through her bag to grab her notebook and the page she knew was folded up and pressed inside.

Flattening out the paper, she heard Logan pull the chair out next to her and sit down. She looked up at him for a brief second before searching her bag for a pen.

"That the message hidden within?"

"Yeah. Usually it's just one letter marked from each sketch, but looks like my very own Annie is trying to expedite the process." It didn't occur to her deflect, or give him a casual brush off coupled with a promise to explain later. Logan had said they were a team.

*Take that defense mechanisms.*

"Your very own, who? Now your stalker's a girl?"

Jotting down a few notes, she slid the paper over to him with the three additional letters added to the phrase. "*Sleepless in Seattle* reference. Everyone thinks it's sweet but really, Meg Ryan is a little creepy."

"You are such a romantic." Looking down at the note, his expression fell almost instantly.

She knew exactly how he felt. The sickening mixture of distress and confusion. Had felt it the moment she realized it was a stranger stalking her, and several other times since then. Reaching up,
she smoothed out the wrinkle in between his brows with her thumb.

"So, am I to assume this guy probably thinks he's being sweet, too? 'When you're ready for me to love you, I will -" Handing her back the note, the frown on his face deepened. "Is that the end, or do you think there's more?"

She noticed everything about his physicality, trying to appraise him the way he often did her. His shoulders were tense, his back ramrod straight, and he kept clenching and unclenching a single fist. It was a gesture that she had always thought meant he was itching for a fight. Now she understood it was what he did when he was feeling out of control. Or when he was scared. This whole situation was probably making him feel both of those things.

_He said he wanted this, though. I have to trust he can handle it. Everything I know about who he is now tells me he can._

She shrugged as she took the note from Logan and tucked it back into her bag. "Hard to say. He's gotten more dogged for some reason. Something must have set him off." Rotating slightly in her chair to look Logan in the eye, she lifted a hand to run her fingers through his hair, scratching his scalp with her fingernails as she did.

"Maybe it's me?" Logan's voice became softer as he spoke, and he looked down at his shoes, toeing a piece of macaroni that had fallen off one of their plates. "I mean, I did perfect the art of putting people on edge long ago."

_He is not going to get away with finding a way to make this whole situation his fault._

"I'm sure he doesn't love the fact we're back together, but Logan, he had a package here waiting for me. He decided to break his pattern before you and I even saw each other again. Which means that whatever happened to make him deviate happened before I even left Chicago. Think about it. Why else would he risk coming to your house. And why after dragging this out for so long is he now all of a sudden getting impatient?"

She cupped his jaw and turned his face so she could place a soft kiss on his cheek. "This isn't happening because of you."

Once he nodded, his eyes clearing of any shadows of guilt, she leaned into him. Resting her head on his chest, she waited to feel the weight of his arms wrapped around his waist. When several seconds passed and the press of his forearms was still not felt against her lower back, she looked up at him.

One of his arms hung loose at his side and the other was propped against the dining room table. While he wasn't holding any of the sketches, all of his attention seemed to be focused on the single sketch recognized by both him and Wallace.

"What is it?"

"Huh?" Logan looked down at her, a tinge of surprise in his eye as if he had forgotten that she was there and sitting only inches away from him. "I know I've seen that before. I recognize that face you're making."

_Of course he does. I look annoyed, but not angry. That was my default face with him most days._

"When Wallace thought you drew it, he said it looked like you based it off a photograph."

Frowning down at the picture once again, he shook his head, seemingly to both clear himself of whatever thoughts he was thinking and to remind himself of Veronica's presence. "You think I could
Pulling away from him, her eyes flicked from the sketches to his face and back again. "I don't know, Logan."

"You said you're at a standstill, right? Maybe I can help. There's something about these that is familiar. I can figure it out."

_This is the moment, Veronica. He's not taking over the investigation. He's not telling you to stay out of it. He just wants to help._

"Bring them by my dad's tomorrow after you're done hanging out with Wallace? We can put our heads together, maybe."

She saw his face change. The light in his eyes didn't dim. It morphed. It was no longer tinged with fear or worry, but with appreciation. Maybe a little awe. It floored her how delighted he was to help her. How her putting that little bit of trust in him caused his confidence to so obviously grow.

He brushed the hair back from either side of her face and, while it was possibly the slowest build up to a simple forehead kiss that she'd ever experienced, it almost felt more intimate than the wall groping from earlier. As if he was communicating his gratitude and his love for her with just one chaste kiss.

It's not that she wanted to go, because she didn't, but given everything that had happened she wasn't eager to continue their date night as if it hadn't been uninterrupted. It felt dishonest, somehow, to pretend everything was fine.

_He knows. Knows I'm planning to tell my dad. That's enough for one night._

Looking up at him from where she sat, she bit her lip, not in a coy attempt at seduction but to steel herself to go home. She was a big girl. Monsters weren't real. She could drive to her dad's house without incident.

"I need to go. It's getting late."

There was a flash of panic in his eyes, and she hoped it wasn't because he was afraid of her leaving period but rather a reaction to the events of the evening. His hands left her face and he clasped her hands, holding them tight.

"Stay with me tonight. I know you're going to tell me you're fine but, please Veronica, just stay here."

It wouldn't take much effort on her part to make a quick escape or convince Logan that she was fine. The fact that her stalker has never made physical contact with her was a point she could argue. Also that he wouldn't hurt her because, as warped as it seemed, he thought he loved her. However, despite telling herself all that, she didn't actually want to be alone for the fifteen minute drive to her dad's house.

_More than that, I want to be with Logan._

She nodded, but Logan didn't relax until she verbalized her agreement. "Okay. I'll text my dad. But no funny business."

He placed a kiss on her knuckles and then raised an eyebrow. "What is this 'funny business' that you speak of?"
Smiling at him, she shrugged, kissing his knuckles in counterpoint. "You know you have a tendency to tell knock knock jokes in bed. It's really not as charming as you think it is."

A few months prior, during the summer, Heather had been put on snack duty for a camping trip with her and her girlfriends. After much begging and pleading, she persuaded Logan to take her to Costco to shop in bulk. Once there, she'd convinced Logan of the sound financial decision he'd be making if he were to purchase some items himself. Toilet paper was the primary commodity she insisted he purchase, but she also urged him to buy an eight pack of toothbrushes.

A decision he was now grateful for as it made it possible to provide Veronica with one of her own. They were almost the picture of domesticity as she helped herself to one of his sweatshirts and a pair of his sweatpants, which she cinched tightly and then rolled over several times.

He had told her that there'd be no funny business and he was going to be a perfect gentleman. He'd never rushed her into anything before, and he was not going to start now. And yet –

"Interesting. You said no funny business, and yet you're already getting into my pants."

She glared at him from over her shoulder but then her face lit up and her eyes came alive with a prominent mischievous glint.

_Oh, hell._

He watched her take her bra off from under her sweatshirt and then fold it on top of her jeans. When she lifted up the back of the sweatshirt to scratch at her bare skin, he conceded that there wasn't anything funny about the current situation. It was possibly the most unfunny of any situation he had recent memory of.

Okay, I may have deserved that.

Veronica was being stalked. The stalker had shown up to his house. And all he could think about was the fact that she wasn't wearing a bra. The universe did him a small kindness when she changed in the bathroom rather than in his bedroom. He found the hint of skin he caught whenever she changed her clothes almost more alluring than her completely nude. Almost.

Despite the events of the day, Veronica appeared at ease in that moment. He didn't allow himself to think that he was the sole cause for that. Part of it had to be the pasta in her stomach and the simple fact she was emotionally wrung out.

_I might be a little part of it too, though. Right? I mean, it doesn't feel farfetched to think that._

"Is there a reason why you're just watching me get ready for bed instead of doing the same?"

Logan was snapped out of his distracted haze and looked over to the bed to find that Veronica was already under the covers and leaning over the side to sort through the books he kept stacked under his nightstand.

"I find it interesting we've skipped right past fervent reunion sex and have headed straight to sitting in bed and reading before we go to sleep."

She laughed, the sound enough to send a chill up his spine, as he walked across the room to get his own pair of sweatpants.

"Maybe we're just doing our relationship in reverse. Tonight we fall asleep while reading and in fifty
years we'll get kicked out of the fanciest restaurant in Neptune for having sex in the bathroom."

His back turned to Veronica, he shucked off his jeans and pulled on his sweatpants. Taking off his sweater, he tossed it in the direction of his jeans, and then flopped backwards onto the bed. "I'm not certain what to respond to first. That you see us together in fifty years or that, if I follow your train of thought, you want to have sex in the bathroom of Purple now."

*Yes to all of it. It's the best offer I've gotten all year.*

She swung the paperback she held in her hands to hit him in the chest, but he blocked it before she could make full contact and pulled her into his chest.

"Goodnight grope?" she asked. Her voice lilting up in what he read as hope. Her strength floored him. How could she lay there, joking about him copping a feel, when only a few hours before she had been crying?

He groaned and pulled back from her, taking the book and tossing it behind him, onto the floor. "We probably shouldn't start."

"Goodnight kiss?" Veronica licked her lips, in what Logan understood was probably an unconscious action.

*She doesn't even have to try to own me. And even if she knew how much she did, she'd never dream of making that power play.*

"If you insist." He leaned over her, but pulled back right before his lips touched hers. The action earned him a groan and a cuff over his head.

Wrapping her arms around his shoulders, Veronica pulled him back down to kiss her, sliding her lips over his softly. Just a touch of sweetness before he parted her lips with his tongue and rolled over onto his back so she was splayed across his chest. The action, decidedly smooth in his head, was less so in practice but Veronica didn't seem to mind.

She broke off the kiss with a small sigh, pecked him once more on the lips, and then lay down on his chest, propping her head up with her hands. "You're pretty."

Laughing, he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, and once again touched her lips lightly with his. "Likewise."

As he played with her hair, he'd catch her looking at him, only to have her turn her eyes away as soon as they made eye contact. After this happened several times, he disentangled his hands from her hair and tilted her chin up so she had to look at him.

*Usually I'm able to ignore all her odd shifts in mood but I'll bite tonight.*

"What, Veronica?"

She tried to burrow her head into his chest, breaking the stare he held, but his hand on her chin prevented her from doing so.

After another couple seconds of him holding her there, she smiled at him. "Thank you, for everything. This night could have been a lot worse."

"I think that was a compliment."
"It was." Sliding off of his chest, she lay on her side and Logan shifted to face her. "I'm just a little surprised that this doesn't feel weird. Letting you help me."

"We're a team now. And I haven't actually helped you yet." He took hold of her hand and kissed her palm, then reached behind him to turn of the bedside lamp. Still lying on top of the blankets, he pulled the covers back to slide under the sheets as Veronica rolled onto her other side, allowing Logan to curl his body around hers.

All this time, I thought I'd been deluding myself. But no, just sleeping really can feel this good.

Aside from a few kisses placed on her shoulder, and Veronica playing with the fingers of the arm he draped over her, there was no attempt from either to initiate further contact. Lying there in the dark, a dim glow from the moon filtering through the window, a terrible joke he had once heard popped into his mind. He felt compelled to share it with Veronica, if only because after the tension of the evening he needed a release. In the absence of sex, laughter would do.

Just as Veronica's breathing started to even out, Logan pulled her tightly against his chest and lifted his head up to whisper in her ear.

"Veronica, knock knock."

There was a pause before Veronica's sleepy voice, a combination of irritated and amused, responded. "Who's there?"

"Ivana."

She rolled to her other side so she could once again face him. "Ivana who?"

He paused, both for dramatic effect and also to try and convince himself that this was a stupid idea. She was not going to find him funny. She seemed to think she was the humorous one in the relationship. But he was on more than a little bit of emotional overload.

She's stayed with me through worse. What's one crass knock knock joke in the grand scheme of things?

"Ivana hump your brains out."

It was another stretch of silence and Logan worried that the strain of the evening's events coupled with her exhaustion might have made the joke decidedly less funny than it was in his head. But then he heard the low snicker bubbling up from Veronica's throat. In the dim darkness he saw her cover her mouth with her hand, stifling her laughter.

She wheezed the words out, "Hump my brains out?" and broke into another peel of laughter.

I defy the universe to think it can top this moment.

Soon both of them were laughing, tears forming in the corners of her eyes like they did only when she found something truly funny. He pulled her to lie across his chest again, sneaking kisses in between gasps of air and laughs.

When she sat up and straddled his body, she was no longer laughing, but looking down at him with a radiant grin. Without a moment's hesitation she lifted the sweatshirt she was wearing over her head and threw it behind her.

Startled both at the sudden shift in the tone of the evening, and the way Veronica's pale skin almost
seemed to glow in the moonlight shining through his window, he lay motionless.

*Point universe. I'll just shut up now.*

"I'm never going to get that sweatshirt back, am I?"

"I wouldn't count on it." She leaned forward to kiss him, her chest brushing up against his as she did but, at the last second, he turned his head so her lips merely brushed his cheek.

"Veronica, I was just joking."

"What can I say?" Her words trailed off as she kissed down the column of his throat. "Knock knock jokes do it for me." Sitting back up she almost looked annoyed as she raised an eyebrow in challenge, daring him to make the next move.

His fingertips traced the curves of her waist, committing those things to memory just as he had the curves of her face earlier in the evening. "Well, I've got another one for you."

Even in the almost dark of the room, he could see the way she was smirking at him, fully prepared to be underwhelmed by his joke.

"Knock knock."

"Who's there."

"Lena."

"Lena who?"

He trailed his finger up her sides, smiling as goosebumps appeared on her skin, and then brushed the hair back from her face. "Lean a little closer and give me a kiss."

She didn't, instead opting to roll off him as another fit of hysterical laughter hit her.

*I'm never going to get tired of that sound. That sound should be recorded and played for coma patients in hospitals everywhere.*

 Somehow, when they finally managed to get undressed, the sex was made better by the fact that it was preceded by laughter rather than the right song, and the right lighting, and the right food.

That it happened as a bookend to an evening that was quite difficult in a lot of ways made it feel even more real, more honest. Here they were, a shit storm raging outside the walls of his house, choosing to be okay on the inside of the same home.

After another fit of laughter, brought on by Veronica's realization that Logan had kept his socks on the entire time, he spooned up behind her, an arm wrapped around her waist. He heard the words 'I love you' spoken in the dark but, as he drifted off to sleep, he wasn't cognizant as to which one of them said it.
It was the vacant side of the mattress depressing that first stirred Veronica awake. A series of images from the last dream she had before waking flickered in her mind. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to replay them in an order that allowed her to make sense of what she had dreamed. All she could gather was that she had been warm and comfortable but, she acknowledged, that could have had more to do with Logan's duvet cover than the dream itself.

She allowed herself to revel in the softness of the sheets for another second and, as she did, tried to remember if she had dreamt of Lilly in any form. Finally conceding to herself that any memory of Lilly had again been absent from her sleep, she opened her eyes.

Arching her back, Veronica stretched her limbs, disentangled her feet from the sheets and rolled onto her side. She was met with the sight of Logan, dressed for work, and lying facing her. A tiny smirk was tugging at the right side of his mouth as he took in her disheveled appearance.

*Past experience tells me that seeing me rumpled and in bed inspires Logan to go for another round. But he's never had a job before. Makes morning sex in our older age a statistical improbability.*

She lifted up onto an elbow to glance at the time and saw it was close to 9 o'clock. Far later than Logan ever went into the office. Sitting up all the way, she pressed her hands against his chest, which only caused him to roll onto his back and her to hover over him. "What are you doing? You're going to be late."

"Correction. I'm already late."

She flipped back the covers, remembering she was still naked, and leaned over the side of the bed to grab Logan's sweatshirt and her underwear off the floor. "I can be ready in five minutes. God, why did you let me sleep so late?"

*I'm having flashbacks to our year at Hearst, when one of us inevitably overslept almost once a week. Usually it was him.*

Seeing her jeans folded on the chair near Logan's side of the bed she rushed to gather them, only to be stopped by Logan wrapping his arms around her waist from behind. "Woah, Speedy, how about a 'good morning' and a kiss before you tear out of here?" Logan loosened his grip on her and took a small step backwards, enabling her to turn around in the circle of his arms.

She hooked her arms around his neck, which caused the hem of the sweatshirt to lift and hit her mid-thigh. "Good morning," she conceded, giving him a quick peck on the lips. She dropped her hands from around his neck and again pressed them to his chest, walking him backwards to his bedroom door. "You've got to go. And so do I."

By locking his knees, he prevented her from continuing to push him towards the door. "I already called work and told them I'd be late, and you don't have to go anywhere. Coffee is downstairs."

"Yes to coffee, but I can't hangout. Clean underwear and a shower are a must."

*Way to open the door for a discussion about your underwear, Veronica. That's not going to help either one of you get out the door.*
To her surprise, however, it was as if the idea of making a lecherous comment hadn't even occurred to him. In fact Logan looked ill, as his grip on her waist tightened and his chest heaved with the effort of taking several deep breaths. "I have a washer and dryer. And a shower. Just stay here."

She cocked her head to the side and furrowed her brow. "That's sweet but I have things to do. Can't afford to laze around your house all day." She deliberately spoke each part of her response, trying to communicate with her tone alone that she knew there was something he was leaving out.

When Logan pushed away from her, kneading his forehead with his hand, she frowned both at the abrupt move and the loss of contact.

Come on, Logan; talk to me. Universe, I understand that me asking him to open up is the irony of ironies.

Somehow, in the time between falling asleep and waking up, they had gone from being incredibly in sync to missing each other again.

This felt too much like senior year of college. Where everything in their relationship seemed to be balanced perfectly one moment but then crumpled the next. It had taken them more than a year to make it back to each other after that point. She refused to let history repeat itself.

Maybe me getting ready to leave is reminding him of the last time we slept together and then parted ways. Is he worried that we're going to mess this up again?

When she stilled her thoughts long enough, she understood that it wasn't anxiety she saw in the erratic darting of his eyes and the clenching of his hands – it was fear.

"It'd be easier to see each other if you just hung out here for a couple days. I can stop at your dad's and grab some of your clothes. Besides, if you were here –" he trailed off, stared down at her bare feet and took a step closer so he could play with the hem of her sweatshirt.

It was the shy downturned glance and the slight shrug of his shoulders that made her aware of exactly what he was thinking. She could pretend she didn't know, but if they were breaking old patterns together, he had to tell her when he was worried and she had to listen.

"If I was here, then what?" Her voice gave away the fact that she knew what he was trying to say and she couldn't remember the last time she had spoken to someone so gently.

"I'd know you were safe." With the rush of words, his hands moved from playing with her sweatshirt to holding tight at her hips. "You wouldn't be out there driving, and, and, vulnerable where whoever is doing this could get to you."

"He came here last night, Logan. He could -"

He dropped his hands from her hips to frame her face, and gave her a quick but ardent kiss. "I already talked to the security company and they're upgrading my system. There will also be 24 hour security onsite. He won't get anywhere near the front door."

Covering his hands with her own, she took hold of his fingertips, and brought their clasped hands to rest in between their chests. "I won't let him think he's trapped me here."

He huffed out the words "damn it" before pulling her close. "Veronica stop being so stubborn. I'm trying to help."

Her face pressed into his chest, she shook her head and clutched at the back of his dress shirt, aware
that her tight grip was wrinkling the material. When she didn't respond to his plea, he began to draw circles on her lower back with one of his hands.

*I wish I could be less stubborn. I know it'd make Logan's life easier. Hell, it'd make everyone's lives easier.*

"Are you ignoring me?" he asked.

Shaking her head again, she mumbled her response into the fabric of his shirt. "I'm just trying to hold onto the last vestiges of my afterglow." Taking one last breath, she pulled back from Logan and mentally ordered the precise words that would get him to understand. She looked down, reminded of the fact that she wasn't wearing any pants, and walked past him to pick up the sweats she had worn the previous night.

As she slipped them on, she could feel Logan's tense anticipation as he waited for her. He seemed to breathe a little easier when she grabbed his sweatpants rather than her own jeans. "I know you're scared. And I am too but I'll be okay, Logan, I promise."

He was shaking his head before she even completed her thought. "You can't promise me that, Veronica. Because there's some guy coming after you, and he thinks he's in love with you, and he's apparently upset that you and I are back together. As long as he's out there you can't promise me that. I just – fuck, what am I supposed to do?"

"We're going to figure it out, Logan."

"You should take this to the sheriff's station. You said you were going to tell your dad, right? So, go tell him now. He can have Vinnie put a car in front of your guys' house and-"

*There it goes. The remains of my afterglow. Goodbye bliss, I barely knew ye.*

Her hands shook as she crossed to his dresser to steal a pair of his socks. It was from some combination of fear – his words reminding her of exactly what she was dealing with – and frustration that he kept pushing her.

"Think about it. What evidence do I have against this guy? Nothing. He sends me love letters. He's never threatened me. He's never put me in harm's way. If I take this to Vinnie, he's not going to do anything. They have nothing to go on."

"What about the footage on the camera?"

"The footage of an attempted robbery, you mean? There's no proof that the envelope was left by the guy who tried to break in. Hell, Dick was here last night. They're going to say that it's possible Dick was just messing with me all these years. He's not exactly my biggest fan."

"What you're telling me, then, is that we're fucked. There are no leads and nothing to go on." He ran his fingers through his hair, mumbling under his breath. "That's just perfect."

*I'll store the fact that he said 'we're fucked' away and turn to mush over it later. We have to come to some sort of agreement here. Alright, Joanna, let's see if this whole concept of 'honesty in relationships' actually has any merit.*

Taking a deep breath, she shook the tension out of her arms, forcing herself to relax her defensive posture. She tried to remind herself that this was all new to him. That while she had been dealing with the reality of her situation in some form for the past two years, he had been doing so for less than twenty-four hours. So she swallowed the biting comment she wanted to level at him about his
lack of faith in her, and instead reached out to take his arm.

"Not exactly. It's not much but there's something that's been bugging me. The package that was just sent to the PO Box here was postmarked December 7 which was last Wednesday, three days before I got here. Sending me a package from Chicago but having it arrive in Neptune, and then having that package contain a cogent message rather than gibberish? He's never broken his pattern and yet he did it twice with one sketch. I think something may have happened on that day to trigger him that has nothing to do with our getting back together. I just need to figure out what."

Her hunch was hardly anything, but hearing that she had at least a small command of the situation appeared to instantly put Logan at ease. The tension in his shoulders receded and he stepped closer to her, taking hold of the tie from the hood of her sweatshirt and twisting it around his finger. "And you're going to do that, how?"

"I don't know yet. But I'm probably going to need to leave your house to do it."

"Didn't you used to have a bunch of vaguely and not-so-vaguely criminal lapdogs at your disposal? Maybe you could bring one of them with you today."

Veronica scrunched up her brow and blinked a number of times in quick succession, hoping he'd catch onto the inherent humor in his choice of words. When he just looked at her in response, she raised an eyebrow and tilted her head to the side.

_Vaguely criminal? I know you're thinking of Weevil but, come on, Logan, I have another vague criminal much closer to me at the moment._

When he finally caught on, he chuckled, waving a hand between them in concession. "Yes, present company included. But somehow I don't think you'd allow me to miss work to follow you around all day —" He trailed off at the end of his implied question, allowing her time to shake her head in the negative. "Didn't you used to know the leader of a biker gang?" He pouted his lips and tapped his chin with his index finger. "Maybe he's out on parole. Think he could spare a few minutes for you?"

During the happier points of their relationship, she and Logan had gotten quite adept at navigating the line between flippant joke and moment of sincerity. While Logan was tossing these comments out to her casually, hiding his worry behind jest, what he actually needed was pointed reassurance.

She ran her hands up his chest and looped them around his neck once more. "Something tells me you are already well aware of the fact that Weevil is in LA, but if you want me to call him up and ask him to come hang out with the two of us for the week…?" As one hand played with the hair at the nape of his neck, the other smoothed out the collar of his shirt, still rumpled from when he had decided to lay in bed with her. "Although I don't think he'll be able to get the next few days off work on such short notice."

"Local gangs have vacation day policies now? They've really organized themselves."

She clamped a hand over his mouth and shook her head. "Stop. Okay? Just stop. I know you're worried about me and I get it. But I can't just sit at my dad's house for the next week and do nothing. That's not me. You know that's not me."

_We've had this argument before. And last time it didn't go well. I ignored his worry, he didn't even give me a chance to explain myself, and then it was done._

With her hand still clamped over his mouth, he squeezed his eyes shut for a second before opening them and nodding. At his nod, she dropped her hand away and stood on tip toe to lightly brush her
"And I can't stop worrying about you. You know that's not me."

"I get it." Buying herself a few additional minutes, she played with the knot of Logan's tie and smoothed it down with her palm.

She knew if she pushed she could get him to back off completely – issue some sort of vague ultimatum or edict. If she did that, she also knew how he would react. He'd kill himself with worry then pretend he was fine, and she'd pretend not to notice the panicked look on his face each time she left the room.

Dropping her hands from his chest, she kept her posture relaxed and locked eyes with his. "Here's the deal. You wanted to keep the sketches to look over for yourself so there's not really much else for me to go on right now. I have a couple of errands to run today, and I need to call Agent Baxter to fill her in on what happened last night, but there's no reason I have to do that all by myself. I bet if I called Wallace he could-"

It took Logan half a second to close the distance between the two of them, one arm wrapping around her waist to bring her close and the other fisting her hair. He pulled her head back with gentle but firm pressure as he kissed his way down the side of her face. She felt her throat constricting as she realized just how worried he was.

The hand that was wrapped around her waist started to drift up the back of her sweatshirt, Logan trailing his fingers up along the ridges of her spine. Trying to regain her focus, she pushed away his hand. Her eyes drifted to the alarm clock and went wide when she saw the exact time. Twisting out of his grasp, she pushed him towards the door. "You need to go. Go be a productive member of society."

Logan's head dropped forward so his chin dramatically hit his sternum. "Overrated." But then he checked his watch for confirmation. "But necessary."

As they walked down the stairs, Veronica took hold of his arm and then sat at his kitchen island as he flitted about the room, packing his lunch for the day.

*Logan Echolls has a lunchbox. Logan Echolls uses matching Tupperware. Logan Echolls packs himself a Bento box. God, US Weekly would kill for this kind of an exclusive.*

They'd never had this type of domestic tranquility before. Unless she counted their spring break. A full week of almost perfect her senior year of college and then – nothing. But, they were already six days into being back in one another's lives. Another two and they'd have broken their previous reunion record.

Logan slid a piece of paper and a key across the countertop to her and, before she even picked it up, he explained. "A house key. And my alarm code. Stay however long you want. Maybe, I don't know, text me every now and again. Put my lil 'ol heart at ease?"

She looked at the sequence of numbers before her, 1-2-1-0-1-2-1-4-1-2-1-5, and frowned. That's an odd pattern. But it's definitely a pattern. I'm going to have to remind Logan what the phrase 'random sequence' actually means.

Nodding, she turned her face up for a kiss, and smiled when he bobbed his eyebrows before taking the invitation. She mentally chided herself before she could grab his tie and pull him towards her again. Despite being victim of a suspicious fluttering in her stomach, she did not need to steal a move...
from every romance novel written since ties were worn.

He pulled away with a sigh and then walked backwards, his lunch in one hand and his phone in the other. "You're a hard woman to walk away from, Bobcat."

She sensed more than knew that if she was to walk with him to his front door he was going to be even later to work, so she rotated on the stool she sat on and leaned back on her elbows to appraise him. "Sweet talker." She kissed the air in an exaggerated pucker and then turned around, her eyes falling on the alarm code once more.

The sounds of the beeps as Logan set the alarm underscored her reading the paper. She mumbled the numbers to herself and after staring into space for a few seconds, the pattern made itself clear to her.

_Son of a sentimental bitch._

She ran up the stairs to collect her cell phone from Logan's room even as she finished working out the reason for his alarm code.

12/10. My first day back in Neptune. 12/14. Our first official date two days ago. 12/15. The first time we, well, again –

At once amused and nonplussed at her own reaction – how could something as simple as him naming dates make her feel like she was being swept off her feet – she paused before sending him a text.

9:22 AM – Veronica Mars to Logan Echolls

'_Random'_ usually means without method or design. I'm changing your alarm code. But I love you, you big sap.

If he asked her about this moment later, she had every intention of lying about the grin that spread across her face as she hit 'send.'

"Darrell's okay being left home alone?" Veronica asked, tapping her fingers to the subtle bass beats of the song playing on her car stereo.

"He's not out of school until Wednesday. If you hadn't called me, I would have called you."

"Neptune living leaving you bored?"

"Not all of us hook up with old flames two days back in town."

Veronica bit the corner of her lip and shrugged the shoulder closest to Wallace. "Well, not everyone has my kind of luck."

"That's enough. Additional details not required." Wallace looked out the window, noticed the signs on the freeway, and then turned back to Veronica. "So you call me up, tell me you're workin' a case. Where are we going exactly?"

"Beautiful, glamorous San Clemente."

_T-minus thirty seconds before I'm on the receiving end of a barrage of questions. And me without a fully developed cover story. Damn, I'm out of practice._

"You haven't told me how we're playin' this. Let me guess, I'm going to pretend to be collecting signatures or somethin', and you're going to use that as a distraction to break into a place you
shouldn't be?"

"Not exactly. This is more of a solo mission." She shot him what she hoped was an impish smile, rather than one of her smiles that communicated she needed something. This one was supposed to reassure him.

"Then why'd you need me to come?"

"I didn't want to go by myself." Veronica lifted up from the driver's seat to search her pocket for a slip of paper. "Type this address into your GPS."

Wallace took the paper from Veronica's outstretched hand. "My response to your requests stopped being 'how high' long ago, V. If you expect me to jump, you best be jumping too." He broke eye contact to enter the address into the GPS, the automated voice on his smart phone informing them that they were twenty minutes away from their destination.

I definitely didn't think this all the way through. Between my case, and whatever my dad's working on for Logan, we have enough we're trying to manage. This probably could have waited.

They were well beyond the middle marker for their destination, having already been on the road for close to forty minutes. When Veronica had called Wallace, she avoided all details, telling him only that she was working a case. Her primary concern had been making sure she didn't have to lie to Logan about going off on her own that day. The first part of their trip was spent catching each other up on their respective weeks back in Neptune, and Veronica foolishly thought that topic of conversation would hold until they had arrived in San Clemente. But Wallace was done listening to her list off what she had bought everyone for Christmas and she had to make the decision as to whether or not she was going to lie to him now.

"There's someone I have to see and Logan would be upset if he knew I was alone. That's all."

Except that the reason he doesn't want me alone is that I'm, ya know, being stalked. But that's really just semantics.

"Nice and vague response, V."

Though Veronica could feel Wallace staring at her, she chose to ignore him. Instead, she shifted in her seat so that she was almost leaning up against her door, leaving only one hand on the steering wheel in an attempt to play casual. Internally, however, she was pleading with Wallace to let the subject pass.

There were times her sophomore year of high school – stretches of days when she was ignored or derided by those she had once considered friends – that she didn't think she'd ever get to have this kind of friendship again. She became convinced that finding people who would stick around through hard times was a fantasy; her dad being the once exception to the rule. And yet, somewhere along the way, Wallace proved her conviction had little basis in reality as he continued to show up for her.

And here I am, trying to decide if I'm just going to conceal the truth or out and out lie to him.

"So you're telling me you expected me to drive an hour into the middle of wherever we are without you even telling me why?"

"It's not a big deal, Wallace. There's someone I got to see."

"Yeah, you mentioned that already. You know what? Let me off at the next exit. I'll hang out somewhere until you're done with whatever you need to do. But I'm not going to let you just drag
my ass around without any explanation."

*Fuck this. All of this. Wallace and I haven't fought once since we moved to Chicago. No matter what happens between Logan and me, I can't lose my Wallace.*

"His name is Charlie Stone."

The name fell from her lips almost involuntarily. Speaking it aloud made her feel like she was betraying Logan and she felt the sting of tears at the corners of her eyes as she fought for control.

"Charlie who?"

She wanted to think she was still good at this. Pulling a cover story out of her ass was a skill well-honed in her high school days, then further refined in her college PI days. That ability to think quickly continued to be honed in medical school. Just because she only solved cursory cases every few weeks didn't mean she was no longer capable.

She contemplated crafting a story that would be convincing enough to fool even herself. But as she thought of what to tell Wallace, she realized how exhausted she truly was. She had been dealing well with intense levels of academic stress for the past two years, but a mere week of interpersonal stress was causing her to feel unhinged. Keeping this from Wallace was not worth the effort it required.

"He's a teacher. In San Clemente." She gestured to the phone Wallace held in his hand. "Look him up if you want."

She felt incapable of looking at him. Any notion he might have had that this was an innocent case not at all connected to her life had to be proven false when she started to tear up.

"Says here he teaches history and social studies at San Clemente Prep. Has for two years."

Of course she knew these facts; had researched them for herself, but hearing Wallace recite them made her wonder, again, if this was misguided. A classic example of Veronica Mars seeking out answers to questions people never asked.

While this remained a hypothetical mission, it was easily accomplished. It was as simple as running into The River Styx to ask a few questions, meeting Mac on the roof of the Neptune Grand, or tracking down the person responsible for posting a specific video of herself. None of those tasks were supposed to end badly either.

*Does California still have that silly, 'No u-turns on the freeway' policy? Because I'm starting to doubt the sanity of this particular endeavor. If this goes bad it's going to hurt him more than if I'd never tried.*

Logan had obviously been writing Charlie letters for months, and Charlie had been returning them unopened for months. What could she possibly say in a twenty minute conversation to convince him to do otherwise?

This wasn't Wallace's fault. She had to remind herself of that so she didn't get short with him. Even if he hadn't asked questions on their way to San Clemente, he surely would have on the return trip home.

"This isn't another Mr. Rooks situation, is it?"

"Just keep reading."
Wallace cleared his throat as he continued to scroll through the search results on his phone. She saw the precise moment he stumbled upon a link that took him to details about Charlie Stone that were far more colorful than his occupation. Rather than acknowledge the fact that she knew he knew, she kept her focus on the road and gripped the steering wheel.

It had been close to five years but she could still recall the precise look of hope on Logan's face after he met with the man he thought was Charlie Stone. The sound of Wallace slipping his phone into one of the cup holders registered through the fog of memory but she continued to stare ahead.

Wallace shifted in his seat to lean up against the passenger side door and angled himself to face Veronica. "He has a brother, huh?"

"Half-brother."

"Aaron?"

"Yup. Sowed some oats. Some of those oats grew up into an adult male."

"Why are we visiting Mr. Grown Oats?"

Veronica wasn't one to share the experiences or stories of people she knew with others – hell most days she was hesitant to share her own. To tell Wallace more about what they were doing would be to reveal painful aspects of Logan's life.

And yet when she texted Wallace with little more than a, "I'm picking you up in forty-five minutes," he had agreed without hesitation. Didn't that deserve a sign of faith on her part?

Logan and Wallace are friends. It's not like I'm telling a stranger.

She inhaled deeply and held her breath for a few seconds before slowly exhaling. "Logan's been trying to get in touch with him. He hasn't been successful."

"He couldn't find him? Why didn't you just give Logan the address?"

"No, he knows where Charlie lives already. Sends a lot of letters. But they're never opened, just returned to sender."

"So you're going to do what? Storm in and make him answer? Isn't he at, ya know, work or something?"

She frowned, shooting him an occasional glance as she continued to drive. "Remember who you're talking to, please. His planning period is at 12:30. We stop in, I have a few words with him, give him Logan's letters, and then go from there."

"How do you have Logan's letters?"

"If you keep asking me questions you already know the answers to, I'm going to punch you in the throat."

"You used to threaten to tase me. Now you're gonna rough me up? Not sure if that means you're getting less violent as you get older, or more."

Wallace knows more of my history with Logan than most people. It couldn't hurt to get an outside opinion.

They allowed a moment of silence to hang in the air before Veronica released the tight grip she held
on the steering wheel and attempted to relax in her seat. "I'm not enough, Wallace."

It took him several seconds to respond as he, undoubtedly, backtracked to follow her train of thought. "How so?"

The shrug was intended to be dismissive but her voice sounded choked even to her own ears. "I see the way he looks at me, even after everything that's happened between us, like I could be his whole world. But I'm not enough. He needs more than just me. We both do, if it's going to work this time."

How's that for honesty?

If Wallace noticed that her voice cracked or that her lack of tears was only due to a renewed effort on her part not to cry, he didn't say anything. Instead he acknowledged the sentiment behind her words with a small nod. "Look at you applying those hard knock lessons from behavioral psych." He cleared his throat, looking down at his hands, and she took advantage of his momentary distraction to let out a shaky breath.

"Your plan is to get him his brother back?"

"I just want Charlie to acknowledge that Logan exists. I mean, I know better than anyone that Logan can be a little intense, and when you invite him into your life he only becomes more so. But he doesn't deserve to be ignored. Hell, even when I thought I hated him I didn't ignore him."

When Wallace began chewing on his bottom lip and stared out the window, she worried she had said something to offend him. As she pulled up to the stoplight at the freeway exit ramp, she realized that he wasn't mad, but rather was formulating a question. Probably one that he was uncertain he should ask.

"You can ask me anything, Wallace."

Wallace wasn't a fidgeter. Occasionally he'd gesture with a hand as he spoke but, like everything about him, his physical presence was steady. He didn't bounce on the balls of his feet to release nervous energy. Or draw his words in the air with his fingertips. Or require a purple and white koosh ball to toss back and forth during meetings.

A smile graced her lips and she wanted to roll her eyes at herself when she realized that she was already doing that thing where she related things back to Logan for no particular reason.

If it's happening to me, it's definitely happening to Logan too. You know what they say: swooning loves company.

Her attention back on Wallace, she took in the way he wrung his hands and then flattened his palms on his knees. "V, I just don't get it. If you don't think Logan deserves to be ignored then why haven't you guys talked the past year or so?"

"We talked."

"One email exchanged every three months does not a friendship make." Wallace must have sensed her discomfort with his inquiry because his tone was softer when he spoke again. "And if you even think about saying the words, 'it's complicated' you're the one who is going to get punched in the throat."

She couldn't help her reaction. Rather than be offended, or defensive, she bit down on the corner of her lip and grinned. "Would I, Veronica Mars, really blow off my best-friend with some two-bit answer like that? Not likely."
"Look V, I know there are parts of your history with Logan I'll never understand but, as much as I tried not to, I like the guy. And I love you. So I just want to make sure—"

"We're good, Wallace. I promise. Things got a little messed up for a while but we're working on it."

"I know there are things you're not telling me."

From anyone else it would sound like an accusation, but from Wallace it was just a simple statement of fact. It wasn't crafted to injure but rather to communicate that she didn't need to hide or pretend.

*Or to keep my most important people separated and in their respective corners. It always felt like a public service, keeping Wallace separate from Logan, Logan separate from my dad. But them all knowing each other, being okay with each other, has its own appeal.*

When she answered, her voice was more resigned. "I know."

"The things you haven't told me, are you telling him?"

This wasn't an interrogation, she told herself. It was just a conversation. With her closest friend. "Yeah."

"Good."

"Good?"

*Since when is Wallace pro-Veronica-Mars-secrecy?*

He nodded at her incredulous tone and then grabbed his phone from the cup holder, turning it over in his hands. "I don't need to be the person you tell everything to. I just don't want you to lie to me."

"There are things I need to tell you Wallace, and I know that you know that. But I just need some time, okay?"

That small concession seemed to be enough for him. For the moment, at least. There was a prominent gleam in his eye as he appraised her, which caused her to mistrust the innocent expression he also affected. "Take all the time you need. Just know it's not going to stop me from asking Logan a few questions about where the two of you stand when we grab a drink tonight."

"What?"

*This can't be good. I'll have to text Logan an appropriate list of conversation topics. Hell, if I do that he's just going to avoid those topics and go straight for the ones he thinks are off-limits. I wonder if I can reverse psychology my way out of this situation.*

She opened her mouth to protest, what she hoped was, Wallace's teasing plan but the sound of his phone declaring they'd reached their destination startled her out of her indignation.

"Hey, look at that, we're here."

She doubted he could have timed his line of questions to so perfectly coincide with their arrival at the school. It had to be a coincidence. However, when Wallace dashed out of the car the second she parked, before she could ask any follow up questions, she formed a few doubts. They had been best friends for seven years. He was bound to pull one over on her at some point.

Even as he drove to work, Logan knew the eleven and a half hours he was to spend there would be
more or less a waste. During the first part of the day he attempted to respond to emails in between doing research for his meeting with Benny Scott. Both tasks were impeded by his frequent checking of his cell phone for updates from Veronica.

10:14 AM – Veronica Mars to Logan Echolls
Picked up a hitchhiker on my way to my dad's house. He was wearing a shirt that said, "Ask me about stalking Veronica Mars." Was this a bad decision?

10:18 AM – Logan Echolls to Veronica Mars
I'm taking away your snarking privileges.

Halfway through his meeting with Benny, as they were charting the character arc of both his antagonist and protagonist, he got another text. Stopping mid-sentence, he dropped the dry erase marker on his desk and picked up his phone.

11:18 AM – Veronica Mars to Logan Echolls
You can take the snark out of the girl but you can't take the girl out of the snark. That didn't work as well as I thought it would. Just picked up Wallace.

11:20 AM – Logan Echolls to Veronica Mars
Where'd the hitchhiker go?

11:22 AM – Veronica Mars to Logan Echolls
Left him tied up and sexually satisfied at my dad's house.

11:25 AM – Logan Echolls to Veronica Mars
That'll be fun to explain to him.

11:27 AM – Veronica Mars to Logan Echolls
To the hitchhiker or my dad?

For a moment Logan had forgotten he was at work. It wasn't until he heard the loud thud of Benny extending his feet on Logan's desk that he looked up and remembered he was in the middle of a meeting with his most important client.

Shit. Less than one week in and this is what's happening? If I don't want to get fired, I'm going to have to schedule my fawning to occur in between meetings. Unless I want my love-sick face alluded to in Benny's next novel.

"There he sits, our young protagonist. The reality of his being smitten is undeniable. It is made evident in the way he hides his smirk behind pursed lips, grins without any provocation, and frequently stares off into space."

Logan leaned forward to push Benny's feet off his desk. "Don't prose my life, Benny."

Benny sat up straight in his chair as his feet hit the ground. "Prose my life? That's good." Without another word, he stood up, grabbed his coat from behind his chair, and headed to the door. "That's really good."

Logan also stood, doing his best to ignore the message-received tone he heard chime on his phone. Before he'd been derailed by thoughts of Veronica their meeting had actually been going quite well. "Where are you going?"

"Inspiration strikes. And I told the dogsitter I'd be home by noon. Winston waits for no man."
"Your dogsitter's name is Winston?"

"No, my dog's name is Winston. The dogsitter's name is inconsequential."

Stepping away from his desk to join Benny at the door exiting his office, Logan grabbed the purple and white koosh ball that sat on his desk and tossed it from one hand to the other as he walked. "There's a subpar knock-off of an Abbot and Costello sketch about to happen here."

"Suggesting I buy a dog is not the worst idea you've ever come up with."

He looked down at the object in his hand, which triggered a memory of Veronica's face the day he had seen her in her dad's office. The faint blush that skirted up her neck when he had caught her unawares. "It wasn't actually my idea."

"Well that explains it."

After Benny left, Logan paced the expanse of his office, tossing the ball up into the air. He didn't bother to keep track of how high he was throwing it, but still managed to catch it each time with little effort. He had close to six hours to fill before his departmental meeting over dinner, and then he had his plans to meet Wallace. If he accomplished two hours' worth of work in that time, he'd consider it a victory.

The Spanish restaurant Logan elected to meet Wallace at was specifically chosen. Being next to the restaurant where his business meeting had occurred made it convenient but he also loved the atmosphere at the bar. He had once told Veronica the stained glass windows alone in the restaurant provided him with enough reason to want to go there.

*I wonder if she even remembers I told her that. Who am I kidding? She absolutely does. Not that she'd ever admit to it.*

Despite the fact they hung out whenever Wallace came into town, Logan still wasn't sure how good of friends he and Wallace actually were. Over the past sixteen months, when his relationship with Veronica had been strained on its best day, he had to routinely convince himself of the folly behind calling Wallace and asking him for his help. He'd never wanted to put Wallace in the middle like that, nor did he think that Wallace would have ever allowed it to happen. In light of what he now knew, however, he wasn't entirely convinced that had been the right choice.

Logan accepted his drink from the bartender and, seeing Wallace across the room, he gave a nod of acknowledgment. Wallace waved in response and made his way through the Friday night crowd to join Logan at the bar. He was a little less formally dressed than Logan. Understandable given that Logan had come from work while Wallace had spent his day chaperoning their favorite pint-sized P.I.

They weren't the kind of friends who did complicated handshakes, and they definitely weren't the kind of friends who hugged so, without any preamble, Wallace sat down and waved over the bartender. "Hey man. How was work?"

"Good. Busy. Done for the week."

When the bartender came over, Wallace gestured to Logan's drink. "What are you drinking?"

"Scotch."

Shaking his head, he spoke to the bartender. "Whatever dark beer you have on tap."
"Still not a hard liquor fan?"

Wallace accepted the beer from the bartender and took a large gulp before answering. "I can't tell the difference most of the time between the good stuff and the cheap stuff. My taste buds are wasted on liquor."

*That practical attitude would have saved me a large sum of money in my binge drinking days.*

There was a list of topics that Logan wanted to address with Wallace. He wanted to ask if Veronica seemed okay that day. If she had convincingly hidden her anxiety behind too many jokes, or if her worry had seeped through. If she'd given Wallace any indication as to what she was thinking would happen between her and Logan when she went back to Chicago in ten days. His own thoughts on that final topic had taken up much of his afternoon.

When their opportunity for a new beginning was waylaid almost a year and a half prior, it had been just as Logan wrote Veronica and told her he wanted to move to Chicago. While he had mentioned that fact a couple days prior, it hadn't actually been discussed. She had said she would have wanted to discuss it, if she had received his original letter, but Logan didn't know what that meant for them now.

Logan knew she had another two and a half years of medical school to go and, if what he gathered from reruns of *ER* was at all accurate, her third and fourth years were going to be hellish. Meaning that picking up to move near her was at once a terrible idea and also, perhaps, the best idea he'd ever had. Maybe this would be his chance to support her. Prove that he didn't just talk in therapy, but that he was making better choices. But if he offered and she accepted, then Wallace would be without a roommate for his final year of grad school. And could he really leave his job, Heather, Dick, and the handful of friends he'd made since college?

Thus went his internal debate for the vast majority of the afternoon.

Instead of entertaining those topics, Logan filled Wallace in on his work, and Wallace regaled Logan with the details of school and his potential move to Seattle upon graduation.

"I don't know, man, moving to a city where you don't know anyone? And one where it rains close to 300 days a year?"

*If Wallace can consider picking up and leaving everything behind, I suppose it's not crazy for me to think about doing it myself.*

Wallace nodded, obviously having heard these arguments before, and took another sip of his beer. "From what I've been told, it doesn't actually rain all that much. It's just grey a lot of the time. Gives the illusion of rain."

"And that's better, how?"

"I don't know. It'd be an adventure. I've never really been out on my own before. I mean, I stayed in Neptune for college, and then V and I in Chicago. Maybe it's time to see if the Fennel Flavor translates to a city where no one knows who I am."

"A part of me gets that. But your family? You wouldn't miss them?"

"Hell yeah, I know I will. It's not permanent, though. I try it for a couple years. If I hate it, I come back." After a moment's pause, he frowned at Logan over another sip of his beer. "Why are you looking at me like that?"
"You're lucky, is all. To have a family to come back to."

"You have that too. Just not in the traditional sense." Wallace sat his beer back down on the bar and turned one of the square coasters over in his hand. "I'm not about to get in the middle of what's going on with you and V but, I will say I'm glad it's happening. Whatever it is."

"Really?"

"Yeah, man, I am. You know V. She'll always have that spark. When she's with you, though? I don't know – it's like new parts of her come alive. It's kind of cool to see that again."

Logan had never had anyone besides his counselor and Dick, when he was in his drunken college days, offer him their opinion of his relationship with Veronica. That is until a couple days prior when Keith had told him that Veronica fought for him. And now here was Wallace telling him that she came alive with him.

If I didn't know any better, I'd think I actually have a few supporters in this whole relationship thing. I guess if I ever get cocky I can drive to LA and go visit Weevil. He wouldn't hesitate to tell me just how full of shit I actually am.

Despite receiving what sounded like a positive endorsement from Wallace, Logan noticed there appeared to be more he wanted to say. He looked morose; an adjective Logan never before applied to the man in front of him, his attention focused on the beer inside of his glass, rotating it so the deep amber liquid sloshed around.

"What aren't you telling me, Wallace?"

Wallace shook his head and, even before he spoke, Logan could see that he was a little surprised that he'd given anything away. "Nothing. Nothing that's for me to tell. I just – I just didn't like her last boyfriend is all."

"You didn't like me much once upon a time."

"Wasn't the same. You were a fuck-up. This guy-" Wallace huffed out a breath and gulped the last of his beer.

"He what?"

"You should ask V. She'll tell you."

"He didn't." His throat constricted as he gripped his scotch glass, trying to put words to his fear. "He didn't hit her or anything, did he?"

Haven't been in a fight in close to two years, but if Wallace even hints that's what happened, I'll be tracking this guy down.

"No. Nothing like that. He was just not a good dude. I think she forgot who she was a little when she was with him. She was in the middle of her first year of med school, which is intense under the best of circumstances. But she figured him out. She always does."

He had more questions. Dozens of additional questions, and he simultaneously wanted to thank Wallace for the information he had just been provided and also keep feeding his friend alcohol until he gleaned everything Wallace knew. But he had to hope that Wallace was right. That if he asked Veronica she'd tell him.
At the same time, if this was another 'warts and all' conversation, he'd be content with leaving it alone. They'd agreed to a fresh start, and he didn't care too much what had happened in her past. A potential psycho stalker was enough to worry about at the moment. Maybe the ex-boyfriend was something they could overlook.

It wasn't until Wallace wove a hand in his face that Logan realized that he had, yet again, been caught unawares thinking of Veronica Mars.

"Man, you got it, you got it bad."

Rolling his eyes as he picked up his scotch glass, Logan looked around the room and then leaned forward, faking as if to conspire with Wallace. "Here's a little tip from me to you. If you want to convince women of the Fennel Flavor, stop quoting Usher lyrics."

Wallace and Logan remained at the bar longer than either had planned. They went through their first three drinks quickly and both had buzzes that were just past the 'okay to drive' stage, so they stayed to order Tapas at the bar. The combination of carbs, time, and no additional alcohol provided a much needed sobering effect.

Logan was able to gather from Wallace that he and Veronica had spent the majority of the day together, but Wallace was scant on details.

For his part, he was fearful of unintentionally revealing information to Wallace about Veronica's current predicament. He opted to remain silent on that topic, uncertain of how much Wallace already knew. It was evident they were both harboring secrets for Veronica, but neither intended to reveal what they knew to the other man.

As the bartender ran Logan's card for their tab, Logan checked the time on his phone and was surprised to find both that it was close to midnight and that he had received another text from Veronica.

11:33 PM – Veronica Mars to Logan Echolls
I know we talked about maybe hanging out tonight, but it's late. Call you tomorrow.

He didn't allow himself to feel too much disappointment over not being able to see her that evening. With any luck he'd be able to spend a prolonged amount of time with her over the weekend. And this way he would have a chance to look over the sketches without her interrupting him to ask what he thought about them every few seconds.

Logan waved off Wallace's offer of a couple of twenties to pay his part of the tab. "Don't worry about it. You'll get the next one." Signing the bill with a flourish, he slid the black folder over the counter to the bartender. "Veronica just texted me and said she was wiped out. What did you guys do today?"

So much for not prying into their friendship or putting him in the middle. Nothing I can do about it now. The idea is out there in the universe.

It was only a second, but Wallace's shoulders noticeably tensed before he shrugged in an attempt to look casual. "Just drove around."

Logan knew it was bullshit, even without looking at him. He rolled his eyes as he put his credit card away. "Liar."

"Yup."
"One of these days we should sit down and compare notes. Between the two of us I think we probably know all of Veronica Mars' secrets."

"I don't need to know everything. As long as she doesn't lie to me, I'm good."

Logan frowned at Wallace's level-headed approach to Veronica. He was being all zen, and Logan envied him. Maybe he needed to approach his relationship with Veronica more like Wallace did?

"But that shouldn't be enough for you."

*Get out of my head, Fennel. Wait, did he just say I shouldn't settle for not knowing everything?*

"Why not?"

"Because she doesn't need another me. I love her but, it's different."

Logan ducked his head down to stare at the shiny black of his shoes in an attempt to hide a small grin that had formed. Leave it to Wallace to validate his relationship with Veronica without even really trying.

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The last time she felt this disoriented was when she'd fallen asleep at her and Wallace's kitchen table while studying and then woken up on the kitchen floor having fallen off her chair.

While it registered she was in a bed, it took her some time to remember she was at her dad's house. She pinpointed the source of what woke her up as her cell phone vibrating loudly on her nightstand. Picking it up, she saw Logan's name and groaned.

*Nothing like a drunken late night booty call to stoke the embers of reunited love.*

She took a deep breath before answering, trying to wake herself up enough to converse. "Logan, what time is it?"

"Close to 2:00 AM, I think."

"Are you drunk?"

"No. I need to talk to you."

"We are talking." She fell back onto her pillows and curled onto her side, already drifting back to sleep. She had fallen asleep that night almost the instant her head had touched the pillow, and she was close to doing so again. "We're using words and everything."

"Come on, Veronica, wake up. It's important."

The urgency of his words registered through her half-asleep haze and she sat up, rubbing her eyes. "Are you okay? Want me to come over?"

"No, I'm actually standing on your dad's porch."

*Bold move, Logan.*

Without disconnecting the call, she tossed her phone onto the empty side of the bed, slid on her slippers and made her way to the front door, careful to avoid the hallway floorboard she knew squeaked.
When she opened the front door, it was to find Logan, dressed in sweatpants and a hoodie, the manila envelopes she had let him keep clutched to his chest. That was all the evidence she needed to know that this wasn't, in fact, a booty call.

She pulled him inside the house, closing the door and locking it behind him. "My room," she mouthed to him silently and he followed, clutching her hand in his own.

*Something tells me he's not bringing me good news this evening. No, "Don't worry, honey! There's a simple explanation for this. You've been involved in a seven year prank on candid camera."

Her guess was that Logan had done as he intended and spent some time that evening poring over the sketches. She wondered if he had turned up something new or if, much as it had done for her the day before, spending so much time looking at them simply caused him to worry.

If Logan's expression was any indication as to how she should feel, this news was not going to be pleasant. She turned on her bedside lamp and patted a spot on the bed for Logan to sit down next to her.

He dropped the stack of envelopes onto her comforter as he sat down, scooting to be close enough so their hips touched. She noticed he had also brought a couple books with him and that some of the pages were marked with post-it notes.

"You found something, didn't you?"

He nodded, offering her a tight-lipped, grim smile. Before he could start to with his explanation, she grabbed his shoulders and pulled his face down so she could brush her lips lightly against his. It was less a kiss and more a caress of lips. When she pulled back, she wrapped her arms around his waist and cuddled herself up to his chest.

She felt his breath warm on the crown of her head. "What was that for?"

"I can tell whatever you're going to say isn't good. I just wanted something that was before—" She sat back on her heels and gestured to the sketches and books.

*I remember when I thought all this was due to an ex-boyfriend who was hung up on me. I pine for the days of teenaged drama.*

He gave her another smile, this one more reassuring, and then sorted through the sketches, finally holding up the one wherein she wore sunglasses and a low ponytail. It was the image both Wallace and Logan had claimed to recognize. "I told you this one looked familiar, right? Well, I woke up and I just knew where it came from."

Grabbing one of the books he had brought, a yearbook from their freshman year of Hearst, he flipped to a marked page and there she was. With Logan. The two of them were walking on campus side-by-side, an arm around the other person's waist, her face turned up to his ever so slightly. They were part of a photo spread of couples with the headline, 'Hearst's Got Heart.'

He slid the sketch in front of her and, while it was blown up so it was solely of her face and didn't have Logan in it, it was an almost identical copy of the photo from the yearbook.

"Do you remember that day?" he asked her.

She was transfixed by the sight of the two Veronica's, one in a black and white photo, the other a black and white sketch. When his words registered she shook her head.
I thought I imagined how happy we were at times that year but look, here's proof. And now that memory has been commandeered by some anonymous asshole.

"It was the day I asked you to get my grandfather's pocket watch back from that journalist, Norman Phipps. We must have walked most of the campus that day. This could have been taken anywhere."

"How did you know? I mean, that's one picture in a book of thousands of pictures."

And how did I never notice? I guess I didn't spend a lot of time looking at pictures of myself. It never even occurred to me to buy a Hearst yearbook. There was so much about that year I just wanted to forget.

He pulled his knees up to his chest and looked over at her. It couldn't have escaped his attention how her hands shook as she set aside the yearbook with the sketch on top of it. He took both of her hands in his and held them tight, steadying her tremors. "When we broke up, I cut it out of Dick's yearbook and hung it up in my room at the Grand. I stared at it every day for close to a year before I packed it away."

"We looked happy." Her eyes scanned over the stack of sketches and books, noticing two other marked pages in the second book he had brought. "There's more, isn't there?"

Reaching across the stack, he grabbed a Neptune High yearbook and flipped to one of the marked pages, a spread of the homecoming dance their senior year. A picture of her and Duncan smiling at the camera was at the bottom right and before Logan could sort through the sketches himself, she grabbed the sketch she had received her first day back in Neptune, her hair parted to the side, with a single strand tucked behind her ear.

The days wherein blue velour was still in style. When I thought Duncan and I would be together always. And there was apparently a stalker on my heels the entire time.

Flipping to the other marked page, a spread of their graduation, her eyes fell to a photo of her with Wallace. She was wearing the halter dress she had correctly identified the previous night from one of the other sketches.

"He must have gotten ahold of your yearbooks, somehow. Used them for inspiration, I guess. I don't know."

She shook her head at Logan's explanation. While she didn't want to dismiss him entirely, there was something about that suggestion that didn't quite make sense. This person had been following her for years, fancied himself in love with her, and seemed to think he knew what was best for her. He wouldn't simply purchase a yearbook for inspiration. It wasn't personal enough.

Come on, Veronica. Logan is helping you draw the dots. Now connect them.

She grabbed both yearbooks from the bed and laid them next to one another, overlaying and folding the pages so she could see all three photos at once. Hunched over the images, her eye caught the photo credit listed on the graduation and homecoming photos: J.D. King

"The same photographer." She mumbled the words, running her finger over the name as she did. Next she focused on the photo credit for the picture of her and Logan: Johnny Kirkpatrick. "Shit."

Not the same name, but it is the same initials. This could be a coincidence. And I could also still be voted Miss Congeniality among my peers in an informal poll.

The thing she'd learned about clues and leads over the years was that while they most often led to
another clue, sometimes they just made a person aware of how fucked up their situation was.

"These were all taken by the same photographer." She passed the books to Logan, pointing at each of the photo credits.

"The names are different. How do you know for sure?"

"Because nothing in Neptune is a coincidence. They have the same initials. And also, look at how the images are framed." She grabbed the books and overlaid the pages once more. "If you were to break the photos up into quadrants, my face is in the bottom left quadrant in all of them. Beginning photographers are told to frame their subjects in the upper right because that's where the human eye naturally travels. To have all three be framed bottom left? It's distinctive."

"What does that tell you?"

She felt she was in danger of sinking under a maelstrom of emotions, but if this had been a normal evening, it would have occurred to her that this was one of the things she loved most about Logan. That he believed her even without her providing unequivocal proof.

Concentrate on holding it together now, Veronica. Logan doesn't need to see you undone.

"I don't know." She stood up from the bed, turning on the overhead chandelier light in her room, well aware that Logan's eyes followed her with each step she took. "I think my yearbooks from UCLA are in my closet. You find those and I'm going to make a pot of coffee. We're going to be up for a while."

If her Neptune High and Hearst yearbooks contained traces of this guy, it stood to reason that her yearbooks from UCLA would as well.

As she walked down the hallway she put her hand out to steady herself against the wall, feeling just a little weaker than she thought she had the right to be. Leaning her forehead against the cool paint she took a series of steadying breaths, trying to quell her racing pulse.

It had been years since she'd been involved in a case of this magnitude and she doubted she possessed the ability to put the pieces together the way she used to. Turning her back to the wall, she slid down until she was sitting on the floor with her knees pulled up to her chest. Hiding her hands in the oversized sleeves of the sweatshirt she wore, she buried her face in the soft heather material.

Get up. Get up. This isn't going to help you solve anything.

Despite her inner cheerleader trying to encourage her, another voice was telling her to get up in order to run away. Spain. Greece. South Africa. Surely there were places she could run where she wouldn't be found.

Regardless of where I ran, he'd follow me.

That thought was what caused her veneer to crack, tears running down her cheeks and onto her fabric covered hands.

The feel of arms encircling her shoulders startled her before she recognized the hint of Logan's cologne. She didn't look up, just burrowed further into the elbow of her sweatshirt and scooted a half inch closer into his side.

She felt his kisses start at her temple and move down side of her face that was still exposed. It was only a matter of time before he began to speak platitudes, she assumed. He'd tell her it was all going
to be okay. As much as she wanted to believe him, she was already convinced of that it wouldn't be. Nothing about this situation was okay.

His voice was whisper soft, but it still surprised her. "I went through all the trouble of dragging my ass out of bed at 2 AM. I'm sure as hell not going to spend it on this cold floor." Though he brushed the hair away from her cheek in a sweet gesture of comfort, his words were crafted to light a fire in her.

It mystified her how in the midst of such an imperfect situation he had figured out the precise words she needed to hear.

A weird moment for me to realize exactly how much he loves me. He's not going to let me be beaten by this.

She turned her head, resting her cheek against her knee and looked up at him. She wanted him to know that she loved him as much right back, but didn't know what to say to make that clear. Nodding once, she held her hands out for him to take. "Help me up."

He stood and then pulled her up in one quick motion. "And cookies," he whispered, as he clasped one of her hands in his and walked on quiet feet to the kitchen. "I also request cookies."

Chapter End Notes

My beta rocks my socks off. And then I put them back on. And she knocks them off again. Thank you, Miss Scandalpantsstuff, for being a one woman army against my use of terrible cliches.
Waking Up

Chapter Notes

So many thank yous go out to my beta, scandalpants, who threatened to come up to Seattle for the express purpose of kicking my ass if I didn't get my act together and post this chapter soon. Clearly, I am motivated by violence.

Veronica woke up the next morning, uncertain of what time it was and how much sleep she had actually gotten. Her last memory was of Logan stacking the pages and books to set them aside before they curled up together in her bed.

"What did I do to make him come after me?" She had whispered the words, needing them to be spoken for her own benefit more than Logan's, but he heard them anyway.

He held her tight and leaned over to turn off the lamp. "Sleep, babe. We'll figure out the rest tomorrow."

They had, in fact, figured out a lot the previous evening. The UCLA yearbooks contained indexes that listed each student and the pages on which they were featured. Aside from the three images that Logan had discovered on his own, they were able to identify twenty-six others as having originated from the Neptune High, Hearst, and UCLA yearbooks. The photos from Neptune High used to inspire the sketches were all credited to J.D. King, those at Hearst to Johnny Kirkpatrick, and those from UCLA to J. David Kenmore, thereby confirming Veronica's suspicions that the three photographers and the person sending her the sketches were one and the same.

Laying out those details required a much closer examination of her past than she had ever desired to endure, but this wasn't filling in a new boyfriend on school memories. They had a mission and a focus, and that was to identify and label. She was actually quite proud of Logan for managing to keep his grimaces to a minimum at the overly affectionate photos of her and Duncan.

Logan had wondered if there was a picture of the photographer in any of the books, but he was missing from each one. In each of the UCLA yearbooks J. David Kenmore was listed with the phrase "not pictured," leading Veronica to wonder if that phrase was destined to be bad omen for her life.

There were four remaining sketches tied to photos that weren't found in yearbooks and, after a few different internet searches, Veronica found that they were all from UCLA's student newspaper, The Daily Bruin. Those too were credited to J. David Kenmore. One was taken at the opening of the exhibition wherein Veronica had won the photo contest her senior year. This also meant, however, that while she had received sketches while dating Skyler, no new photos originated during her time in medical school.

"Maybe the vastness of your intellect scared him off for a while," Logan offered.

They had been sorting through yearbooks and online archives of newspapers for two hours, and she had to remind herself not to snap at him. While the impulse was there, she considered it personal growth that she did in fact stop. "Medical school is kind of designed to keep you alone and isolated with only your text books for company. There probably wasn't much opportunity."
"And I'm guessing that no one would have time to be the editor of a medical school yearbook?"

"It'd probably just be photos of people sobbing and drinking coffee."

"Well that has indie arthouse film written all over it."

The fact that Veronica had been employed as a freelance photographer at the same newspaper where J. David Kenmore was also employed made her a little ill. During her time at UCLA, there had been a team of close to fifteen different photographers who routinely snapped photos for the newspaper. As they were all part time employees she rarely interacted with any of them. She'd visit her editor, get her next assignment, and only return to the office to pick up her paycheck. Meaning that it was entirely possible she had been steps away from J. David Kenmore without knowing it.

Visiting Neptune High to sneak a peek at J.D. King's permanent file, as well as calling her former editor from The Daily Bruin, went to the top of her list as leads to pursue during her time in Neptune. She also owed Agent Baxter a call, if only to concede to her that bringing someone else into the investigation was expediting the processing considerably.

She had put up little fight when Logan had suggested they get some sleep, it being close to five o'clock in the morning. Her eyelids had long since developed a stinging sensation behind them as the coffee she had drunk lost its ability to keep her awake. It didn't occur to her to mention that falling asleep together in her dad's house was a bad idea. With Logan's arms wrapped around her waist as they drifted off it was the least of her concerns.

Until she woke up the next morning, that is. She was both saddened and relieved to see that Logan had extricated himself from the bed. It was only eight o'clock as it was, and for Logan to get out before her dad woke up he had to have lost out on quite a bit of sleep. Meaning he was probably even more exhausted than she was.

Now I am responsible for my boyfriend's sleep deprivation, and not for a fun reason. Something to feel guilty about after breakfast. Just going to add it to my list.

As she grabbed a sweatshirt and made her way to the kitchen, she worked on an explanation for her dad that would account for her bedraggled appearance and red rimmed eyes. But when she entered the brightly lit kitchen and saw her dad and Logan chatting over a cup of coffee, she discerned that she had been developing a cover story for the wrong scenario.

Deep breaths, Veronica. It can't be considered a walk of shame if no sex has been had.

"Hey, look who's up!" Her dad's booming voice interrupted the conversation she was trying to have with Logan, utilizing only the force of her stare. How did one communicate, "What the hell is going on?" without saying a word?

Probably involves eyebrows. Logan was always better at speaking eyebrow than I was.

"What the hell is going on?" She opted to verbalize the question rather than strive for subtlety.

"Funny story," her dad began, getting up from the stool beside Logan so she could occupy it. "I woke up a little bit ago only to run into Logan here in the hallway, doing his best to sneak out of the house."

"I was thwarted."

She scrunched up her face and shook her head at him, finding his obvious statement only kind of amusing. "You think?"
"Sweetie, I thought I had banned co-ed sleepovers once you turned six."

She narrowed her eyes at him, trying to interpret the odd combination of sternness and amusement she heard in his voice. "Since you've provided him with toast and coffee, I'm guessing you don't have plans to kill him."

"Maybe I just want him to be alert as he faces his impending doom."

Logan raised an eyebrow and lifted his coffee mug to his lips, taking a sip. "I don't like this joke thread."

"It's what you get for using the, 'Let Veronica explain' defense. If you had spilled, this would have all been over by now and you would have been the good child."

The choking sound that came from Logan could have been the result of coffee going down the wrong pipe. Or, it was an indication that he was thinking the same thing she was.

Logan Echolls? One of my father's children? And now he's the good one? Which I guess makes me the older child who gets blamed for everything.

Keith reached up into the counter and pulled down a coffee mug. Veronica was about to ask him what he was doing, as he already had a mug for himself, but when he added two sugars and plenty of cream, she realized he was making the cup for her. She'd long since given up drinking coffee black and she was pleased to see her dad acclimate.

As she reached for the mug, he pulled it back a few inches. "This coffee comes with conditions. Explanation please."

She rolled her eyes and took it from his hands, keeping her eyes fixed on her father even as she took a gulp of the beverage. "Logan slept over. We woke up. Now we're drinking coffee. What's for breakfast?"

Eyes darting back and forth between her dad and Logan, she was pleased that her dad looked halfway amused at her avoidance of the subject. Logan, however, was concentrating solely on his coffee mug, looking anything but entertained. Before she could fully register why he looked so sullen, she heard her dad 'tsk.'

"If you think the coffee came with conditions, you can only guess what the pancakes are going to require."

"Pancakes? You were going to make pancakes?"

"With chocolate chips," he added, grabbing a spatula from the stovetop and waving it in the air to emphasize his point. "And they can be yours in exchange for just a teeny bit of explanation."

Veronica looked down at her mug and took another sip, providing herself with just enough time to figure out what to say. It wasn't a lie, exactly, but it did leave out some information. Information she knew her dad needed to know but she wasn't ready to give in that moment. "I couldn't sleep last night. Logan called and came over. We talked for a while then fell asleep."

That'll hopefully appease him for the moment. Now I'm ready to collect on those pancakes anytime, dad.

The lines of both her dad's and Logan's jaws tensed. She knew what accounted for her dad's response, but Logan's wasn't making sense to her.
"Nightmares again, kiddo?"

She shrugged, keeping her eyes turned downward. "Sometimes. Not as bad as they used to be."

At the mention of the nightmares, a topic that she hadn't yet broached with Logan, he seemed to relax. She didn't know if it was from relief that she had told the truth, or if it was a conscious effort to put her more at ease as they discussed another topic she'd rather avoid. "You have nightmares?"

"Not all the time. Just when I'm really tense or have a lot on my mind."

"You're still meeting with Joanna though, right? That's going well?" her dad asked.

Ignoring Logan's sharp gaze at that question, another little detail of her life to get him caught up on, she nodded. "Yeah, dad, it's good."

"Is Joanna your 'kind of' therapist?"

I have not had enough coffee to handle this ping pong match of questions that dad and Logan have going on. I'm not sure if I'm a spectator trying to keep up, or the actual ball.

Logan's question stole her attention away from her dad, but he wasn't looking at her anymore as he played with the spoon he had used to stir his coffee.

"Yeah. It got too expensive so I had to quit. Then a month later she called and offered to let me pay for therapy with lattes. We're sort of friends."

'Sort of' was definitely the operative phrase, and that was just how Veronica liked it. It wasn't that she didn't care for Joanna, but it was nice to have someone who remained disentangled from the daily aspects of her life. Someone who could offer unsolicited opinions that were actually welcome. Veronica wasn't entirely certain if trading coffee for therapy was considered ethical, but it was definitely not the most questionable thing she'd ever done. And if she was screwed up enough to have a therapist call her and offer free therapy, it probably meant it was needed.

"Alright, you've earned pancakes. Gonna take a quick shower, then they're yours. Logan? You staying for breakfast?"

Logan gave a curt nod and then looked back down at the countertop.

Either Logan has developed a gluten allergy in the past six hours, making the thought of pancakes unpleasant, or I've done something. Again. This looks like the kind of surly only I ever inspire in him.

As her dad left the kitchen, she swung her legs around on the stool and faced Logan, reaching for his hand. "So that went a lot better than I expected."

Logan jerked his hand away from her and grunted, taking another sip of coffee. The clench of his jaw told her he wasn't mildly disagreeable due to a lack of sleep or a real breakfast. He was actually pissed.

"What's wrong?"

"Nice equivocation there, Veronica."

She folded her arms across her chest, assuming what she sometimes thought of as her battle posture. "Meaning what exactly, Logan?"

"Guess telling your dad the truth is a lot harder in the light of day."
There it was. Logan hadn't refrained from providing her dad with an explanation because he didn't know what to say. He had done so assuming she'd want to explain everything to him in that moment. Something that hadn't even occurred to her, honestly.

"That's not fair." She rotated away from Logan, trying to assemble the words that would be her defense. She held onto her coffee, feeling the comforting warmth radiate from the mug. "Need I remind you, Logan," her voice, while low, was all sharp edges. "That I was the one who intended to leave your place two nights ago so I could tell my dad? And you convinced me to stay."

"And yet you lied to him just now."

"I didn't lie. I couldn't sleep. You called and came over. All those things happened."

Logan rolled his eyes and puffed out a breath of air, communicating how much he didn't believe her. The coffee, despite the cream and sugar, tasted bitter in her mouth. She'd had enough.

Walking over to the sink, she poured the coffee down the drain and kept her back to Logan. "That's right. Veronica Mars, she never changes. Once a liar, always a liar." She turned around, gripping onto the counter behind her. "Or maybe I got three hours of sleep last night. Maybe I'm emotionally wrung out and wanted to wait just a little while until I felt better again." She turned her eyes down to her feet, toeing the linoleum so her socked feet burrowed further into her slippers. "But your answer makes more sense, I guess. I probably never intended to say anything."

It was only a matter of time, I suppose, for old issues to creep up between us. Honestly, given our previous pattern, I thought it was going to me throwing them in his face.

With a shake of her head, she made to leave the kitchen. Logan could stay or he could let himself out. She couldn't care less.

Her feet made the transition from linoleum to carpet and she felt Logan's arms around her waist and his breath on her neck. She knew she could elbow him away. Get him to back off. Or she could stand there and listen to his explanation.

Her body was rigid, but she stayed where she was.

"I guess I'm a little emotionally wrung out, too."

That small reminder, that she and Logan were now shouldering this burden together, broke through her ire.

She nodded, her back still to him, and let out a sigh. "Yeah. Makes sense."

Releasing his grip on her waist, Logan took a step back, allowing her the chance to face him. He looked more than a little ashamed of their early morning argument and was rubbing the back of his neck in that familiar demonstration of unease. And that's what it took for her to soften completely.

Yes the gesture was familiar. Yes they were the same people. But they were standing in her father's new kitchen in the house he had bought. And her dad kind of approved of Logan. And rather than shoot barbs at him she had accepted his apology. They were small growth steps, but they were something. This didn't have to be a big deal unless she made it one.

As she thought about that, it occurred to her that she liked this new mix of her and Logan. This bizarre combination of the people they once were and the people they had grown into.

"Maybe we should save our bitter snark for when the other person is being especially boneheaded,"
she suggested.

Logan smiled at her and then cautiously reached a hand out to take hold of hers. "That leaves us with reasonably talking out our issues first, though."

"It's been working the past couple days."

"Yeah. It has."

She took a small step forward and stood on her tiptoes, placing a soft peck on the side of his mouth. A part of her wanted to deepen the kiss and affirm him that their small squabble was over, but she was still aware that her dad could enter the room at any moment. "So, pancakes?"

"I thought your dad was going to make them."

"Don't tell him I told you this, but yours are better."

After Logan left, trudging back to his own house wearing, to Veronica's amusement, his pajamas from the night before, Veronica showered and got ready for the remainder of the day. Months without any leads and now she was accumulating new ones quicker than her brain could actually process.

First, she had to follow up on what she had originally told Logan: that something had occurred in the days prior to her returning to Neptune that had initiated her stalker's deviation from his previous pattern.

It was times like these that made Veronica thankful for medical school. Her life was scheduled down to the second, and her planner contained a detailed record of what she had done the day the sketch in question had been sent.

8:00 AM – Final ethics class
9:30 AM – Study group – library room A
11:30 AM – Coffee with Joanna
1:45 PM – Lunch with Wallace
2:30 PM – Final pharmacology class
4:00 PM – Study at home
6:00 PM – Dinner with Liz and Beth at home
7:30 PM – 10:30 PM – Study at home

If her suspicions were correct, she had said or done something during the hours of that day that had led the stalker to break his pattern. It had to have occurred prior to 4:00 PM so that the stalker had time to get the package to the post office.

Her classes had gone much as they always did, and unless Wallace was her stalker, there was no reason to conclude that whatever it was happened during her time with him.

The most probable location was where she'd had coffee with Joanna. Their meeting had been scheduled for a full two hours at a coffee shop near campus. Despite it often being crowded, they were usually able to find a table. The noise of others chatting allowed them to have privacy in the midst of chaos.

She replayed the conversation they'd had that day as she put on her makeup. The distraction of the activity calmed her thoughts enough that the memory came to her easily.
"Joanna, I can't keep coming back here. I can't keep coming back to this imaginary place in my head where Logan Echolls is the one who got away."

"Well, Veronica, if you can't go back there, where will you go?"

Veronica frowned at such a direct question. One she should have known Joanna would ask. And one she didn't really have an answer to. "I don't know yet. But maybe if I go back to Neptune then I can finally get some closure. Say goodbye to Logan once and for all." At Joanna's answering smile, Veronica felt her level of indignation rise. "Stop smiling at me like that."

"How do you think I'm smiling at you, Veronica?"

She rolled her eyes and took another sip of her latte. "Like you know something I don't. And stop repeating my name."

Her relationship, or lack thereof, with Logan had been discussed at length that day. What she intended to say to him. Coping strategies in case the conversation didn't go well. Tactics for getting the conversation going if Logan stalled. Together they had made a list of things within Veronica's control and those things outside it. The list of things within Veronica's control got shorter as Joanna crossed a number of them off.

If her stalker had been in the coffee shop, he could have easily positioned himself to hear the majority of her conversation with Joanna. A few text books and coffee mugs spread across his table and he would have easily blended into the setting of the café. Based on what he gathered from said conversation, he could have concluded that any feelings she had for Logan were gone.

She was reminded of the cumulative message of the sketches, "When you're ready for me to love you, I will…"

For whatever reason, this man thought she was ready for whatever came at the end of the sentence. He was trying to make his grand overture, and deviated from his pattern to expedite the process. She still maintained that he was getting tired of waiting for her to find him. Which was more than a little frightening. How long until he decided they needed to meet in person for that overture to be communicated?

Veronica's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a received text. Picking up her phone she smiled when she saw it was from Mac. They'd made plans to hang out that day, but Mac had been vague about the exact time, citing that she'd need to spend some with her family.

12:10 PM – From Mac to Veronica
I've been in town for three hours and already need a family break. Love them. But, sheesh.

12:12 PM – From Veronica to Mac
Pick you up in twenty. You know how I said I needed help with something?

12:15 PM – From Mac to Veronica
Oh my god! Thank you!

Veronica's original plan, knowing that Mac was coming into town, was to use and abuse her technical prowess. But that had also been when she'd intended to keep the details of what she was investigating to herself. With the circle of people she was responsible for telling ever widening, she wasn't certain she could, in good conscience, hide this from Mac too. Mac had risked hacking into Jake Kane's hard drive, for goodness sake. Maybe loyalty like that wasn't something she should turn her nose at.
I should mark this moment down for posterity. Joanna would be so proud of me.

Just a little after 12:30 PM, Veronica picked up Mac. They hadn't seen each other in close to a year, but they managed to pretend that this was just a casual hangout that they weren't all that excited about. Although, the way they spoke a little more quickly than normal and kept talking over one another indicated their true level of excitement.

Mac had taken a job in San Francisco right after college graduation, working as a programmer for one of the many software companies based there. Starting the prior fall, she had begun taking night classes at the University of San Francisco, not necessarily because she needed to but because she had to remain competitive in a male dominated field. From what she had told Veronica, it left her exhausted most days, a point of much bonding between the two friends. What did it say about their drive as a group that Wallace, in grad school for mechanical engineering, had it the easiest of the three?

The drive to San Diego felt longer than either woman remembered. After grabbing tacos from a taco truck, the two wandered through Balboa Park, only partaking of those things which were free. They people watched, listened to a 90's cover band fronted by a man who called himself Mr. Yes, (many jokes were made about how Mr. No was more apropos) before grabbing iced beverages from a coffee cart and sitting in the shade under a large tree.

Mac was fixated on pulling out tufts of grass and sprinkling the blades around the lawn as she updated Veronica on her life in the Bay Area. School was good, but tough. Job was less than great, but she didn't have time to search for something new. Men were abundant, but she had no desire to go out on a date with any of them. When a companionable silence settled over them, Veronica cleared her throat, steeling herself.

"So, if I were to say hypothetically," Veronica was cut off by the sound of Mac's groan. "What?"

"Hypotheticals with you are never hypotheticals. They're always terrifying realities."

"Rude."

And people have said I'm unpredictable, but Mac sure seems to have my number.

"Lay it on me."

"Well," Veronica stretched out the word so it lasted about three seconds, figuring out as she did how to make her request of Mac. Deciding to be direct, yet vague, she continued. "Let's say, hypothetically, I had a secret admirer of sorts who I felt was admiring me a little too much and I wanted to get him to back off. You think you could help me sniff him out?"

"You have a stalker?"

Yeah. She definitely has my number. Who's been teaching that class on decoding Veronica Mars? Maybe we can advertise it and my stalker will show up. Then police can pour in from every entrance trapping him there..

"Secret admirer sounds much more romantic."

"Do you find this person to be romantic?"

Veronica curled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. "Not so much."

"Then let's call a spade a stalker." Mac leaned back on her hands, stretching her legs out in front of her and crossing them at the ankle. "What can you tell me about him. Or her, I guess."

"Definitely a 'him'. He has a very distinct pattern. Stretched out over years at a time. Enrolled at Neptune, Hearst, and UCLA, under different aliases. All of the aliases are male. And he may have been at the same coffee shop I was at the Wednesday before I left Chicago."

Mac's attention was turned away from Veronica as she listened to the series of facts get rattled off. At the mention of the coffee shop, she sat up straight. "What's near the coffee shop?"

_I recognize that look. Mac smells a lead. And if I know her, it'll be of the tech variety._

"Couple small clothing stores. A kickboxing gym. A bank is right next to it. I think there's a florist."

"You had me at bank. This should be pretty simple and painless." Mac brushed a trace of dirt off her hands, as if demonstrating the ease of the task. "If you've got a week to spare."

"You're going to hack into the ATM camera?"

"I mean, it's a long-shot, I guess. He could have approached from the other side of the building. But if he walked by the ATM, the camera would have captured him."

"I was there for two hours. Maybe we can get the stills for the half hour before and the half hour after?"

"Then we can upload them all and cross reference them to the 1,000 or so students at Neptune High."

Veronica was feeding off of Mac's optimism, until this suggestion when she was reminded that there wasn't actually a picture on file of the stalker under any alias.

_Now for my next trick: I will put a damper on Mac's enthusiasm and watch her come up with a new solution. I like having all my crime fighting sidekicks be advanced in their fields. Makes this all much simpler._

"Small problem, my little Macaroon," Veronica smiled at the look of displeasure Mac shot her at the nickname, "he's not pictured in the yearbook. No record to cross reference."

Scrunching up her nose, Mac thought for another second before snapping her fingers, another idea obviously making itself apparent to her. "We can narrow it down though, right? Take out all the women, anyone who looks older than thirty or younger than twenty years old."

Veronica rubbed her hands together in malicious delight at this suggestion. "Then I get to play one of my favorite games: name that asshole. I've got a friend at the FBI who'd be happy to run them through a database or two for me." Veronica stood up, energized now that she had a specific task to focus on. "When can you get started?"

"Right away, but it's going to take me some time. My mom limits me to an hour on the computer per day." Mac had mumbled the last part of the sentence and spoke in such a low tone that Veronica wasn't certain she had heard her correctly.

"Excuse me?"

"Please don't make me say it again."
Veronica pressed her lips together in an attempt to stifle a laugh. "Why not just take the keys and your laptop and run?"

Mac's cheeks pinked the slightest amount even as she started to answer. "I tried that once. Now I have to hand over my copy of the keys before she'll give me my laptop."

"She confiscates your computer?" Veronica asked, looking away at Mac's nod, to bury her face in her shoulder and hide her ever-growing grin.

*I wish I could just pack Mac and Wallace and bring them with me wherever I live. My Neptune clan is in a class of its own.*

"Thank you for laughing at my pain. I wouldn't laugh at you if your dad took away your," Mac trailed off, obviously not knowing how to finish that sentence, "stethoscope."

In response, Veronica gaped at Mac. Admittedly her PI operations were much smaller scale than they had been in her college days, but she had more hobbies than school. At least she thought she must.

"Yes, Cindy Mackenzie, because all med students value their stethoscopes above all else."

"Would make playing doctor a lot easier. Speaking of which, how's Logan?"

*Granted, one may say I deserved that for laughing at her. And she did once describe me as worldly. Calling your bluff, Mackenzie.*

"Oh, so you want details now? Well...he does this one thing—"

Mac was up off the ground and backing away from Veronica before she could go further in her description.

Laughing, Veronica followed after her, mixing the remaining dredges of her beverage with her straw. "Thanks. You know for helping me. Even without all the details."

"Just tell me one thing. How worried should I be about this?"

She considered her answer carefully, not wanting to downplay the seriousness of the situation, but also not wanting to cause Mac to worry needlessly. "We're barely at DEFCON 4."

"You'll let me know if we get to DEFCON 3?"

Veronica smiled at her returning question. Not only because Mac knew enough to continue the analogy, but also because of how much trust was implied in that moment. For Veronica, this was another solid reason as to why Mac continued to be one of her closest confidantes. "You have an airplane I don't know about?"

"No, but I have a mean lead foot and a Toyota that I can make go zero to sixty in fifteen seconds."

"What more could a girl ask for?"

Without further discussion on the subject, they continued their walk through the park, tossing their empty cups in the trash as they made way for Veronica's car.

ATM surveillance photos weren't conclusive evidence, but they did form a start. The prospect of being a step closer to putting a face to the man who had made it his purpose to study hers made her feel calm in a way she hadn't in some time.
Yes, it had been a while since she'd been involved in an investigation of this level of complexity, but she was remembering what to do. That feeling of waking up was a comfort, in and of itself.

He had promised her posole. And that was Logan's sole reason for showing up to her dad's house with several bags of groceries. It had nothing to do with wanting to reassure himself she was fine. Or needing to know if Mac had helped her figure anything out. It certainly wasn't because he wanted to be around in the event that Keith didn't take her, "Hey daddy, I have a stalker" revelation well. It was all about posole.

Still, when Keith Mars answered the door and simply waved him in, Logan couldn't stop himself from narrowing his eyes to read Keith's expression. Did he look distressed? Uneasy? Both of those would indicate Veronica had already told him. But Keith looked quite at ease, helping Logan unpack grocery bags. Logan, in stark counterpoint, was on edge enough to start every time Keith opened a drawer or set something down on the counter.

"You okay there, Logan? You're a little jumpy."

"Fine, Mr. Mars. I just didn't get a lot of sleep last night." At Keith's look of interest, coupled with a side-cocked head and wide eyes, Logan rushed to explain. "I was out late with Wallace and then came over here around two. Took Veronica a while to get to sleep. And then we slept." He put a little more emphasis than necessary on the word 'slept', finishing off his answer with a nod.

Well done, Logan. Truthful, vague, not at all insinuating you've seen his daughter naked.

"Tell me. Did you and Veronica first bond at the age of twelve over your shared ability to avoid subjects you don't want to discuss?"

Logan shot Keith a small grin and grabbed the tomatoes and cilantro from the counter to give them a rinse. "Not really. But it quickly became a shared interest."

"And the kids are surprised they didn't make it last in college."

It was a joke that didn't quite land, but Logan chuckled anyway. Never let it be said that Logan couldn't do self-deprecating humor. Plus, it looked like maybe they had learned from past mistakes. At least a little.

He turned around holding the produce, suddenly forgetting where Keith kept his paper towels, knives, and cutting board. While Logan had been to Keith's house a few times, for the exact purpose of cooking dinner before, it had never been in this capacity. It had never been as Veronica's boyfriend. "Mr. Mars, is it okay I'm here?"

Reaching across the counter to grab the bag of tortilla chips, Keith's expression was quizzical, his eyebrows raised. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"I don't know." Logan, having located a knife, began chopping the onions and garlic. If he didn't actually look at Keith he thought he'd be able to hide the cautious optimism from his expression. The expression that made it apparent Logan wanted Keith's blessing. "I always thought you'd be the kind of dad to do the, 'stay away from my daughter' scare tactic."

"Logan, what are your intentions with my daughter?"

He felt his throat constrict and he set down the knife, finding himself at a loss for words for the first time in a long while. Veronica had mentioned her dad had joked about finding out what his intentions were. At least, he had thought it was a joke.
Apparently you must possess the last name 'Mars' to render me speechless. If Veronica and I ever have children they're taking my last name. Shit. No thinking about children while her scary father is near cutlery.

"My intentions?" 

Keith laughed at Logan's slightly strained tone of voice. "At ease, son. I know you care about her. And I've already told you she cares for you, too. But if you mess this up, I'll be forced to take her side."

Nodding, Logan resumed chopping. "Mr. Mars, if I'm stupid enough to mess this up again, I'll be taking her side, too."

Veronica walked into her dad's house, greeted by the smells of cumin and cilantro. She had noticed that Logan's SUV was parked in the driveway but her dad's car was missing. Those facts, combined with the specific aromas from the kitchen, led her to the conclusion that Logan was cooking. She was banking on the fact that Logan was making good on the offer he had made the previous week.

_The offer that he made before I promptly threw a fit because I was hurt that he made an effort to see my father but didn't make one to see me. Awww, memories._

"Dad? Logan?"

"Your dad ran out to get some stuff to make margaritas." Logan's voice carried from the kitchen into the living room and she smiled at the thought that her dad felt comfortable enough to leave the house under his care. Even if it only was for fifteen minutes.

It triggered a memory of the last time the three of them had eaten dinner together; much had changed in those five years. For one, she doubted that Logan would be content this time around to sit and smile as she and her dad volleyed. And she had no intention of silencing Logan if he said anything she found to be questionable. She thought him quite cute when he had to work hard to extricate his foot from his mouth.

Veronica kicked off her boots and then dropped her purse onto a chair as she headed into the kitchen. Her suspicions of exactly what Logan was making were confirmed when she peeked into the recycling bin and saw the empty cans of hominy and tomatoes.

Walking up behind him as he stood at the stove, she wrapped her arms around his waist, pressing her cheek to his back. "Seeing you twice in one day? What did I do to deserve such an honor?"

_Having him around all the time is going to be a hard thing to get un-used to when I head back to Chicago. Great, I just depressed myself._

"Didn't you know? I'm stalking you now."

They both simultaneously tensed at Logan's choice of words, and Veronica let out a nervous laugh.

_Didn't even have to wait for Dad to get here to witness Logan saying the wrong thing. I swear he used to be smoother in high school._

She pinched his side in mild chastisement.

"Too soon?" he asked.
"Gonna go with yes."

Logan turned so she could stand more comfortably at his side, and she peered into the soup pot as he gave it a stir. "Should be ready in about twenty minutes."

"We're eating dinner and drinking margaritas at five o'clock? I don't know if that means we're lushes or geriatrics."

"I know you never met my grandparents, but those things aren't exclusive."

"Hardy har," she said, helping herself to a handful of cheddar cheese that was piled on the cutting board. He smacked her hand away, but it only encouraged her to grab a bit more.

While she waited for Logan to finish slicing, or dicing, or fileting – she never did learn all the proper cooking terms – she got comfortable on a stool at the island. On the counter was a half-eaten bag of tortilla chips and she began to reward herself with snacking each time she figured out the next part of what she was going to tell her dad.

The first thing you should know is that I am fine.

Chip.

The second thing you should know is that I have a team of people helping me. Logan. Mac. Agent Baxter.

Chip.

The third thing you should know is that I've already promised to speak to a friend of Agent Baxter's after the holiday if I don't solve this before then.

Chip.

To put it simply, I'm being stalked.

No chip.

If those specific words left her mouth, her dad would go deaf in a haze of worry. No matter how she mentally phrased the actual confession to her father, it never came out in a way that was in any way reassuring. He wasn't going to be okay with what was happening. He wasn't going to be okay that she had kept this from him. And he was probably going to be hurt that Logan knew what was going on before he did.

That's it, Evil Veronica. You've convinced me it's better for everyone if dad just doesn't know. I deserve more chips for an evasion well crafted.

Logan reached across the counter and moved the bag of chips so she couldn't reach them.

It's like he knows I was trying to get myself out of this. I guess no chips, ever, if I refuse to talk to dad.

"They're just tortilla chips, Veronica. Eating them really shouldn't take this level of focused determination. Plus, it'll spoil your appetite."

"You know that's not true." She offered him a half-smile and dismissed his implied question with a wave of her hand. "Besides, I'm fine."

"Bullshit."
"Yeah." She breathed the word out on a sigh, looking down at the countertop. Sometimes when she had a difficult time talking to Joanna, Joanna would instruct her to start in the middle. She claimed that the beginning of most conversations was filler anyway. Without explaining what she was doing, Veronica decided to try it with Logan. "My dad has always been the most important person in my life. You know that?"

She looked up only long enough to see Logan nod his head. "He's taken such good care of me, even when I was a royal brat. But, I can't get around the fact that I've always felt I needed to take care of him, too. I never let him know about the really hard stuff because we're the same in a lot of ways."

She flattened her palms on the counter, spreading out her fingers and then sliding them back together. "We both kind of think that if the world falls apart, it's somehow our fault."

Though her gaze was still fixed downward, she felt Logan move to sit on the stool beside her. Steeling her confidence, she took a deep breath and continued. "He still doesn't know a lot of what's happened to me. Doesn't know about Shelly's party. Or Cassidy. Or why I broke into the Kane's house in the first place. He's my dad, and he's going to think that this mess is somehow his fault. That he should have been able to do something to prevent it from happening."

She folded her hands together on the counter and leaned forward to rest her chin on them, turning so she could look at Logan. He was the picture of concern: forehead wrinkled, eyes completely earnest.

"I don't want to do that to him," she whispered.

He cupped her cheek and she turned her face to rest more firmly in his palm. "Veronica, it's not a chore to love you."

She tried to smile, but she was certain it came out more as a grimace. "Yeah."

_Not sure I believe you on that one, Logan. Something kind of messed up you and I share, I guess._

"Come here." He grabbed onto the edge of her barstool and scooted it closer so he could easily pull her to his chest. "How was seeing Mac?"

She smiled into the fabric of his shirt appreciating more than she could express the change of topic. It was a relief to not have Logan respond with a series of trite platitudes. They both knew she was going to keep her promise and tell Keith; all she wanted was an opportunity to live in denial land for a bit longer.

And, as irritating as it was when her first instinct was to conceal, she found her time with Joanna was beginning to make it so that voluntarily sharing was becoming a bit easier.

"It was good. I think my secret admirer may have been at the coffee shop I was at last Wednesday. Mac is going to do her usual brand of wizardry and get me some photos from a couple surveillance cameras. Then we'll narrow them down and I'll send them off to my old supervisor at the FBI."

"One of you on your own is scary. The two of you together are a terror to behold."

Pressing herself a little more firmly to his chest, she looked up at him. "'Terror to behold' was actually the name of the band we thought about forming in college."

"What?"

"We were going to wear lots of lycra. Only cover songs by one hit wonder hair metal bands. I called the keytar."
"And Mac would play something properly obscure like the penny whistle or didgeridoo?"

"The bagpipes, actually. You're picturing me wearing lycra, aren't you?"

Logan chuckled into her scalp and then placed a kiss on her temple. "Wouldn't be the first time."

When she heard the door open and close, she sat up straight, a feeling of dread settling in her stomach. She'd never admit it, but part of her had hoped Logan would absolve her of this task. That he'd tell her it'd be better if the two of them kept her dad out of the investigation for a bit longer. But, rather than do that, he gave her a firm nod and squeezed her hand.

"Who wants tequila!"

Logan looked over his shoulder at the direction of Keith's voice, but Veronica put her hands on either side of his face and pulled his attention back to her.

"Inspirational quote." Her words were rushed and she looked almost panicked as she calculated the time it'd take for her dad to take off his shoes, hang up his jacket and then enter the kitchen.

*Having to tell my dad about this is a hundred times more overwhelming than telling Logan ever was. Need a big time distraction. And since sex is out of the question, this will have to do.*

"Huh?"

"Hit me with something. About courage being like a plant, and how it only needs sunshine and a little bit of water to grow. Inspire me."

He ran his fingers through the tips of her hair, tucking a strand behind her ear. "Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear - not absence of fear. Mark Twain."

The words seemed to come to him unbidden. Her guess was that his current job, requiring him to read a wide variety of literature, made the arsenal of his quotes much grander.

She nodded, mumbling the words to herself. "Resist stuff. I can do that."

"Logan, I don't even care what it tastes like. I feel satisfied just smelling whatever it is you're cooking."

Veronica dropped her hands from Logan's face and they both swiveled from where they were sitting to face her dad. As he set the bags down on the counter, and took in both her and Logan's expression, a little worry mixed with the always bright glimmer in his eye.

"You kids okay?"

Veronica nodded as Logan stood up, collecting bowls and glasses from the cupboard.

"Yeah, dad, we're good. I just—" she trailed off, looking at her hands once more and then she remembered the soft timbre of Logan's voice, encouraging her not only that afternoon but many times before that, to do the hard thing.

*Resisting was my middle name for a while. I've resisted what I wanted. Resisted who I am. Resisted listening to others. Maybe now I can put that ability to actual good use.*

"—I have something to tell you." Over her dad's shoulder she caught Logan's eye. He grinned at her and gave her another quick nod as he mouthed the words, 'Cowboy up.'

Logan seemed to think she had already accomplished something great by starting the conversation.
With that small reassurance and nudge to continue, she felt the fear of disappointing, or upsetting, or hurting her dad release its grip on her. She turned her attention back to her dad and, as she started explaining everything, it felt something like victory.
There was a time when Veronica thought the most unsettling sound in the world was that of her dad yelling. Now, sitting in the kitchen next to him as he flipped through sketches, notes, and photocopies, she was convinced that his silences were actually more disconcerting. Logan sat on the other side of her, occasionally picking up a sketch even though he'd already practically memorized each of them.

Despite being focused on her dad while awaiting his reaction, she could also sense Logan's discomfort. He was noticeably tense, likely unsure as to his place in the current Mars family dynamic.

*I wonder if dad would notice if I took this moment to slip out the door. I would just make sure my cell was turned on. The words of inevitable disappointment can be communicated just as well over the phone as in person.*

Keith sighed and, as he did, Veronica sat up a little straighter, anticipating the worst.

*And here we go.*

"The PO box numbers for Neptune and Chicago are the same. That can't be a coincidence."

Encouraged by the fact that he wanted to discuss details first, Veronica relaxed her posture. She shook her head, sorting through some of the papers, having to lean a little closer to her dad.

"I don't think so. And look," she said, pointing to the copy of the application she received from the LA branch of the post office, "that same number was requested in LA but was unavailable."

"You have any sort of hunch as to what the numbers 1004 and 105 mean?"

*This is new. He's got to be upset that I've waited this long to tell him, but he still wants to know what I think.*

Her eyes flicked to Logan for a second and then back to her dad. "I think they correspond to dates. October 2004 and January 2005, but I'm not sure."

Keith nodded, rubbing a hand over his face as he did. "Makes sense."

Silence again descended on the room as Keith looked back down at the counter, picking up the stack of notes she and Logan had made the previous evening. Veronica was anxious for her dad to offer his opinion, of course, but she also wanted him to commend her in some way. Okay yes, the case itself had been ignored for a number of years. However, after working so hard on putting the pieces together, she was proud of the work she'd done.

It didn't escape her notice that the amount of leads she had found exponentially increased once she asked Logan for help. Something Agent Baxter would certainly point out, considering it had been at her insistence Veronica opened up when she did.

"And what about this package that was delivered to Logan's house? Nothing turned up when the Sheriff's department came over?"
"No, Mr. Mars," Logan answered. "Just the security camera, but the guy was wearing all black and you couldn't see his face."

Logan had been so quiet that his voice in the midst of their discussion almost felt out of place. However, she found she also gained comfort in his being attuned to the details they were discussing.

"I still want to see the tape." Her dad shook his head again, setting down the papers he held in his hand.

The clench of his jaw and the way he held his shoulders told Veronica everything she needed to know. Even if he wasn't saying anything, he disapproved of the way she had handled the case.

*Does that feeling of wanting your parent's approval ever go away?*

"Just say it, dad." She crossed her arms tightly against her chest. Her personal version of armor.

"Okay, Veronica. This is shoddy work, but you know that. By waiting so long to investigate, you've lost evidence. By not having me at Logan's house after this was delivered," he picked up and waived the sketch in question, "we've lost time."

"I did the best I could, dad. I went with my gut. Isn't that what you always do?"

The look he gave her was indulgent at best. It did nothing but piss her off. "Yes, but my gut was informed by more than twenty years as a cop."

"Whereas mine was informed by zilch."

"You jump to conclusions, sweetie. That's always been a weakness of yours."

"I think I've done pretty well. It's not like I was on my own here. The FBI was helping me. They're pretty well known. Maybe you've heard of them?"

While he nodded in response, she knew it wasn't because he was agreeing with her. He was formulating his next attack.

*I don't want to feel like this. Like it's my dad against me.*

Logan placed a hand on Veronica's shoulder which, while she knew was intended to comfort, only startled her. She took a few deep breaths, trying to calm her temper, never looking away from her dad.

"Logan," her dad began, "could you give us a minute?"

When she looked over at him, she could read the hesitation on his face. Despite not wanting to leave, he stood, directing a soft smile at Veronica and a curt nod to her dad. It may have been wishful thinking, but she chose to interpret the differences in the gestures as an indication that he was on her side. From over her dad's shoulder she watched him leave the kitchen.

"He was pretty quiet," her dad observed.

"He's good at letting me fight my own battles."

"This doesn't have to be a battle, Veronica." Her dad placed a hand over hers where they lay clasped on the counter. "You and I are better than this, kid. We have to be better than this."

She remained unmoving for another second, allowing his words to register.
Wait, that didn't sound like a chastisement.

His short reproof didn't sound like a disregard for what she wanted. It almost sounded like a plea from him to her. And she understood to a certain degree.

There was a time when the work she did as a PI was something they talked about. Discussed over dinner. Mused over during cups of coffee. But the more entrenched she got in that world, the more closed off she became, knowing just how often she'd garner her dad's disapproval. His hints that he'd wanted her to do anything other than be a PI weren't all that subtle.

Though she did turn away from that part of her life in her undergrad days, only really rediscovering it in med school when she needed a bit of cash, she realized how much she missed it. The thought of her dad thinking she was ill qualified to handle her own case was a devastating prospect.

Maybe we don't have to play this like a game of spy versus spy. Maybe it can be a game of spies versus creepy ass stalker.

"Full disclosure." Her words were a promise.

When he nodded, accepting her words, his relief was apparent. He put a hand at the back of her head, touching his forehead to hers. "Full disclosure," he echoed.

"But I get to be the boss."

"Only if you listen to your minions."

"Of course. I have the smartest minions in the biz."

"And I want to be the chief minion. You tell me everything. Deal?"

She nodded, gesturing to the materials splayed on the counter. "It's all there."

Looks of gratitude bounced back and forth between them and, after running a hand over her hair, her dad looked over his shoulder into the living room. "Logan. You can come back in."

He walked into the kitchen seconds later, jacket on and cell phone in hand. He entered the room cautiously, as if he uncertain he had heard her dad's beckoning call correctly. When he shot her a questioning glance, she provided him with one in return.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Tossing the phone between his hands, Logan shrugged. Mild uncertainty, displayed in the wrinkles of his forehead, was still prominent. "You said you guys needed a minute. I was going to take a walk."

The microwave display was a little far off, but Veronica squinted to make out the numbers. "We asked for one. You gave us three. Talk over."

Keith stood up and patted Logan on the back. "It's the Mars way, son. We may pack a lot of heat but we get things done quickly," he said, walking around the island to pull a beverage out of the refrigerator.

At that statement Veronica and Logan's eyes widened and met across the kitchen. To suppress a laugh, Veronica smashed her lips together. Her vehement head shake was the best way she knew to tell Logan to let the subject drop.
Oh god, dad. You just waved a red flag in front of a bull's face.

While Logan's lips turned down into a small pout, she took his lack of reply as concession to her silent request. She wanted to applaud his maturity but a series of retorts, all inappropriate, were cycling in her own head. Undoubtedly Logan was participating in the same mental exercise.

Packing a lot of heat isn't just a Mars trait. Logan has had the corner on that since high school. Shit. We have to get out of here now.

Jumping off her barstool, she grabbed Logan's hand and pulled him out of the kitchen. "Actually, Logan, that walk was a great idea. I'll join you."

The moment they were out of Keith's sight, Logan moved behind Veronica, throwing a cursory glance over his shoulder, and then wrapping his arms around her waist. "We could do time trials?" he whispered into her ear.

"My dad might like you, but I don't think he'll approve of our copulating under his roof. Especially while he's here."

"Your use of four syllable words to talk about sex is really turning me on."

Separating herself from him long enough to grab one of her dad's zip up hoodies from a hook by the door, she looked at him from under her lashes, then rose up on her toes. "Fornication," she whispered directly in his ear, drawing the words out in a slow drawl.

Logan swallowed and then nodded his head. "Yeah. That's the stuff."

Laughing again, she took his hand and led him outside. "Down boy."

There was still plenty to concern her about the uncertainty of her case, but it'd keep for a few minutes. Her dad was doubtless still sitting at the kitchen island adding his own notes to those she had collected. It was going to be another late night of evidence sifting, so she was going to allow herself the indulgence of a post-dinner walk.

There weren't any cars on the road and they were the only people out for a walk, even though the evening was mild. While she was certain they were alone, her senses were still piqued, sharply observing everything around her.

Allowing herself to soften the slightest amount, she wrapped Logan's arm around her shoulder and played with the fingers of his right hand. It was okay to enjoy this moment of peace, she reasoned, spending little time wondering how long it would exactly last.

By early afternoon the following day, most of the hours she'd been awake had been spent with a cup of coffee in hand, arguing with her dad over the finer details of her case.

She maintained the stalker was unequivocally a man. Keith sided with Agent Baxter that it could be a woman. She maintained the stalker wasn't dangerous, just obsessive. He pointed out the amount of recent fluctuations in the stalker's pattern indicated that he or she was unraveling.

Logan texted her a little after noon, having finished his session with Thomas. It was perfectly timed for the moment she needed a break. He seemed ready to supply one, offering to bring over takeout for lunch.

Veronica was well aware her time away from school was being equally divided between working on
her case and spending time with Logan. Something she allowed in large part because their easy proximity was temporary. Being together so much in the moment didn't change the fact that they lived two-thousand miles away from one another.

*It's going to be a long dry spell until we see each other again. Not like I'm expecting him to pack up his life here in Neptune and move to Chicago.*

One disadvantage of having more people in the know about the stalker was that there was now an ever present relay team running around her.

Her dad was purposefully hovering. Mac apparently had nothing to report, but still kept texting to confirm that. Wallace, still not completely informed but sensing that something was up, kept calling her just to chat. Her walk with Logan the previous evening had turned into a pleasantly PG-13 grope and make out session on the beach when a call from her dad interrupted, leaving them both more than a little frustrated.

*One night of stellar sex does not make up for two years of being apart.*

The evidence spread around her was losing its ability to keep her engaged. It was beyond frustrating knowing there were new leads to collect, both from Mac and at Neptune High, but all were outside her grasp at that moment. Being a Sunday the school office was closed and something told her that her previous tricks for getting in undetected wouldn't be successful five years later.

A sudden urge to go back in time to prevent her past self from telling Van Clemmons to change where he hid his passwords overwhelmed her.

Glancing at the clock she smiled, knowing that Logan would be arriving soon. Her happiness had as much to do with seeing him as needing sustenance besides coffee and a piece of toast.

Standing up to drop her mug and plate in the sink, she noticed her dad's intent expression. His lips were pursed as he scribbled a few notes and then set his notebook aside with a deep sigh.

"What?" she asked.

"Maybe you're right, sweetie."

"I'm sorry. What?"

"I said, maybe you're right."

"One more time, just for the sake of clarity."

"This is all quite personal. Either this person is someone in your life already, or he or she thinks of himself as being a part of it."

Leaning forward onto the counter, she glanced at her dad from the corner of her eye. "Yeah. I know."

Rather than be encouraged that her instincts seemed to be in tune with her dad's, it only caused a feeling of unease to well up. "Come on, dad. Your theory about that would be?"

"That maybe it could be an ex-boyfriend of yours."

At that Veronica snorted out a laugh, shaking her head in disagreement before the sentence had a chance to land. "I don't think so. I've exhausted that theory."
"Hear me out, honey."

_Do I prefer Chinese water torture or discussing, in detail, my past relationships with my father?_

The doorbell rang and Veronica shot her dad another incredulous look, dismissing the entire idea, before jumping off the stool.

There wasn't time enough for anticipation to properly build, but even so a suspicious fluttering in her stomach immediately developed at the sight of Logan standing on the porch. He beamed as he held out the bag of Thai takeout, still managing to curl her into some semblance of a hug despite his arms being full.

"Not sure you know what you've gotten yourself into. Dad and I are theorizing."

Logan kicked the door shut behind him and then toed off his shoes. The actions, though quite casual, managed to be chock full of his usual brand of grace and she couldn't help but smile.

"You mean, I'm going to get to witness the Mars minds in action?"

Taking one of the bags from him she headed into the kitchen, intentionally putting a smidge extra swish into her step as she walked. "If you sit in the corner and are very quiet we might let you stay."

"Now that's hospitality," her dad offered, effortlessly picking up the stream of conversation. "You hope you've done right by your kids, but you never really know for sure."

She ignored him, opting to instead gather silverware and napkins. There was very little doubt her dad would continue their prior conversation even without her prompting. It was unnecessary to remind him of what they'd been discussing.

Handing him a fork, she held his stare for a second and then relented with a roll of her eyes, waving a hand to get him to continue.

"It makes sense, honey."

"What makes sense?" Logan asked.

"You being single for so long," she answered, handing him a fork as well. "The amount of hair gel you use is startling."

"And with charm like that, it's a wonder you weren't snapped up years ago."

Biting her lip to hide her smile she paused when she realized she had instinctively put the containers of pad kee mao and red curry in front of Logan. She'd assumed he'd gotten those for the two of them to share. Such an odd thing to feel self-conscious about but she wanted to take it back.

_It's possible these aren't his favorites anymore. Possible he doesn't want to share._

Logan caught her eye and, somehow understanding the source of her hesitation, opened the container in front of him. His hand wave was an invitation to dig in. To share.

"Red curry is pretty hard to eat right out of the container. We could always eat off, I don't know, plates."

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. The familiarity of the script amused her. They'd had that same argument countless times in high school and at Hearst. And he still remembered.
"It's not the same," she and her dad said simultaneously.

Holding his container of spicy noodles and a box of spring rolls in the other, Logan stood up, noting with a jab of his elbow the spread of pages across the countertop. "What's going on here?"

Veronica left the kitchen and headed into the dining room, grabbing another couple takeout boxes. "Dad I and spent our morning in the land of pure conjecture."

"Is that more or less magical than the world of pure imagination?"

"Less. Much less."

"You guys come up with anything?"

She sat down, curling her legs up under her. Picking up a napkin from the center of the table, she unfolded it with a flick of her wrist, and then set it in her lap. "Yup. My dad thinks it's you."

"I didn't say that." Shaking his head, Keith sat down and looked at Logan with sober sincerity. "I didn't say that."

Veronica rolled her eyes, leaning over to twirl some of Logan's noodles around her fork. "Okay. Maybe it was implied."

"And here I thought that Veronica was the only Mars who seriously thought I was capable of evil." Logan aimed a simpering smile at Veronica and then relished in taking a bite of a spring roll.

Not smart, Logan. We're pretty evenly matched in the 'who behaved worse' game. And he's still my dad which means I'd win anyway.

"Innocent until we say otherwise. It's the Mars family motto," her dad said.

"So. Which ex-boyfriend of Veronica's are we nailing to the wall? My money's on Deputy Leo. Means. Opportunity. Mumbles a lot, so he's probably confessed several times and you guys have just never heard it."

"Where is Deputy Handsome these days, dad?" She tilted her head in her dad's direction, noting Logan's frown at her choice of adjective.

"San Jose last I heard. Just got promoted to Sergeant."

"See! He could be right under our noses. Poised and ready to strike with his art supplies." As he spoke, Logan wove the spring roll under his nose for emphasis and then took another bite.

It was charming the way Logan was working so hard to add levity to her day. However, she knew he had a sharp mind and, despite the series of jokes he was making, he was still gathering information.

"Actually." Her dad’s sharp tone alerted Veronica to the fact he was about to posit a legitimate theory. Most likely, considering it concerned an ex-boyfriend, one she would not care for. "I was thinking a little more recent. Like maybe that Skyler guy."

Veronica's snort of derision startled both Keith and Logan. "Yeah, dad, I'm going to go ahead and say no to that one."

"Sweetie, hear me out."
"No. He could barely tolerate me while we were actually dating. Why would he stalk me for years if his intent was to treat me badly?"

"Could have been a power play. Wanted to prove to himself he could. From everything you told me. that guy was cold, calculating, and manipulative. He fits the profile."

Logan set his fork down and leaned back in his chair, communicating ease, but Veronica was well aware of the minefield they were all now walking in. Her dad's focus shifted once he noticed Logan's change of posture.

"Logan? What do you think?"

_And behold, ladies and gentlemen, the flip side of having your dad and boyfriend get along. They now have the ability to team up against you._

"I don't have an opinion on the subject."

His answer was a surprise to her, but it appeared even more so to her dad who tilted his head to the side and looked at Logan with wide eyes, blinking slowly for added effect.

"Logan Echolls without an opinion? You're forgetting I've known you since you were twelve, kid. How many times did I drag you into the sheriff's station? Even when it most benefitted you, you wouldn't keep your mouth shut. But now the sound of silence."

Logan pressed his lips together, remaining firm in his resolve to not speak, but both Veronica and her dad caught the almost infinitesimal way his head moved in her direction.

"Ah. Very smart this kid is." Keith stood, grabbing the box of Phad Thai he had barely started on. "Humor the poor man in his late forties, will you? I'll head to the office and run a background check. See if there's any chance Skyler has ties to Neptune."

Her poker face used to be of the unreadable variety. Or maybe her dad had simply done her the courtesy of pretending he couldn't read her. Perhaps it was the way she couldn't quite meet his eye after his last postulation, but there was something about her response to his announcement that made him frown. He stood poised to react, the box of takeout in hand.

_Shit. He's really not going to like this._

"What?" Logan asked first, picking up on the tension in the room.

There wasn't any point in trying to pretend her dad's words hadn't triggered the memory of something significant. "Skyker's family is from San Diego. A southern California transplant in Chicago? There weren't many of us." Logan and her dad each had her in their crosshairs, obviously frustrated she hadn't mentioned this before. "He wouldn't think I'm worth the trouble!"

Keith nodded at her words, and while she could tell he still didn't quite believe her, she appreciated him trying to see it from her perspective. "I'll look into it. And that 'full disclosure' thing you mentioned? It starts now, Veronica."

She nodded as her dad left the dining room, then shot Logan a rueful smile. "I promise you that Mars family meals aren't usually this eventful. Stalkers and ex-boyfriends are very rarely topics of conversation."

His answering smile was more a grimace than an actual grin, and he had stopped eating, opting to push his food around in the carton.
"Full disclosure applies to this guy too. I hope he knows that."

"Hey," she said, flicking the edge of his food carton. "Pad kee mao for your thoughts?"

He smirked as he twirled another bunch of noodles around his fork and then let them slip off, back into the container. "That was lame, but good effort."

There was a retort half formed and it almost fell from her lips before deciding on a last minute pinch hit.

"You know, I'm not that hungry. And my dad's leaving in just a couple minutes for the office. Which means he'll probably be gone for a couple hours." She trusted Logan to follow that thought to its logical conclusion.

"Is that so?" he asked, his lips curling into a wider smile. One that was genuine. He got it.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she nodded, and then scooted to the edge of her seat so their knees bumped together. Sometimes sex as a distraction was unhealthy. And sometimes it was absolutely necessary.

It wasn't the general topic of ex-boyfriends that had caused Logan to shut down. No. She could pinpoint it more specifically to the exact moment Skyler's name had been mentioned.

Their senior year of college, when Logan had visited her in LA, she had thought they were only focused on renewing their friendship. Mentioning a semi-casual relationship with Jared, therefore, wasn't all that uncomfortable. Such a conversation was simply fodder for friendship. She knew this was different, especially since it was apparent her relationship with Skyler did not end well.

It'd be good for them both to focus on something besides the inevitable conversation for just a couple of minutes. Even better that what they'd be distracting each other with would reassure Logan of their commitment to one another. Despite them both having found some maturity over the years, she was not deluded enough to think that discussing past relationships would be easy or fun.

"Well that sounds like a plan. Meet you in your shower in, let's say, ten minutes?"

Nodding again, she tightened her grip on his shoulders and hiked herself up to sit in his lap. The action, of which she was quite proud, prevented him from standing up and also made it easier to surprise him with a quick peck on the lips. A quick peck that she allowed to deepen, not wanting to break away.

"Dad in the kitchen. Me on Logan's lap. Look at me taking all kinds of risks."

Logan's hands which initially had rested lightly on Veronica's hips, slowly trailed up her back until one cradled her neck. In a tacit agreement, her lips parted and Logan, ever the one to take initiative, leaned her against the table, pressing their chests together.

"Veronica," he breathed out, his voice strained. "Your dad."

"Right, right, my dad." Even as she agreed with him, she chased his lips again, laughing at the sound of his almost defeated groan. "Okay. We'll chill."

Rather than pull away fully, she rested her face in the crook of his neck, holding him against her. "You'll sex me up, we'll sit down and have some dinner, and then you can ask me about anything or anyone."
Last time we played the 'warts and all' game, we both lost. This is our chance to redo it.

The rumble of his laugh was low and she could hear the note of genuine amusement. "You reading me now, Veronica?"

"Like the pages of my favorite novel."

"Harriet the Spy? Dial 'M' for Murder?"

"Child's play. No Country for Old Men."

"Sociopath."

"Hm,", she said, sitting up so she could look at him in the eye. Keeping her arms around his neck, she tilted her head to the side, the picture of concentration. "You say 'sociopath' but that look in your eye tells me you think I'm charming."

He grinned and leaned forward to kiss the tip of her nose. "So charming. But I'll pay you good money to never say the phrase 'sex me up' again."

Together they put the food away, never straying more than twelve inches from each other the whole time. When her dad came back into the kitchen to tell her he was leaving, she almost applauded Logan's ability to play it cool. It was all a farce, she knew, but what an impressive farce it was.

The moment the flick of the latch confirmed her dad had left the house, Logan had her pressed up against the refrigerator. He deliberately teased her, kissing her thoroughly, but never actually touching her lips with his own. First her neck. Then moving down her jawline. And across her collarbone.

"Logan, wait." The promise she made to herself, the one that demanded full disclosure, required that they pause. Briefly.

"What?" he asked, tilting his head back. His breath was stilted, his eyes dark, and it took every ounce of will she had to keep her feet on the ground rather than wrap her legs around his waist.

More than sex, she knew he needed this. The assurance that she was as equally invested. "You read me too. Better than most people, and sometimes I hate it."

When she looked up at him from under her lashes, the small smile he offered in return bespoke more feeling than any verbalized reply.

"You just did it again," he whispered, brushing a strand of hair away from her face.

And sometimes words were good too.

At Veronica's insistence, communicated by her repeatedly jabbing a toe into his thigh, Logan got out of bed to pull the blinds shut. A rather persistent ray of light was interrupting her post-coital contentment, or so she claimed. Logan maintained she just wanted an excuse to sneak, what she thought was, an undetected peek at his naked ass.

However, once he acquiesced, he was glad he had done so. Closing the blinds made the room dim enough to feel intimate but still provided enough light to see each of Veronica's features as she tried to fend off sleep. As far as he could tell she was failing, but her efforts were endearing.

Her head would comically bob against his chest a few times, then she'd stir herself awake, always
looking surprised she'd almost fallen asleep. Rather than tease, he pulled her snug against his chest, running a hand up and down her back. When she let out a small sigh and snuggled into him, he knew she'd given up.

While he didn't remember deciding to join her in a nap, he awoke with a jolt, suddenly quite concerned he'd be found very nude by a very perturbed Keith Mars. Veronica was no longer in bed with him and the glass of water waiting on the nightstand, as well as his clothes neatly folded at the edge of the bed, told him she wasn't planning to come back.

Now begins my nefarious plotting to try and convince Mr. Mars that Veronica will be much safer if she spends her remaining days in Neptune at my house. I'll be gracious enough to split time with him on Christmas.

He heard a clatter sound from the other room, likely Veronica messing around in the kitchen, and he hastened to join her. But first, he was in much need of a shower.

Ten minutes later, his muscles pleasantly soothed by the hot water, a feeling of contentment settled deep into his gut. He knew that pleasant feeling was a direct result of the small domestic interludes he'd had with Veronica over the past week. Simple things like movie nights, and apple pie, and walks. Those things had always been his favorite part of their relationship in the past and the thing he missed most whenever she left.

Nostalgia also carried with it the ever present reality that these moments were fleeting, but he resolved not to dwell.

Your girl is currently in the kitchen, and containers of Thai food runneth over. Not the time for maudlin cynicism.

By the time he entered the kitchen, Veronica was almost finished heating up the food. She too was fresh from the shower, her hair braided but still obviously wet, wearing a pair of jeans and black v-neck shirt. The tune she was humming was unfamiliar to him, and he guessed it was probably improvised. A half dozen little details he catalogued in a moment. Given the opportunity he'd spend the rest of his life continuing the list.

At the sound of his footsteps, she smiled and proudly handed him a plate, piled high with an assortment of noodles and sauces.

"Honey! You baked."

Snapping her fingers and waving one in the air, she dropped a spring roll onto the heap of food.

"And I took into account your delicate sensibilities and put it on a plate." She frowned as she peered at his food. "The middle of your Phad Thai might be cold."

"I can't live under these conditions," he said, setting his plate down.

As he got them each a glass of water, he was vaguely aware of Veronica's close proximity as she continued to heat up leftovers. It wasn't until she cleared her throat, garnering his attention, that he realized she had been watching him.

This is going to be unpleasant.

"We dated for five months. Skyler and me." She turned around, taking her plate out of the microwave and stirring a few of the piles of food, then put it back in. "When you came to visit me at UCLA, I told you I still had my PI license but I wasn't really using it. Remember?"
He nodded but she was already turning away from him.

Sometimes, when Veronica needed to confide in someone, proximity helped her. Bodies touching and hands clasped. Then there were other times when what she needed was to focus on the words and not the person she was speaking to.

Space. Patience. Deep cleansing breaths. She still wasn't looking at him so he took the opportunity to sit back down.

"That first year of medical school, I felt like I was drowning." The microwaved beeped again. She cleared the display but made no other move. "Wallace was the one who suggested I put a notice up advertising my PI services. He thought it'd be good if I had something else to focus on for a couple hours a week."

She let those words linger in the air for a second and then nodded, Logan guessed mostly as a way to urge herself to continue, removing her plate from the microwave. "That's how Skyler and I met. He hired me to tail his little sister's boyfriend. He was convinced the guy was cheating on her."

"Was he?" It felt like they were the first words he'd spoken in a long while and his throat cracked with them. As he watched her decide how to proceed with the story, he took a sip of water, purposefully holding the water in his throat to soothe before swallowing.

"Yeah. And that's what got me." Shaking her head, he recognized her annoyed expression. Lord knows he'd seen it enough. That phrase 'got me' implying that she felt like she'd been had in some way.

*Which, if I know her as well as I hope I do, it's the thing that pisses her off about this guy the most.*

"I saw him with his sister and while I initially thought he was kind of an ass, he was sweet with her. I don't know. That side to him kind of reminded me of –" She dropped off the sentence, instead waving a hand in Logan's direction.

His eyes widened and he reared his head back as the implication of the gesture was clear. "Me? This asshat who your dad thinks might be stalking you reminded you of me? Nice."

At that she snorted, rolling her eyes in relatively good humor. "I still wasn't over what had happened with you and me. Wasn't really thinking with a clear head."

He got that. He really did. Though there hadn't been many women in the past couple years, he'd gone on enough first dates to know it would have been easy to replace the blonde he wanted with any blonde who was there.

*Now I have even more to level at this asshole stalker when we find him. If he would have left her the hell alone, Veronica would have gotten my letter, and she would have never even dated this guy.*

"Then what happened?"

"We started dating. I guess. He asked me out a few times before I actually agreed. It was nice at first." She picked up a still cold container of red curry, fishing out a bamboo shoot, and chomped down on it. "Wallace never liked him."

"Yeah," Logan said, rubbing a hand on the back of his neck, uncertain of just how much he should reveal. "He mentioned that."

Veronica tilted her head, her lips smashed together in displeasure. Folding her arms across her chest,
she glared at him. He waited to react until he could discern how much heat was behind the gesture. She was always feisty. Always blustery. Even when she was happy and content there was spark. One of her gestures could just as soon mean she was pissed as that she was turned on.

*Given how we spent a good chunk of our afternoon I'm guessing that spark is a result of the latter. At least I hope so.*

"You and Wallace talked about me?"

Now it was his turn to roll his eyes. "Barely. He told me I should ask you about Skyler."

Her features morphed into real curiosity, any edge of anger vanishing. "Why didn't you?"

"I knew you'd tell me. And if you didn't, I trusted it wasn't that important."

*Is that the right answer? I mean, it's true, which probably helps.*

A hint of a smile tugged at the edges of her mouth. "You're reading me again."

*Always been able to read you, Bobcat. The difference is that now it seems to actually make you happy rather than want to run away.*

The answering shrug he provided prompted her small smile to grow and her eyes to crinkle with delight.

"I asked Wallace if Skyler ever, you know, hit you. He said it wasn't anything like that, but didn't say what happened."

"No," she shook her head, much more sober as they returned to their discussion. "He never hit me, but he got off on manipulating me. Or trying to at least."

Logan took another sip of water, mainly so he had something to do with his hands. Veronica was one of the savviest people he knew. How much of a prick did this guy have to be to know her, acknowledge her intelligence, and then work at breaking her down?

"He'd show up at my apartment with takeout and movies on nights I had told him I had to study, and then insist that I had told him to come over. Or we'd make plans to meet somewhere and when I'd show up, another woman would practically be draped over his lap. If I got upset he'd lecture me about my trust issues."

*Okay, now I don't know which guy I want to fuck with more.*

Maybe not a sociopath, but the guy was definitely manipulative. Honing in on a characteristic that had caused her distress – her inability to trust people – and then using it against her. It was a wonder she was even discussing it.

"Did you ever follow him? See if he actually was cheating on you?"

"A couple times. Nothing came of it." Poking at her food, she continued to explain. "God, he was great at making me feel guilty." With that, her eyes rolled up and she looked at the ceiling, shaking her head again. "We'd be texting, making plans to hang out, and he'd just stop responding, so I'd assume we weren't going to get together. But then he'd show up and be upset with me for not making him a priority."

The more she explained, the angrier she got. It was likely as much at Skyler as it was herself. "Then,
in an instant, he could be really sweet. You know, drop off snacks when he knew I was up at 2:00 AM. Or once, when Alicia and Darrell were coming to visit but I had to cram for a big exam, he surprised me by renting a hotel room for a couple days so I had a quiet place to study and sleep."

It was a tactic he knew well. In fact, it was something Thomas had spent countless hours explaining as they touched on his relationship with his father. You want to fuck someone up you don't abuse them consistently; you intermingle affection and abuse. That way the target never knows what to expect. They may fear the abuse, but they always crave the affection.

Is there an instruction manual for psychotic assholes out there? How to lie, cheat, and manipulate in three easy steps.

"Everything was always my fault, and I was just too exhausted, almost unhinged most days, to do anything about it. God, that sounds stupid," she muttered, covering her hands with her face.

Logan shook his head and reached across the counter to grab one of her hands. He wasn't certain if it was the right thing to do in that moment, but he was beyond knowing the right thing to do at the moment. "Not stupid. Does that mean he ended things?"

"No, I did," she said with a shake of her head. "I was supposed to meet him at his apartment so we could grab dinner and, when I got there, he didn't answer. I was standing in the hallway sending him a text when his door opened and this woman, someone I had seen him with a lot, came out looking thoroughly—" She trailed off, pressing her lips together, clearly searching for the best word to finish her thought. He was guessing it was going to be 'fucked.'

"Debauched," she said.

Close enough.

"He forgot about your date?"

"No. He knew exactly what he was doing." Disregarding her own glass of water, she reached for Logan's and drank from it, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "I left his apartment, threw away all his stuff, and that was that. I started counseling a couple weeks later."

Keeping his energy focused on her, hearing her story as it unfolded, was the only thing preventing him from dashing out of the kitchen to track down a man named Skyler who lived in Chicago. Or perhaps San Diego, if he was in town for the holidays. There couldn't be that many.

He shifted his weight forward, leaning onto his elbows to get her to look at him. "Have you seen him since then?"

At the reminder of what, he assumed, was an unpleasant memory she clenched her jaw. "We ran into each other at the grocery store about a month ago. He asked me out to dinner."

A short burst of disbelieving laughter escaped his lips. "What an asshole."

Now, watch as I side with her dad and piss her off. From listless to livid in three second flat.

"Your dad might be right. I am well versed in manipulative asshole. That breed doesn't usually like being bested."

The sound of Veronica's chuckle confused him. "Yeah. He strung me along for five months and cheated on me. I'm too strong." She finished by comically flexing her muscles, but it was coupled with a still, glassy stare. Her arms fell to her side and she gave a pitiful shrug. "I don't like people
"Believe me, Veronica, this guy didn't get the drop on you. He probably kept after you for weeks. Didn't he?"

She nodded and, when she wiped at the corner of her eye, he slid off the stool to join her on her side of the counter.

"You're a force, Veronica. Kicking ass in medical school. A rich and devastatingly handsome boyfriend at your beck and call." He pulled her to his chest and kissed the crown of her head. "You were stronger than Skyler and you're stronger than this asshole da Vinci wannabe. And if they happen to be one and the same you'll figure it out."

She nodded, her forehead rubbing against the cotton of his shirt, her breath on his chest warming his skin.

_I don't want to give this up. She leaves for Chicago in a week and it's going to fucking hurt like hell. And, fuck it all, why can't I stop poking at that wound?_

Maybe because that was something he could get his head around. Missing her. He'd done it before, and whether they were two-thousand or twenty miles away from each other, he'd do it again. Someone like Skyler, though, was something he just didn't want to dwell on. The asshole was out of Veronica's life now, something to celebrate, and she was still standing.

Pulling back she gave him a small tremulous smile. "The food's probably cold again."

"I have good memories of eating cold Phad Thai with you. I can gut it out."

The relief was overwhelming as that comment prompted a genuine laugh from her. She reached across his body grab the spring roll off his plate. "Ever the philanthropist."

Despite her protests as they'd eaten their late lunch the previous day, Logan insisted he take off the following one from work. He claimed it had nothing to do with the fact that her father was going to be at work all day, thereby leaving her alone.

No. He swore it was merely because talk of ex-boyfriends over cold Thai food did not a romantic date make.

She texted him when she woke up, letting him know he could come over in two hours, once she was back from her run and showered for the day. It was hardly surprise that he showed up to her dad's house twenty minutes later, coffee in hand, ready to go on a run with her.

_I really shouldn't reward his behavior, but he brought me coffee, so what can a girl do?_

Their run became less of a workout and more attempted one-upmanship as they took turns trying to out sprint and maneuver one another. Veronica declared herself the victor after she ran behind him along the edge of the water, kicking up wet sand onto his back.

"Quit it, you pest!"

"Hey. You interrupted my personal time. Thems the breaks."

While the knowledge they were potentially being watched put a mild damper on her enjoyment, they both refused to be intimidated out of spending time together. She had assembled an odd team of
warriors. The previous evening, once Logan went home, she had met Wallace for ice cream and filled him in. After a short little headshake and a muttered, "Took you long enough" he made it clear he was there for whatever she needed.

Wallace as her Watson.

Mac as tech genius.

Dad as her partner.

Logan as emotional support and bodyguard.

There was plenty about her life that threatened to overwhelm her, but there was no room for feeling like that when the weather was a pleasant sixty degrees and she had conned Logan into giving her a piggy back ride for the last two blocks of their trip.

Tightening her grip on his neck, she pressed her cheek against his. "Hey, what are you doing tomorrow night?"

She smirked as his hands moved up her thighs under the guise of making sure he had a secure hold on her. "Having dinner with a couple friends from work but not until later. I should be home around ten if you want to come over after and seduce me."

"Hah! Seduce you. Hardly. You're an easy mark."

His hands slid up a little higher so they rested at the lower curve of her butt. "Meaning?"

"All it takes is me adding a little swish to my step and you're dunzo."

"That goes both ways, my friend. I saw you checking me out that morning I showed up to your dad's house unannounced."

Nuzzling his check with her own, she smiled at the realization he hadn't actually denied her prior claim. Nor did she have any intention of denying his. "Prove it."

"Oh, I intend to. Tomorrow night apparently."

"I'll consider it. But that's not actually what I had in mind when I inquired into your schedule. I need to pay a visit to our alma matter." She hitched herself up on his back, holding on with only one arm, and mimed a pom-pom being thrust in the air. "Who's with me?"

"Me I guess. But why?"

"I need to get my hands on Mr. J.D. King's file."

"Not seeing how that warrants my participation."

You're my partner in crime. You would have freaked if I had gone alone. And it strangely turns you on to see me working on a case.

"Van Clemmons is still the principal. If I come within five feet of his office he's going to know something's up."

"Whereas I always had a relationship with him based on mutual respect? I think you're remembering high school wrong, dear."
"No. I remember exactly how much of a perpetual thorn you were in Van Clemmons' side. Mine too if memory serves." That comment earned her a smack on the butt which prompted her to nip at his earlobe, a little harder than was strictly necessary.

"Hey!" he protested, rubbing his ear. "So if your memory's not fuzzy, how am I supposed to help?"

"You're going to play the part of an independently wealthy man looking to make a generous gift to Neptune High to replace the performing arts center."

"Ahh, I see. And naturally I'll want to take a tour of the current center to cast my vision for renovations."

"Naturally, which will take you far away from his office so I can pilfer his keys."

"Am I to assume that I insist this meeting be after everyone else on staff has gone home for the evening?"

She hoisted herself up, gripping his waist more firmly with her thighs. "See! And they said you weren't smart."

"So, just to be clear, if I help you stick it to Clemmons, you'll come over later and I'll get to stick it to you?"

"Why wait until later?" As Logan noticeably increased the pace at which he was walking, Veronica chuckled into the side of his neck. When she started planting a series of kisses along his pulse point, he broke into an almost run. Both of their attention, however, was stolen by the sight of her dad's car in the driveway. "What's he doing here?"

"Probably working tirelessly to make sure we're never alone long enough to have sex." Leaning back slightly, Logan released his grip on Veronica's legs, allowing her to slip down from her perch. "I wouldn't put it past him, but this is calculated even for him."

She batted Logan's hands away as he tried to cop one last feel as she opened the front door and, with her best attempt at a stern look, grabbed the bag he brought with him, pushing him towards her dad's room. "You go shower. I'm going to say hey."

"Be honest with me," Logan said, winding his arms around her waist. "If he wasn't here, would we be showering together?"

She provided a small answering shrug. "We'll probably never know now, will we? It's a little sad." Pulling her arms from his grasp, she gave him another push towards the hallway.

The picture her dad made in the kitchen, sitting at the island, arms folded, just staring at his hands, was a little unnerving.

"Logan's using your bathroom, so don't go in there unless you want a mighty big surprise." Once her own words registered she wrinkled up her nose and shook her head. "Forget I said that."

He kept his hands where they were and turned to give her a small smile that made it all too evident exactly how tired he was.

"Dad, what's going on?" Her first thought was that he'd found something in Skyler's background check that warranted him coming home early. If that was the case, however, it was a little odd that he hadn't crushed her to him in worry the moment she walked through the door. If growing up meant
she didn't get big dad hugs anymore she was going to stop the process immediately.

"I called Logan's office and they said he wasn't coming in today. I took an educated guess as to where he was."

_Pleasant day of flirting and sexing is coming to a rapid end. Logan's suggestion from the other day about flying off to an undisclosed foreign location is sounding better and better._

When she saw it, the muted tone of the manila folder against the dark of the granite, something clicked into place. There was no way to tell one manila folder apart from another. She'd seen a million of them in the Mars Investigations office, stacked on both her former desk and her dad's current one. Logan was still a client of said office.

She made no effort to hide her attempt to see what was written on the tab of the folder, dreading that it was actually Logan's name. Once the idea was in her head, however, she couldn't make any more sense of her dad's presence than that he was there as a PI and not as a father. He'd found out something about Logan's case.

"Is this about Logan's case? The stuff with his mom?"

Her dad didn't look surprised that she knew this information. In fact, he looked relieved. The less secrets between them right now the better. "What do you know?"

"There's a villa in Italy ripped directly from the imagination of Lynn Echolls, apparently owned by the mysteriously named Lyle Sternn, which was one of Lynn's aliases she'd use when she imagined life outside Neptune."

Her dad smiled again. That same, sad, not even a tugging at the corners of his mouth smile. "Go take a shower. You stink."

It wasn't a tacit dismissal but she was filled with an unhealthy amount of trepidation. The folder. His presence. The quiet resignation. He'd figured everything out, and it was obviously going to cause Logan some distress.

"Veronica." His voice had accumulated a little more heft. "Go."

"Fine. But don't you dare speak one word to Logan about this until I get back." When her dad nodded, she leveled a finger at him. "I'm serious dad. Not one word."

"He's my client, honey."

"Yeah, well, he's my boyfriend."

_Not the best argument I've ever made, but hopefully it'll be convincing enough._

He could have argued with her. They both knew that legally and professionally he owed her nothing. Except this was _Logan._

"Okay."

"Hide that folder," she said as she walked out of the room. "He's just as big of a snoop as I am."

Veronica was in and out of the shower in ten minutes. Hastily dressing, she ran a brush through her hair and was working on braiding it even as she half jogged down the hallway. Taking her time when she knew there was a folder in her kitchen holding documents that directly affected one of the
most important people in her life was unthinkable.

Quieting her pace, she attempted to look at ease as she walked into the kitchen. She smiled at the sight of Logan and her dad amiably chatting at the breakfast island and took a moment to notice that Logan had gotten them each a glass of water and her a can of Skist.

*Logan always kicked ass at the big boyfriend gestures. And now he's got this day-to-day stuff down too, it seems.*

A part of her hoped that the existence of this Lyle Stern would prove to be nothing more than a disappointing coincidence, but she knew that was unlikely. The world wasn't kind enough to her and Logan for coincidences to be merely disappointing. Their coincidences always had the habit of being relatively traumatizing.

"There she is," Logan said in greeting, extending the glass of water to her. "Your dad has been doing a commendable job of small talk as we've waited for you."

"You saying that I was less than believable, Logan?"

"Mr. Mars, I'm always happy to talk baseball with you, but seeing as how the season doesn't start for another three months, it seemed suspicious." Logan picked up his own glass, taking a generous gulp.

"I told you," Veronica said, as she sat down on the stool that Logan had pulled out for her, sitting now between them. She tousled Logan's hair, still damp, and her eyes locked with his even as she addressed her dad. "He may be pretty, but there's more going on up here than you'd expect."

"Still waters?" Logan asked, taking hold of her other hand and kissing the palm.

*Please let this be okay. Please let him be okay.*

She smiled back, attempting to hide her unease behind its brightness. "If by still waters you mean, 'waters that won't stop moving for more than fifteen seconds at a time,' then yes. Still waters."

Touching his forehead to hers for a brief second, he pulled away and sighed. "Alright, Mr. Mars. Let's address whatever it is you have in that poorly hidden manila folder."

Veronica shot him a look that was equal parts exasperation and admiration. When she looked over her shoulder at her dad, she raised her eyebrows.

*What did I tell you, dad? Big 'ol snoop.*

Her dad pulled the folder out from under a stack of newspapers, smoothing his hand over the top. "Logan, I promised you that I'd wait to give you an update on your case until I'd uncovered as much as possible."

"Ah yes. And we've now reached that inevitable juncture in the road I take it?"

The realization that her presence in the room put her dad in a professionally precarious position hit her at once. He was only seconds away from having to dismiss her from the room. If she was eighteen years old still, maybe she'd maneuver it so that she could stay. Or she'd position herself to overhear everything and pretend she hadn't. But she wasn't eighteen.

It wasn't like she intended to leave the house. She trusted that Logan would tell her what her dad had found. Even if he didn't, she couldn't force him to do so. He had no intention of making her talk about Skyler and she was going to return that favor.
"Why don't you two go talk in the living room? I'm going to make some lunch."

It was neither a subtle nor an artfully crafted suggestion, but her dad's small smile and nod told her he understood the sentiment. He wouldn't have hesitated to ask her to leave the room, but now he didn't have to.

*Interesting. Maturity tastes an awful lot like bran flakes. I don't care if it's good for me, it still sucks. Lucky Charms from here on out.*

Before Keith could from a response, Logan reached to take hold of her hand and gave her dad a firm nod. "No, stay. I'll help you cook lunch in a minute."

Running a thumb over his knuckles, she gave Logan a tremulous smile. Stay. She could stay.

"Okay. Just a few questions." Keith reached across the counter to grab a pen and rotated on his seat to face Logan. Feeling odd trapped between them, Veronica moved her stool so she was positioned directly beside Logan. It occurred to her that this was similar to how they'd be sitting if this meeting had been scheduled at her dad's office. Keith on one side of the desk, whichever client he was meeting with and maybe a loved on the other side. She didn't much care for being on this side.

"Do you know a Rose Mackley?"

Logan nodded and swallowed before he spoke, his gaze turned down towards his feet. "Yeah. Yes. She was my mom's stylist."

"And what about her husband James?"

"I met him a few times. He was the owner of the Avalon, this boutique hotel in downtown LA. Mom and I would get lunch there sometimes."

"He still is," Keith said, jotting down notes, presumably Logan's answers. "The owner, that is."

The few seconds of silence as her dad wrote and Logan sat staring at his feet were more than Veronica could take. Six full days of tense conversations and she was about to crack. She leaned over to grab the can of Skist and popped it open, the sound loud in the room. Being the loved one of a PI's client sucked. She'd need to remember that for the future.

"What? I'm thirsty?"

Keith shook his head, but her action had served to dispel the tension. Her dad's mild annoyance was worth it for the effect her childish action had on Logan, causing him to immediately soften and smile at her.

She leaned into his side, and he slung an arm around her shoulder. It was a small thing, but he wasn't staring at his feet any longer.

*My issues. Logan's issues. If our relationship can survive my winter break we're going to be an unstoppable force.*

Pulling on Logan's hand, she traced the lines of his palm with her finger. Days earlier he'd done that for her while she was in the throes of sharing unpleasant life details. She'd personally found it comforting, and she knew Logan craved touch in a way that she never had. Sure enough, after a few seconds Logan let out a shuddering breath, his whole body relaxing.

Her dad sat his pen down and folded his hands together, leaning forward. "Starting when you were
quite young, Logan, each month four-thousand dollars was paid by your mother to Rose Mackley for her stylist services."

"Sheesh." Veronica breathed out the word, stunned by the reminder of just how different her upbringing had been from Logan's.

"But a few years into employing, Ms. Mackley, something odd started happening with those transactions."

Logan sat up a little straighter, his grip on Veronica's shoulder tightening. "What? Did she start stealing from my mom?"

"No, nothing like that. Just like before, four-thousand dollars was deposited monthly into Ms. Mackley's account, but a few days after each deposit, three-thousand dollars was transferred into a new high-yield savings account under the name Lyle Sternn."

"Oh god," Logan said, reaching for the manila folder.

Keith shuffled through a few pages and handed a stack to Logan. He flipped through the papers quickly, and Veronica wondered how much information he was actually taking in. Several specific transactions had been highlighted by her dad. It seemed as if this pattern of deposits and transfers had been happening for years.

Follow the money. The old adage is true. But just where is all this money going to lead?

"A few years after the transfers began, the property in Levanto was purchased. However, Lyle Sternn isn't the only owner listed on the deed." Her dad paused and, while it seemed to be for dramatic effect, Veronica had seen this enough to know that he was actually providing room for the client to ready himself for upsetting news. "Rose Mackley and James Mackley are co-owners of the bed and breakfast. The two of them, along with Lyle Sternn, have an equal stake in the business."

"Still?" Logan asked.

"Still. Four months after the property was purchased, Rose and James Mackley took a six-week trip to Italy. In that time they hired a staff and supervised renovations to the property, then they flew back to the states. Given their wealth and their previous patterns of travel, a trip like that wouldn't have seemed odd to anyone of their acquaintance." Keith grabbed another few pages from the folder and handed them to Logan. "While they were there, a series of calls were made to your mom."

Veronica frowned as she looked at the pages over Logan's shoulder. More than a dozen calls were made to Lynn in the six weeks that Rose and James had apparently been in Italy. While they were never for longer than ten minutes at one time, they would have been long enough for the Mackleys to give Lynn updates on how the renovations were progressing.

She had her own theories about what all of this meant, but she opted to table them until her dad was finished.

"You saw it for yourself, Logan. It's still operational, and if these financial records are to be believed," he paused to hand them to Logan, "it's also very successful. They're pulling in close to two-hundred fifty thousand dollars a year in profit. That's close to double the average for a business of that nature and size."

With each new piece of information, Logan nodded his head. It was as if he had a series of check boxes linked to questions, and he was checking them off at an alarming rate. What was going to happen when there weren't any additional questions to ask?
"If they own only two parts of the hotel, where does the last third of the profit go?"

"Into the same high yields savings account."

Logan's eyes sparked and Veronica knew for certain where his mind had gone. If there was any hope that Logan's mother was still alive, it'd be found in that account under her assumed name. "Have any withdrawals been made from it?"

Keith gave Logan a small, sad smile that barely turned up the corners of his mouth, and shook his head. It was a look of commiseration. He, too, knew what Logan was asking. "Not for more than ten years. A large sum was withdrawn when the villa was purchased, another amount when renovations first occurred, and then a little each additional year, presumably as repairs were made. Nothing since 2005."

Logan nodded and his disappointment was almost palpable. His shoulders hunched the slightest amount, and his feet began tapping on the bottom rung of the stool he was sitting on. "Why is it still open, then? Why not close the account?"

"My guess is that the business proved to be more successful than either Rose or James imagined. And closing the account would have risked alerting someone to the false identity of Lyle Sternn. It wasn't just a fake name they made. They established an entire life for him. A full identity."

Keith slid out another few documents and handed them to Logan but, he didn't reach for them so Veronica took them instead. There were birth certificates for Lyle Sternn as well as his wife Christine Sternn, maiden name Pruitt, and one for their son Stephen.

It was Stephen's birth certificate that caught Veronica's notice.

_The only reason Lynn's assumed identity would have a son is if she had wanted to take Logan with her._

Stephen Sternn would have been two years older than Logan. It would have been totally plausible, in her opinion, as Logan had always been tall for his age.

_She was planning to run._

"So the money has just been sitting there all this time? How much is in there now?" she asked. Logan had started to pull away from the conversation, his eyes flicking over the pieces of paper, but she doubted he was reading anything. She suddenly felt guilty for telling him about Skyler the night before. This was too much information for a person to deal with at one time.

The money was an odd detail to focus on, but it was all Veronica could do. The implications of everything her dad had shared were surely going to knock Logan down the moment he'd processed them all, so she focused on the small things.

"Between the monthly amounts transferred over the years, the interest, and the sums deposited as part of Mr. Sternn's income from the bed and breakfast, there is close to two point eight million dollars in the account."

"Holy fuck." Her exclamation took the whole room by surprise. Logan almost smiled, but then he frowned again, scanning the pages he still held.

"How much would have been in there ten years ago?" Logan's voice cracked around the question. Ten years ago, Logan would have been fourteen. He would have been in the middle of their
freshman year of high school. He had just started dating Lilly.

"Not taking into account the amount withdrawn for the purchase and renovations, probably close to six-hundred thousand dollars."

More than enough for the two of them to have built a life on. Shit. And Logan's going to realize that. Shit.

Logan appeared to be physically struck by that detail, just as she assumed he would. His jaw tightened, his head recoiled, and he slid away from Veronica putting more distance between them. He tossed the papers he held onto the counter, sending them splaying across the granite. "Well there goes my theory."

"What?" she asked. She reached across him to set her soda can down and then grasped onto his hand, trying her best to massage out as much tension as possible through his fingers.

Watching Logan as he fought for control, Veronica wondered if maybe there was some information that people were better off not knowing. How could learning any of this make his life better?

"I always thought the reason she never left was because she couldn't. She couldn't survive without him so she was forced to stay. "When did she start planning this? When did the money transfers start?"

"In 1995."

Logan snorted out a painful laugh and the sound caused something to twist in Veronica's gut. "Yeah. That figures."

"What? What figures?" In the absence of knowing precisely what she should do, she took to rubbing a hand up and down his back, hoping her touch would ground him in the same way his had grounded her over the years.

I don't know who to be angry at right now. Who's the bad guy here?

"I would have been eight. That was the first time," he trailed off, but then mimed a punch to his chin making the end of the sentence all too clear. "You know. Aaron." His face almost twisted in on itself with distress and he kneaded his forehead with one hand. "So that means she bought the property when I was eleven."

The evidence that he was close to snapping was abundant. It was in the line of his shoulders, the tapping of his foot against the stool, and the way his eyes weren't resting on any one point in the room. Yet, he didn't seem satisfied by what he'd already learned. He obviously still had questions, and while Veronica wanted to tell him that digging any further couldn't make any of this easier, she knew better than anyone sometimes you had to say 'fuck it' and keep digging.

He hitched over, his forearms resting on his knees. "Fuck, she could have left any time. She could have been there," he said, gesturing to the photo of the villa peeking out from the folder on the counter, "with friends who cared about her enough to keep her secret, and a life without him in it."

If Logan's grief wasn't devastating enough, Veronica noticed that none of his anger seemed to be for himself. He was lamenting the fact that his mom hadn't gotten away, not that she had left him with Aaron.

Veronica looked over at her dad who appeared to be at as much of a loss as she was. He stood, placing a firm hand on Logan's back. "Logan. Logan, look at me."
Logan did as her dad requested, his eyes glassy, the picture of agony completed by the odd way he was keeping his hands still and folded neatly in his lap. A peculiar combination of propriety and grief.

"Your mom loved you. She was a very scared woman, but she loved you."

It must have been the wrong thing to say because it triggered a burst of almost maniacal laughter to emit from Logan's lips. Logan stood up, pushing away from both Veronica and her dad. "Fantastic she thought about getting away. She never actually did it, though, did she?"

His body was shaking with the force of maintaining control, and Veronica could hear the way he started to wheeze, unable to take a full breath. He reared back as Veronica took a step towards him, trying to get away. However, it was apparent he wasn't focusing on the best or easiest way to exit the room, because he crashed into a shelving unit behind him, sending a stack of cookbooks clattering to the ground.

"Logan. Logan." Veronica continued to repeat his name as she walked towards him, reaching out a tentative hand. "You need to breathe."

He just shook his head, backing up towards the living room. All at once the impact of not taking a full breath was made evident as he hitched over at the waist, the sharp sound of his shallow inhales resounding.

Veronica was there in two steps, tears held in only by her own stubbornness. She cradled his head in her arms and lowered him to the ground, needing to anchor him in some small way as she got him to focus on his breath. "Logan, look at me." When she framed his face in her hands, he tried to shake them off but she wouldn't let go. "Logan," she said again, her voice much firmer. "Look at me."

He looked up at her from under his eyelids and she noticed a slight sheen of sweat had developed on his brow, his body under a huge amount of strain as he struggled against his panic.

Gripping both of his hands in hers, she placed them on her stomach, and then took an exaggerated breath, making sure her stomach expanded as she inhaled and exhaled. "Logan, do you feel that? Do you feel my breath?"

He nodded, and that small sign that he was listening emboldened her. "You need to copy what I'm doing, okay?" She counted out loud to five, held the breath in her diaphragm for two seconds, then exhaled for five seconds, talking Logan through the entire process. "Copy me, Logan." She pressed one of her hands to his stomach to ensure he was breathing properly and nodded at him to continue. It took about forty five seconds before he calmed down enough for him to breathe without her counting for him.

Once he did, he stilled, holding himself quiet.

Her voice was barely a whisper as she spoke, brushing her lips over his cheek and across his brow. "Logan, it's going to be okay."

At first it was his shoulders, starting to shake, and then it was his whole body, racked with sobs.

"Oh god," he choked out.

She sat up on her knees to make it possible for her to wrap her arms around him, but she was almost thrown back as he leaned his body weight into her fully.

"Oh god. I can't...oh god." The words fell from his mouth, the litany repeating. "I can't...oh god."
She looked over at her dad who stood close by, a hand covering his mouth. It was a look she’d only seen directed at her. Behind it was a frustrated anger that he couldn’t make things better than they were for this person he loved.

Her earlier supposition had been correct. This was too big. All of it was too big. She continued to hold Logan to her, running a hand through his hair, whispering words. An endless stream of words.

*Why does being reminded of weakness we already knew existed hurt so much?*

None of what she was saying registered to her own ears. She could have been speaking gibberish for all she knew. Rather it was her dad’s voice, as he knelt beside them settling a hand on Logan’s back that she focused on.

"I know, kid. I know."

She looked up at the ceiling, holding Logan as tightly as she could, her dad’s words cycling through her mind.

"I know, kid. I know."

Chapter End Notes

For my birthday, lilamadison11 created another gorgeous graphic in her fanfiction art series. You can find it on [her tumblr here](http://her.tumblr.here), and you MUST check out the whole series. This kind of talent must be celebrated!
Her eyes may have been closed, but Veronica was primed to act at the slightest hint that Logan was awake. There was a part of her that wished she possessed the power to Rip van Winkle him. A full twenty years of sleep would probably be good. Then, when he awoke, perhaps this sudden and new pain wouldn't tear at him in the same way.

As it was, he'd been asleep for just over an hour. Her dad had removed Logan's shoes before settling him on top of the covers in her bedroom. Logan had been awake for that but barely responsive. After giving her a mildly disapproving look when she laid on the bed beside him, her dad had left them alone. Apart from taking thirty seconds to change into a pair of sweats, she hadn't ceased keeping watch.

Half curled into his side, her hand wasn't so much resting as it was hovering over his chest. She counted along with each of his breaths. They were slow, measured, and deep but occasionally a rough rasp emitted from the back of his throat; as if in sleep he was experiencing anew the pain from that afternoon.

The rustling of the sheets alerted her he was waking up and she pulled her hand back slowly, opening her eyes to watch as he stirred awake. Shifting so that she could more comfortably look at him, she pressed her hand firmly against his chest. A promise for them both, it won't hurt like this tomorrow, and, what she hoped was, a comfort to him, you're not alone, you're okay.

This is going to be a rough nightmare to wake up from.

His eyelids fluttered open and, not even two seconds awake, he looked resigned. Gaze not leaving the ceiling, he nodded once to himself, closed his eyes again and rolled over so that he was nose to nose with her.

On the surface nothing had changed. His mom was still gone and while that wasn't new information, Veronica expected this kind of gone would feel quite different to him.

"Hey."

"Hi." Her hand moved from his chest and up to his brow, pushing away the hair that had fallen forward onto his forehead. Each kiss she lightly pressed to his face carried with it a different promise. Promises she hoped Logan inferred even if they weren't articulated.

We'll get through this. Kiss.
You're stronger than you think. Kiss.
Stay with me. Kiss.

He rolled away from her, throwing an arm over his eyes. It was a move he often did when he was trying to block out light from the morning, but the room was currently dim. She followed him, curling back up into his side, cautiously optimistic it wasn't her proximity he was attempting to escape.

This sensation of not being able to get close enough to him was familiar. She'd felt it before, but it was born of new stuff this time.
"I should get up. Don't think your dad wants to find me in your bed."

*Joking about my overprotective father is a good sign. Right? But you're not going anywhere.*

"You're probably fine, considering he was the one who helped you get here."

"Never thought I'd see the day that Mr. Mars helped a man get into his daughter's bed."

*Okay, that's definitely a good sign.*

Snuggling even closer, though she already had much of her body pressed up against his, her hand resumed its original position directly over his heart. "Like I said. He likes you."

Logan nodded, the position of his arm still flung across his eyes causing his forehead to wrinkle with the movement. Her eyes never left his face, cataloging each minute alteration of expression, shudder of breath, and twitch of the lips to form some sort of conclusion as to his actual state of mind.

*He's hanging on. Like always. However, the last time he got bad news about his mom he showed up in a public place, drunk and half naked.*

"She never could have done it."

His voice startled her. Not the sound, exactly, but the strength behind the words. It meant he hadn't been lying there despondent for the past several minutes. Just like with her, stillness didn't mean internal silence. They were both always thinking, and while she had been focused on how he was processing, he was actually processing.

"What do you mean?"

"Aaron would have never let her get away with it. He moved his arm up so that he could look at her, resting it on the pillow behind him. 'If she had split without me, he could have spun that. 'Aaron Echolls, devoted single father, raises son in the wake of mother's abandonment.'"

"And if she'd taken you with her?"

"'Aaron Echolls pleads with unstable wife to bring son home.' He would have found her. She would have been arrested."

"So she stayed."

"And then she left." His chuckle was dark, twisted with bitterness. "Or fell, I guess. Let's see, given that the height of the Coronado Bridge is two-hundred feet, adjusting for air resistance, that probably took her-."'

"Logan." It was a kind reproach. An attempt to let him know that he didn't need to do that with her. She often deflected the good kind of emotion, making light of it. He did the same with the painful variety.

"I'm fine, Veronica."

"Hey, don't do that with me" she said, cupping his cheek with her hand. She didn't force him to look at her, but the gentle pressure prompted him to meet her eye. "You're forgetting I get it. My mom left when she should have fought like hell to stay. Yours stayed when she should have found a better way to leave. Believe it or not, there was nothing you or I could have done."

His smile barely upturned his lips but it still managed to reach all the way up to his eyes. Touching
his forehead to hers, he took hold of her hand and held it between their chests. "Joanna help you figure that out?"

"Believe it or not, that was all me. With a little help from my copy of The Idiot's Guide to Mommy Issues."

"Good read?"

"I wrote the foreword."

"Dibs on the next edition."

She shook her head even as she laughed. When Logan increased their contact by pulling her closer, wrapping his arms around her shoulders, she breathed out a sigh of relief and rested her head on his chest.

"We should probably stop using such self-deprecating humor" she suggested. "It can't be healthy."

"You think of a better way to cope with all the shit that's been thrown at us and we can discuss it. But if you prefer, I can dive headfirst into a bottle of Jack."

She rubbed her nose back and forth on the cotton of his shirt and allowed herself to indulge in a tiny inhale. "Pass, thank you."

They'd once had an entire conversation about how scent was the greatest trigger of memory. Many of the new memories they'd made over the past two weeks were now among her most significant.

She'd never smell apple pie without remembering holding his hand in a diner. Or macaroni and cheese without seeing his earnest face as she articulated the source of her current anxiety. Or this blend of ocean, dryer sheets and cologne without feeling his arms wrapped around her as they commiserated about their mothers.

"We should get up." It was a weak offer, but she felt the need to offer it all the same.

"No." His rejection of the idea was immediate. He held her tight, burrowing his nose in her hair. "Not yet."

_Sometimes it's nice to be able to control something. Even if it's just the room you're lying down in._

She nodded, though his eyes were once again closed. "Okay."

Logan was being shown glimpses. That's all they were, he reminded himself. Glimpses of what living life with Veronica could be like. The previous afternoon and evening he'd been studiously cared for, not just by Veronica but by her dad as well. But it was just a glimpse.

Sometimes it was a glass of cool water pressed into his hand by Veronica. A gentle nudge of his elbow encouraging him to take a drink. And then it was Keith pulling out another board game. "Just one more!," he'd exclaimed, even as Veronica groaned.

Through it all, Logan was on the receiving end of an almost constant stream of touches and caresses from Veronica. He wasn't certain who they were meant to reassure, him or her, but he accepted them all the same. If simply being reminded of his presence was a comfort to her, who was he to complain?

It felt unfamiliar and he was worried that he was going to get used to it. Veronica's presence in
Neptune was temporary and while he had developed a pseudo relationship with Mr. Mars on his own, it wasn't to this degree. Would he lose that too, once she went back to Chicago?

He had memories of times past when he'd been cared for like that, but he purposefully avoided remembering them. Times where, after receiving a particularly strong reprimand or blow from Aaron, he'd sit on the couch, his knees pulled up to his chest. Hiding his face, he'd feel fingertips exert light pressure on his shoulders as he was wrapped up by a pair of slight arms. Seeing as the person in those memories was his mother, the remembrance now felt particularly cruel.

The only fissure in the carefully constructed peace at the Mars family home formed when he got up to leave, insisting he needed to go home to get ready for work the following day.

Veronica, always thinking, almost convinced him to take another day off under the pretense that she didn't want to spend the day by herself. It took his brain a few extra seconds to realize that even if she felt that way, she would never admit it in front of both him and her father.

At work the next day, he should have taken her noticeable silence since he'd left her dad's house as a hint. If you were being ignored by Veronica Mars, she was either furious with you or she was plotting. And sometimes she was plotting because she was furious with you.

Five minutes before his lunch meeting with a prospective author was scheduled to occur, Logan received a call from his assistant informing him the meeting had been rescheduled. Seconds after hanging up Veronica strode into his office, claiming to be there just to see if he might have an hour free for lunch.

Wasn't Veronica the one who told me there's no such thing as a coincidence in Neptune?

He wasn't certain how she had managed it. Whether the meeting itself had been fake or if Veronica had simply found a way to cancel the appointment on both sides. While he didn't buy it was serendipity, he was more than grateful for the interruption.

The last time they'd gone on a walk near his office, there had been carefully crafted distance of more than one sort. Now, Veronica wasn't just holding his hand but his whole arm, toying with his fingers as they walked.

"What's with you?"

"Nothing," she shrugged. "Just hungry."

"Since when does being hungry make you clingy?" he teased.

It only took half a second for her to drop his arm and put several inches of space between them. In that same amount of time, she also managed to affix a smile of false cheer to her face.

"Sorry. I didn't realize I was." Folding her arms across her chest, she didn't break her stride. "What's good around here? I'm kind of craving a burger."

Come on, mouth. Time to actually catch up with my fucking brain. She's being affectionate. It's not a trick.

Perhaps it was the abruptness of her dropping his arm, or maybe that a marked hardness in her eyes was now paired with the warmth of her smile, but the places on his arm where she had been gripping felt cold. Five points of pressure he felt certain were now well below 98.6 degrees.

"Veronica, stop." He'd always been good with words. Whether using them to create or eliminate
space, he knew how to brandish them with precision and artistry. Even he, however, could still speak without thinking.

"What?" She turned around, taking a few steps backwards, and pointed to her stomach. "Feed me, Seymour."

Now she's deflecting. Fantastic. Veronica's sentimental side is more skittish than the damn groundhog's shadow.

"Look Veronica, I love you. But I don't want you here, holding my hand, because you think I'm going to fall apart."

She stopped walking, her stance resolute, and nodded. "Okay." Reaching out, she took his hand again, pressing her palm against his. "Now, burger?"

He sighed, huffing out a laugh. That was too easy.

"Okay? All I get is 'okay'?"

"I don't know what else I'm supposed to say. You said you didn't want me to be here for those reasons. I'm not. So there's really no reason for you to be pissy."

That's more like it.

Veronica had a low tolerance for self-pity and wallowing. Being prone to both, her bluntness was something he desperately needed. "Okay," he said, echoing her words back and kissing her palm.

A discussion was probably in order about his need for certain words, but that could happen later.

Whenever Veronica spoke of her feelings towards him he imagined an ellipses hanging in the air. It was her invitation to him to finish her thought. He never wanted to push her to say that which made her uncomfortable. He was happy to take the smiles and grazes of fingertips, superimposing the words on top of them.

But sometimes he just wanted her to finish her own damn thought and say out loud what she was feeling. Especially what she felt about him.

"Okay? All I get is 'okay'?" Her purposefully petulant tone made him smile and he tucked her into his side as they continued to walk.

"There isn't a burger place nearby, but there's a great deli up the street."

"I can roll with that."

This was new; bouncing back so quickly from a squabble and having it feel like a legitimate recovery. "If you're lucky, I'll slip you my pickle."

At the sound of Veronica's laugh and the sight of her hiding her face in his pressed dress shirt, Logan beamed.

"I might love you, but that doesn't mean I'm okay with your subpar innuendo. I want your A-game or nothing at all."

Then again, maybe that talk doesn't need to happen.

As he kissed her temple, continuing their slow walking pace, she squeezed him a little tighter. His
full-watt smile settled into a soft grin, Snapping himself out of his musings, he focused on the specific sensations involved in walking with his girl, arm in arm, on a moderately sunny day.

Perhaps a little clinginess was exactly what he needed.

Veronica always thought of eating while sitting side-by-side someone as her and Logan's thing. It wasn't how they always ate, but they did so often enough that she'd identified it as something that belonged to them.

She and Piz rarely went out during their brief romance, spending most of their time at her old apartment or the dining hall of Hearst. Piz also favored sitting beside her. It sometimes startled her to look to her right and find a profile that was still unfamiliar to her.

After the not-quite-a-sex-tape scandal, she remembered purposefully sitting next to Piz, needing comfort and proximity. His Zen attitude simultaneously convicted and annoyed her. It was easy to appeal to karma when one's reputation wasn't being impacted. Piz, undoubtedly, would be deemed a stud. She, however, would be dubbed the trashy daughter of the former sheriff. It didn't escape her notice that the jeers, whispers, and taunts she heard as they walked together were all directed at her.

She had hoped it would be the two of them against the world, but he'd been clear from almost the first day they'd met: he was a lover, not a fighter. He was oblivious that sometimes what she most needed to feel loved was to have someone stand beside her as she fought.

If Logan had been sitting with her in the dining hall that day, he would have wrapped his arm around her shoulder and lobbed a snark bomb potent enough to obliterate those around them. Piz had simply pulled her away.

She didn't see the benefit of sitting beside someone if all that proximity did was make it easier to take her out of a fight.

Now sitting next to Logan on a bench outside the deli, happily munching on a turkey sandwich and occasionally stealing his potato chips, it felt like they were gaining strength for the next battle. Whether that would be Logan fighting against a wave of grief over his fucked up family, or her dealing with another piece of evidence in her case, the peace was temporary.

*May as well enjoy it.*

Logan batted her hand away and slid his potato chips so they were just out of Veronica's reach.

"Sharing is caring," she pouted.

"Then let me have some of yours." He reached over to steal a few from her own bag, and she copied his previous gesture, slapping his hand.

"Uh uh."

"Yeah. That's what I thought."

Veronica just smiled up at him and leaned forward to grab his soda, helping herself to a large gulp.

It'd been a while since she'd been comfortable enough with someone to let silence linger. She was so focused on the dog walker on the other side of the street (struggling with four different leashes and losing the battle against a rather excitable Corgi) that Veronica wasn't aware Logan was reaching for her until his hand was on her collarbone.
She jumped in surprise at the feel of his fingertips against her skin. Sometimes she thought she could feel every single one of the ridges of his fingerprints as he touched her. Laughing at her own reaction, she shook her head.

"Where's your necklace?" Logan asked.

"Which necklace?"

"The star. The one Lilly gave you." His tone was disbelieving, almost as if he thought she was stringing him along. He trailed his fingers down her chest until they hit the lowest point of the neckline of her v-neck shirt and then let them linger there.

Biting her lip, she tried to give him her best disapproving glare, but she was afraid it communicated more amusement than anything else.  

*Does the boy have no shame?*

She pressed her fingers to her neck for confirmation. He was right. It wasn't there. "Must have forgotten to put it on this morning."

"You were wearing it the first day you got back. That afternoon at your dad's office. You haven't worn it since."

Smirking at him, she grabbed his fingers, thereby breaking his contact with her skin. His fingers had been slipping down even lower than her neckline to skim the edge of her bra. Not something she wanted to let progress in the middle of the afternoon while out in public. "That's awfully observant of you, kind sir."

"What can I say? I've spent an inordinate amount of time memorizing the lines of your clavicle."

Her eyes followed the movement of the dog walker, now trying to hold back the Corgi from jumping up on a young couple foolish enough to run directly past the pack of dogs. A smile tugged at her lips and then she looked down at her hands.

*I never would have noticed I wasn't wearing the necklace if Logan hadn't mentioned it. Why does it bother me so much now?*

"Potato chip for your thoughts?"

She looked over and saw Logan was holding a chip out to her between his thumb and forefinger. Perfect blend of considerate and cute.

*This companionship thing is a lot nicer than I remembered.*

She took the chip and tossed it into her mouth, crunching loudly. "Thanks." Washing down the chip with another sip of Logan's soda, she held the cup in her hands, fiddling with the straw as she took a breath. "After Lilly died, I dreamed about her almost every night. Did I ever tell you that?"

He shook his head, a gesture both answered her question and communicated his disbelief. "Every night?"

Veronica nodded but kept her gaze downward. "In some way, yeah. Sometimes there'd be a person who looked like her but they'd be someone else. Or she'd look different but I knew it was her. Or someone's dog would be named Lilly."
Logan snorted and she peered at him from under her lashes, her forehead knit together in question. "Lilly as a dog? That'd piss her off to no end."

She chuckled in response, now seeing the humor in it. "Yeah, it would." Taking another breath, she touched her collarbone again, remembering precisely where the charm of Lilly's gift would have fallen. "Two nights before I left for Neptune I had a dream with her in it but I haven't dreamed of her since. It's been almost two weeks and...not even a pet rock named Lilly. Nothing."

He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, and she scooted a few inches closer to him, making it easier to be pulled into his side. "You remember what happened in that last dream?"

"We were in her pool, I think. Floating on lounge chairs. I told her I couldn't be there anymore and I jumped off the raft, into the water. I've never tried to get away from her before." She set the cup down and reached up to grab his hand, running her fingers over the lines of his knuckles. "The next morning I could have sworn I saw her again in my apartment. She asked me where I wanted to be and then she was gone."

"Nothing since you came back to Neptune?"

"Nope."

"Hmm."

It shouldn't have been possible for someone to make a monosyllabic noise sound smug, but somehow Logan managed. She stared up at him, a little annoyed at how he was visibly trying to school his features to appear neutral.

"What?"

"Nothing," he answered, bending his head to kiss the end of her nose. "You'll figure it out."

"You think you know what that dream was about, don't you?"

"Not that hard to piece out, my dear, but I'm going to let you squirm." As she tried to push him away, a little more aggravated than she was sure she had the right to be, he held her tight. "Hey. Not dreaming about her doesn't mean you're forgetting her.

It better not be. If I break that promise to Lilly I'll never forgive myself.

She tensed her shoulders and bit the inside of her cheek, working against any desire to cry or even well up with unshed tears. If given a choice between letting Logan fondle her or crying in public? At least I'd enjoy the fondling.

"I was supposed to be the one to comfort you today."

"Eh. I got all of yesterday. I can spare thirty minutes for you."

She hugged him around the waist and he moved his free hand to wrap around her shoulders. When she looked up, she saw he was transfixed by something on the other side of the street. Unsure as to whether or not he was thinking or simply providing her with silence so she could process things, she took another second to scrutinize his expression. Something she wondered how soon she'd get sick of.

If he thought any harder, it'd be audible.
Another loud crunch from her brought his attention back down to her face. With his focus elsewhere, she had stolen the remainder of his chips from him, wanting nothing more than to get back to the lighthearted mood of a few minutes prior.

He reached for the bag but she jumped up and backed away from him. "You're going to be late for work." He sighed, grabbed his soda cup and then frowned when she realized she'd finished that off as well. At his glare, she just shrugged. "I was thirsty."

He rolled his eyes and gathered the remnants of lunch, tossing the wrappers from their sandwiches into a nearby garbage can. "Then how come your cup is still three quarters full?"

"Yours tasted better," she said, holding up her own soda and frowning at it. "My sugar to fizz ratio was off."

"Then, can I have a sip?" He smiled winningly and took a step towards her. She didn't trust the innocence of the smile, but damn if it wasn't beautiful.

"Fine. One sip." She offered the drink up to him and while he at first bent down as if to concede to her request, he managed to grab the cup from her and twist away. His legs being quite a bit longer than hers made it so that she had to almost run to catch up to him. "Hey! That was mine."

"Was being the operative word."

When they got back to his office building, Veronica stood up on her toes, quickly kissing the corner of his mouth. He backed away, wiggling all five of his fingers to remind her what time he'd pick her up that evening. It also served as the first reminder of her case all afternoon. That was enough to prompt her focus to shift to the information she needed from Neptune High.

"Text me when you get home?"

She loved that he phrased it as a request, allowing her the space to say yes or no, but trusting she'd give him that reassurance. Regardless of how safe it felt to be here with him now, Neptune wasn't safe for her. It never had been really but, with her stalker getting bolder, the air of the town was almost thick with threat.

"And maybe before that just for kicks."

He smiled, gratitude apparent, and kissed her once more on the forehead before heading into the building.

It wasn't until she saw him throw the soda cup into a lobby garbage can with practiced ease that she turned to head back to her car.

Smiling to herself, she pulled out her phone.

12:58 PM – From Veronica Mars to Logan Echolls
I'm walking back to my car. It's going really well so far.

"Do we need a code word? Bird calls are overdone. I can do a mean chimpanzee impression."

Veronica rolled her eyes at Logan's stream of consciousness. Unbuckling her seatbelt, she leaned forward to search her messenger bag for her lock pick set. She was certain she'd brought it but being stuck in a hallway without it would be less than ideal.
She figured she was partially to blame as she'd insisted on a rather circuitous route, just in case they were being followed on their way to Neptune High. Even then, she'd had him park on the far side of the building, making it so his black SUV wasn't visible from the main road.

"I don't think bird calls will be necessary."

"But then how will you know the coast is clear?"

Logan's voice dripping with sincerity was what told her he was full of shit.

"You see these things?" She pointed at her eyes, making them wider for added effect. "I thought I would stand off to the side, and then watch you and Clemmons leave the office."

"And then what?"

Laughing, she reached a hand behind his neck to guide him so their lips were almost touching. "This dumb brunette routine you've got going on is doing absolutely nothing for me." She gave him a quick peck and could feel his smile against her lips.

"Seriously, though, Clemmons isn't going to have records from ten years ago in his office."

"Lucky for me I happen to know where past student records are kept."

"That's convenient."

"No, that's kismet."

Counting on the fact that Clemmons wouldn't be waiting out front for Logan, they hopped out of the car and strode to the main entrance.

The doors were unlocked, though there were only a couple cars in the parking lot, one likely belonging to Clemmons himself and the other to the evening custodian. Once they entered the school, Veronica walked right past the school office to step into the bathroom she formerly used as her office. While there was the slight risk she'd be seen, she hoped that the amount of distance between Clemmons' office and the hallway would hide her.

It wasn't until she stood in the bathroom that she realized she hadn't even acknowledged Logan one last time before leaving him in the hallway. She had simply assumed he'd go directly to find Clemmons.

Let's hope that dumb brunette thing really was an act.

She stood with an ear pressed to the door and listened for the sound of footsteps. She heard a set approach, wanting to crack the door open to check it was Clemmons and Logan but unwilling to risk it. There were low murmurs in addition to the footsteps but as the steps got louder, so did Logan's voice.

Good boy.

"Seriously Van, I'm loving what you've done with the place. May I suggest, in your next renovation, painting the walls green? Studies indicate it can help students feel more at peace."

Clemmons' returning voice was tinged with exasperation, a tone Veronica herself had vivid memory of. "Thank you for the suggestion, Mr. Echolls. We'll take it under consideration."
"Please Vannie. Call me Logan. We're both adults now."

Hearing the amount of smarm evident in Logan's voice prompted Veronica to roll her eyes.

*Lay it on any thicker, Logan, and I'll have to bring a trowel with me the next time I bring you on a case.*

As the two men passed the bathroom, Veronica opened the door, watching them round the corner in the direction of the auditorium. She counted to five before slipping out of the bathroom and took another cursory glance down each end of the hallway.

Attempting to balance both speed and stealth, she followed the path that Logan and Clemmons had tread. Where they had turned right from the main hallway, she took a left.

The storage closet that held former student records was never much use to Veronica in her high school days, as most of her investigative work concerned those students currently enrolled. Her short stint in detention, manufactured by Clemmons himself, had given her an intimate knowledge of the filing system.

*I'll have to send Clemmons a thank you card for that. 'Dear Vannie, thanks for the help and the memories. Love, Veronica Mars, Class of 2006.'*

She rattled the door knob of the storage closet and, finding it locked, pulled her lock pick kit from her bag. Another glance down the hallway told her she was safe, but she hastened to get the door open anyway. It took her about twice as long as it should have (just more evidence that her skills needed sharpening) but she still felt that satisfying rush when she heard the click of the lock disengaging.

The rows of dark green filing cabinets stretched out along one wall. She recalled that all alumni records were sorted alphabetically, regardless of year. Taking a deep breath, she pulled the drawer open marked with the letters J through L and flicked through the files, easily finding the large grouping of former students with the last name of King.

She still didn't know what the initials "J.D." stood for, which forced her to pull half a dozen files, all with a different possibility for the first name. Eliminating any file for a student who graduated prior to 2006 or had a middle name that didn't start with the letter D, she was left with a single file for a Jason Dwayne King, class of 2006, a transfer to Neptune High his junior year of high school.

*His middle name is Dwayne? That'd be enough to make anyone lose their shit. No wonder he just went by his initials.*

As much as Veronica wanted to sit on the floor poring over the details of the file, she expected that even Logan's unparalleled ability to bullshit and stall was being tested. Rather than rely on, what she guessed was, a rather defunct copy machine, she used her phone to take a picture of each page of the file, capturing more than twenty images in total.

Sending Logan a quick text (*Got it. Meet me out by your car.*) she looked around the storage room to ensure she hadn't left anything that would cause someone to suspect she'd been there.

She locked the door behind her and half ran down the hallway, taking the corner sharply. The front doors of the school eighty, seventy, and then sixty feet in front of her.

*See, Veronica? Nothing to it. Wham, bam, thank you Neptune High.*

Though her pace was quick, she was rooted to her spot almost instantly by the sound of two male voices carrying down the hallway from behind her. Aside from a bank of lockers she could squeeze
next to, there wasn't any real place for her to hide.

Logan's voice was filled with bravado and she was sure he was speaking much louder than was absolutely necessary. Probably as a way to warn her of their approach. "My primary concern, Van, is my plaque. The bigger the better."

*God, Logan. Do you ever not speak in innuendo?*

"As I mentioned Mr. Echolls I'm sure the school board would be happy to negotiate the terms of your donation."

Veronica squeezed her eyes shut, making a quick decision to hide in plain sight, and then turned around to face the direction from which Clemmons and Logan would surely be coming. Even if she had been on the Neptune High track team, there was no way she would have been able to sprint the final fifty feet without being seen.

She rested both her hands on her stomach and began walking away from the front doors and towards the voices.

Clemmons saw her first as he turned the corner. Logan was far too busy looking in every direction, likely trying to ascertain if she had made her escape.

*Obviously not. I'd like to hear that monkey noise now, Logan.*

"Veronica Mars?" Only two words spoken and Principal Clemmons already sounded suspicious of her presence. She had half a mind to be offended but, given the circumstances, she figured his suspicion was well-deserved.

She took a few tentative steps forward and looked at Logan, hoping he'd pick up on her cues. "Logan? Are you ready to go?"

He hastened towards her, stepping around Clemmons, who was now standing with his arms crossed in the hallway, frowning at Logan's back.

"Veronica? I thought you wanted to wait in the car."

*I could kiss you, you stud.*

"You were taking too long. I'm really not feeling well."

"Of course sweetums, let's get out of here." Wrapping an arm around her shoulder, Logan pulled her into his side. From her angle, looking up at the line of his jaw, his sincerely apologetic expression was quite convincing. "Sorry to cut our meeting short, Van, but I need to get my girl home."

"I'm sorry," Clemmons cut in, kneading his forehead with a free hand. "You brought Veronica Mars to accompany you to this meeting? And the two of you are dating?"

Veronica wondered if the slight hint of fear she heard was imagined. It was likely that her presence alone had been enough to tip him off that Logan's visit had been a ruse.

*Though hopefully he'll never figure out what we're covering for.*

"Yes," Logan answered and added one of his hands to join hers, still resting on her stomach. "And baby makes three. Although, it's not so much morning sickness as morning, noon, and night sickness, isn't that right sweet pea?"
Veronica clenched her jaw and narrowed her eyes as she looked up at him.

*Forget the trowel. Going undercover with Logan requires a fucking cement truck and a shovel.*

His absolute delight at adding this element to their cover story was apparent.

*He is going to get it. Absolutely get it. And not in the fun way.*

At her look, his smile simply grew and he bopped her nose with his free hand.

Under the guise of holding his other hand, she interlocked their fingers, squeezing his hand with unnecessary force and then dropping it away from her stomach.

"That's right, hon. The amount of nausea I am experiencing at the moment is practically crippling."

"Veronica, what reason would you have to break back into the school?"

"I don't know what you're talking about Mr. C."

Clemmons studied Veronica, narrowing his eyes. His distrust was palpable but so was his exasperation. "What did you do, Veronica?"

Logan smirked and then moved behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. "Come on Vannie. Get with the times! It's so passé to blame the woman for finding herself in a delicate condition."

Veronica mashed her lips together to stop herself from snapping at him. If playing the loving couple card got them out of the school faster, then so be it. Clemmons, however, didn't seem satisfied with the half-cocked story he'd been provided.

"While Mr. Echolls and I were visiting the auditorium, what were you up to, Veronica?"

"Why does he call you by your first name?" Logan whispered into her ear, pulling her into his body and backing them away.

Veronica, reconciled to the lie, but purposely stepping back to stomp on Logan's toes, gave a small wave. "I don't know what you're talking about. I was just waiting in the car. Good seeing you again, Mr. C."

Louder, obnoxiously, Logan raised his voice in triumph. "Yep. Class of 2029, right here. We'll send you a birth announcement!"

Mr. Clemmons hung his head, a sigh of resignation echoing in the empty hallway. "Not necessary. I'll just wait for the precise moment the gates of hell open up. I imagine the events will correlate."

They turned and walked the last twenty feet toward freedom, Veronica barely restraining herself from giving Logan the hipcheck he so richly deserved.

"Did you hear what he said about our child?" Logan's righteous indignation only served to irritate her.

"Yes, he said our hypothetical child was a demon. Clearly it takes after its father."

"Now our child is an 'it'?"

She smiled up at him, her jaw clenched, and then looked over her shoulder. Poor Clemmons didn't seem to know what room to search first and then apparently decided it was futile, throwing his hands
up in the air and returning to his office.

*I really will have to send him something. Maybe a fruit basket. Or the business card for a security company.*

"Find anything useful?"

"I don't know yet. Not sure I'd tell you even if I did, sweet pea." She hoped he heard the implicit threat in the term of endearment.

"Hey now, don't take it out on me just because you got caught. All of this could have been avoided if we'd had a code word."

Rolling her eyes she pushed him away. "I've got a code word for you: cut-off."

"That's more of a phrase."

"No, single word, hyphenated."

Already flipping through the photos on her phone, she didn't bother to look behind her at Logan's face. His answering grunt was enough to tell her he didn't believe her threat was genuine. It wasn't until she slid into the passenger side of Logan's SUV and buckled her seatbelt that she even realized he had opened the car door for her.

She looked away from her phone to watch him as he also got in and started the car, pulling on his seatbelt as he navigated the SUV out of the parking lot.

More than his gentlemanly gesture it was the way he'd accompanied her on this task, letting her take the lead without fighting her on it, which caused an overwhelming amount of affection to well up in her.

*I suppose that, given the circumstances, I can let the pregnancy thing slide. It did seem to shake Clemmons enough to not pay my presence more attention. Even if he knew I wasn't just there as Logan's girlfriend.*

"Hey," she said, reaching out to ruffle his hair and then rest her hand on his cheek. "You did good back there, Nick."

Leaning into her touch, he turned to kiss her palm. "Thanks Nora." One hand left the steering wheel to pat Veronica's stomach. "Thanks to you too, Nina."

Veronica growled and pushed his hand away. "Like I said: cut-off."

"That's the last of them," Veronica said, closing her dad's laptop. Spinning around in the chair, she reached behind her to grab the stack of papers from the printer. She now held in her hand every page of Jason Dwayne King's permanent file. Calling out to Logan, who was sitting on the couch in the waiting area, she spun the chair back around. "Ready for grunt work?"

"Can't we hire someone to take care of that for us?"

Her eyes were alight with amusement, even as she shook her head. Standing up, she flicked off the light to her dad's office. "Not all of us are used to being waited on hand and foot."

"I'd like you to know I've acclimated quite well to not having a full time staff."
At the sight of him leaning back, his arms propped behind his head with eyes closed, her expression softened into one of pure affection. There was so much about the two of them that felt new. Hallmarks of their newfound adulthood and maturity. Sometimes, though, when she looked at him she only saw the lanky twelve year old boy who'd always shared her taste in movies.

"I figured it out, just so you know." Dropping the file beside him, she settled herself onto his lap, pressing her knees into the cushions of the couch. She hooked her arms around his neck prompting him to sit up and rest his hands on her hips. Leaning over to kiss him on the cheek, she whispered in his ear. "Lilly wanted me to grow up. Get on with my life. Do what I want."

His lips twitched with a smile at the reminder of her dream and he ran his hands up and down her denim clad thighs. "And what do you want?"

"Well I wanted you."

"And you got me."

"Been there, done that."

Resting his head in the crook of her neck, he smirked into her skin. "Several times. Wanna get me again?"

"Later. Now I want you to help me look through this file." She slid off Logan's lap, ignoring his groan and perturbed expression. Handing him a stack of papers and a highlighter, she smiled up at him, tilting her head. "What?"

"Don't 'what' me. You know exactly what." His point didn't need much emphasis, but he gestured to his lap anyway.

"I know," she said, actually feeling a small amount of guilt for teasing him. And no small amount of glee. "But I told my dad I'd be home in an hour."

He nodded, taking the proffered highlighter from her and putting his hand out for some of the case file. "Rain check. Which I will be cashing in. Soon."

"Promise?" she asked, biting her lip for added effect. "Take notes on anything you think could be relevant."

They worked in silence for a few minutes, each of them highlighting as they flipped through J.D. King's file. Veronica was jotting a few notes down on a separate piece of paper when Logan's exclamation of "No fucking way," stole her attention from the page she had been focused on.

"What?"

"Jason Dwayne King transferred to Neptune high his junior year."

"Yeah, I read that already." "More precisely, October of his junior year."

"Let me guess. 2004?"

Logan nodded and she pursed her lips together, nodding, not yet wanting to zero in on any one piece of information.

"That explains that," she said, taking the enrollment record from him. "So if that's why he picked the
number 1004 then why didn’t he start sending me letters when Troy and I were dating?"

Logan shrugged, "Maybe he didn't think Troy was a threat? Says here that J.D. transferred at the end of the month. You and Troy were already broken up by then."

She hid the smile his words sparked by holding the file up to cover her face.

*Interesting that he remembers when I stopped dating Troy even though at the time we were barely civil.*

"I don't know. Maybe." Veronica continued to flip through the papers in the file, finding a few notes from a meeting J.D. had with Rebecca James, the once school counselor at Neptune High. Sneaking a glance at Logan to see what he was focused on, she looked back at the page.

*Jason still exhibits a hesitance to discuss the loss of his parents. He's clearly isolated. Alone. Unwilling or unable to make friends. He rejects any suggestion I've made to move closer to his extended family. The amount of money he inherited from his parents guarantees that he'll always have enough to provide for himself, thereby adhering to the terms of his emancipation. He listened to my suggestion to take an art elective. Maybe it'll better help him express his feelings?*

"Looks like my milkshake still brings all the emotionally damaged emancipated rich boys to the yard." At Logan's questioning look, she handed him the page she'd been reading. "He's wealthy. His parents died leaving him an inheritance."

"Which explains why he's been able to follow you from place to place."

She nodded, and again flipped through the pages. Not seeing what she was looking for, she sat up to peer over at those Logan was sorting through. "You have any of his class schedules?"

"I think so. Why?"

Taking the page from Logan, she pursed her lips together. "Just checking something. January 2005 was second semester junior year. Ms. James' notes were from the end of the first semester."


*Sixth period. Drawing and painting? And that's one more point in my game of stalker-connect-the-dots. Ms. James would be thrilled to know how seriously he took her suggestion to get involved with art.*

"I was in that class, his sixth period elective," she said, indicating the class on the schedule.

Logan frowned at where she was pointing. "You never took art."

"I did for a week, before I managed to convince Ms. James to switch me into an off-site advisory period."

"You mean you worked for your dad."

"Well, yeah but that's not the point. Ms. James seemed to think he was more than a little damaged. He had just lost his parents. I come into the mix somehow. That could be enough -"

"To set him off. Yeah, I can see it."

Veronica gathered the rest of the papers and shoved them back into the manila envelope, standing up
"Let's go. I've got to talk to my dad and you've got to meet your friends."

"You have a plan don't you?"

She beamed at him, her confidence growing as another lead presented itself. "I used to have some connections to the Neptune High art world."

"What kind of connections?"

"You know, the kind that would willingly fashion and put a bong in a rich jackass' locker if I asked him to."

Logan jumped up, moving quickly to encircle her waist with his arms. Nipping at her neck, she heard a low growl emanate from the back of his throat. "I knew that was you."

"Did I say that?"

"I don't have to go to this dinner. I can reschedule. Cash in on that rain check."

She shook her head even as they walked to the front door of the office, her pace slowed by both his close proximity and his hands which were now charting a path under her shirt. "No, you can't. It's important that you go. I'll read the rest of his file when I get home."

He groaned into the side of her neck, his frustration at having to leave evident. If she hadn't been trying to do the responsible thing, knowing it'd be good for him to focus on something other than both of their problems, she would have conceded.

"Give me a call later if there's anything I can help with." She knew Logan had purposefully lowered his voice, making the timber deeper as his breath tickled her cheek. And she suspected his offer of assistance was limited specifically to her case.

"You want me to booty call you?" She attempted to sound disapproving of the concept, but the patterns he was drawing on her skin were altogether too pleasant making her voice rise to an embarrassing pitch.

And I'm not shoving him up against a wall because, why?

"Please. And consider the invitation to my booty open ended."

"I'll keep that in mind." Turning off the last bank of lights, she pulled away from Logan as they exited the room to lock the door. "If Clemmons was surprised you and me are a thing, good ol Corny is going to lose his mind. Pretty sure he hated you."

She smiled as he interlaced their fingers then swung their clasped hands as they walked down the hall.

"You can tell him I pretty much hated me in high school too. That might make him feel better."

Chapter End Notes

By now you know I'm absolutely nothing without my beta! Thanks, again, scandalpantsstuff. You guys don't know how lucky you are that she's around to read my
stuff before you get it. Seriously.

Special thanks to disdainfullady (ladydisdain225 on LJ) for writing an amazing ficlet in response to my previous chapter! You can find it on her livejournal here and it features Skyler coming to a very satisfying end.
It was just after midnight and Veronica found herself tucked into bed, seriously regretting not taking Logan up on his booty call offer.

What's the point of hitching one's self to a hot piece of A-S-S if I don't capitalize on that at every moment?

The majority of her evening had been spent in a frustrating loop of indecision, undoubtedly sparked by her brief conversation with Logan. She had decisions to make about what she needed from herself, from him, and from her future. None of those decisions could be easily made in the six days before she was scheduled to return to Chicago.

She'd learned that saying yes to one opportunity required you to say no to hundreds of others. If she said yes to holding onto this feeling of rightness with Logan, said yes to returning to California, she'd be saying no to the almost two years of time she'd invested in medical school.

That evening, within seconds of returning to her dad's house, she was at his computer. Even before she clicked online, she knew it was a longshot. The forty-five minutes she spent checking admission policies on various medical school websites only confirmed it. UC San Francisco, UC Los Angeles, Stanford, UC San Diego – the top four med school programs in the state and none of them accepted transfer students.

Whether or not medical school was the right decision, she owed it to herself to see it through. But didn't she also owe it to herself to see this thing through with Logan? Wasn't it better to live life without the gnawing ache she'd felt since they'd been separated?

Reuniting with Logan was the last thing she'd expected. Despite the knowing glances Joanna had given her, Veronica really hadn't thought things would fall back into place with the two of them. And, in light of the surprise, she had absolutely no fucking idea what to do.

I definitely didn't think it'd be better than what we had before. Or that those two years apart, despite sucking at times, would make us better for one another.

In addition to her scant personal research that evening, she'd also spent a few hours going over details of her case with her dad, discussing what her and Logan's search had uncovered at Neptune High.

Her plan for the next day was to first follow up with Corny and then check with Mac on her bank hackage progress. If she was lucky, Corny would be able to remember enough to give her a description of the guy. Unfortunately, it had been more than six years since they'd graduated; the chances of that seemed a pinch short of slim. This meant she may have to add in tracking down Rebecca James to see what she remembered about Jason Dwayne King.

Cycling through the day, for the third time, her brain wouldn't stop. She needed a distraction. But she was rather comfortable where she was and reluctant to leave her cocoon of blankets to take Logan up on his offer. Nor did she think her dad would be willing to overlook Logan sleeping in her bed for a third time that week. There was having your dad like your boyfriend and then there was delusion.

Time to plan a sleepover for Logan's house. A series of sleepovers, actually.
Curled up under the blankets, she slid a hand out to grab her phone which sat on the nightstand. She tossed the blankets over her head, burrowing even deeper into the down, and scrolled to Logan's number.

*Note to self. Add to speed dial. Sorry, Logan, number five will have to suffice. Dad, Wallace, and Mac will be furious if they get bumped. Damn voicemail claiming the number one spot.*

She closed her eyes as she listened to the rings, waiting for Logan to answer. Chances were, given the mandates of his work schedule, he was already asleep. She spared a second to feel sorry but figured that losing out on sleep to talk to one another was something they were going to have to acclimate to.

*Might as well get some practice in. One ring. Two. Three. Shit. He really isn't going to -*

"Echolls Clinic for the sexually deprived. Dr. Logan speaking. May I service you?"

She shook her head from her position under the blankets, genuinely impressed that his voice could be thick with sleep, yet he could still answer with such a reply.

"Dr. Logan, you say? Just what kind of doctor are you?"

"A love doctor."

"Is that the same as a cardiologist?"

"Okay, less of a love doctor and more like a sex doctor. I specialize in orgasmicology."

She bit her lip to hold in a laugh, liking the way she could still be surprised by his easy volley of a response. However, this was one area where her current studies gave her the advantage. He could have literary and classic movie references. The medical field was all hers.

"That's not an actual position in a hospital, you know. Unless by sex doctor you mean an andrologist – a doctor who focuses on the male reproductive system. Or gynecologist if you're more interested in the female reproductive system which, based on how thorough I know you can be in that area, seems more fitting. I guess –"

He cut her off with a laugh, and she smiled at the interruption. If she had to guess, he'd figured out he'd been bested.

*Almost makes the more than $100,000 in med school debt totally worth it.*

"Alright, I get it. I get it. I can no longer make doctor jokes without getting royally schooled by my much smarter girlfriend."

"Damn straight."

It all seemed so simple when phrased that way. She was his girlfriend. She was in medical school. But they hadn't even discussed how the former was going to be impacted by the latter.

When she was at UCLA he had sent her a post card that said he would always be proud of her, regardless of what she did. A sentiment that was a definite buoy during that difficult transition. At times it still took her by surprise that this was the profession she'd chosen. Her friends in Neptune, though not fully understanding her decision, had always supported her. It never occurred to her Chicago friends to question her choice, not knowing her in any other context.
"So, what kind of 'ist' are you going to be?"

"I don't pick my specialty until fourth year, but with the ME thing, pathology makes the most sense." She was luckier than a lot of her classmates. Many of them went into their third year still uncertain what their specialty would be. Since she'd applied to med school to pursue a specific career, a lot of those decisions were predetermined for her.

"Which entails what exactly?"

"Diagnosing diseases. Lab work. Autopsies."

*Things that still kind of scare the shit out of me, truth be told.*

"So it's like the research part of working on a case."

"Pretty much, yeah."

"Veronica Mars in a lab. This is going to provide fodder for my sexual fantasies for years to come. But a lab means no field work."

"And I wouldn't be working with patients as much as working with doctors."

"You'd be the doctor's doctors? Those doctors better gear up for a prickly MD."

The way his voice lilted up on that word, 'prickly,' made Veronica feel like he was paying her a compliment. Which was odd, given the implications of that characteristic. And the way both of them had been hurt by it in the past.

"We'll see," she answered, her tone light. "Sorry for calling so late. Couldn't sleep." Veronica didn't feel like she could verbalize the 'without you' but a part of her hoped Logan heard it anyway.

*Implied sentiment pretty much counts, right?*

She was doing better with saying the words she knew Logan needed. That didn't mean it was always easy.

"I should be upset." His voice was filled with false indignation and she could imagine him raising his eyes up to the ceiling in faux annoyance. "You actually interrupted a rather exciting dream I was having. I had a whole doctor and nurse fantasy going."

"You better have been the nurse. And that's officially the third time you've brought sex into this conversation." Veronica let out a little sigh, closing her eyes and bringing her knees up to her chest under the covers. "I like this. I like being your friend."

"Friend? I don't know how I feel about you discussing sexual fantasies with your guy friends."

"Shut up. You know what I mean."

"Yeah. I do."

Though she was still awake, she could feel her breath settle more deeply into her chest. Her limbs felt pleasantly heavy with the promise of sleep and, knowing Logan was on the other end of the line, the sensation was made even more welcome.

"Veronica, can I ask you something?"
"Sure."

She expected him to respond right away, but when his answering silence stretched on for several seconds, she became worried. Sitting up, she turned on her bedside lamp discerning she should be more alert for this. "Logan?"

"The last time I asked you this question we got into a pretty big fight." His reluctance was evident, but she understood better than most people the overwhelming need for answers.

"Well then why ask it?"

"Curiosity, I guess."

"Ah. Curiosity. I remember you. I thought you'd left forever. Apparently you only scurried away and made yourself comfortable with my man friend."

"Why'd you leave Neptune after freshman year at Hearst?" The words were rushed, sounding like they were all spoken on a single exhale of breath.

Not the question I was really expecting. And I can't believe he remembers that fight we got into over spring break.

"That case that went wrong. I told you that a long time ago." She swallowed, giving her answer almost by rote, and yet suspecting it wouldn't satisfy him.

"You kept investigating after Aaron did what he did. After Cassidy. Mercer. Suddenly, though, you get run off the side of the road and that's too much." She knew Logan was getting worked up and could hear the tight band of control he was exerting over his words. He took a deep breath and when he spoke again, his words sounded less edgy but they were just as brittle. "But if you tell me that's all there was to it, I'll believe you."

She waited another second to respond, trying to hear the true request behind his words. It was a long time ago; she could let him on this secret. Buried secrets did tend to surface when she was around. This time she owed Logan one of her own. No digging necessary.

"A case gone bad was a big part of it. Close to 80%.

"What about that other 20%?"

"Alright. Story time." She turned the light back off, craving the cool comfort of darkness. Her reasoning behind leaving wasn't dramatic, especially compared to other parts of her life. It wasn't even particularly traumatizing, but it did require her to bring up parts of her life that were both of those things. "Do you remember Emily Lin from high school? She was a senior when we were sophomores."

"I remember she was hot –"

"Of course you do."

"I didn't really know her. She seemed cool."

"Lilly used to say the girl must have a deep dark family secret. No one could have hair that shiny and be that friendly without selling her soul to someone." Veronica took a breath and rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand.
"After Lilly died – well – you know what my life was like."

They'd never really talked about this. Their junior year of high school they'd asked for and extended forgiveness without any specific mention of their one time hate fueled rivalry. Somehow they even managed to date without mentioning the fallout that radiated from Lilly's death.

He huffed out a laugh. It was a short burst of a sound and she squeezed her eyes shut. True, they'd never talked about it, but her guess was Logan still hated himself for it.

"Yeah. I recall. I was there for most of it."

"The 09ers followed whatever you and Duncan did without question. Most of the other kids in school did too. I don't even think they knew why they weren't supposed to talk to me. It was right after Thanksgiving and I opened my locker. Inside was a box of cookies which I almost immediately tossed in the garbage."

"You figured it was a trick."

"Laxatives? Habanero peppers? Drugs, just to see me get high at school? They could have been laced with anything. But Emily came up behind me, grabbed one of the cookies and took a big bite out of it. I didn't know why she did it, but I figured out she made them for me."

"So you found yourself with an ally. I never saw the two of you hang out."

"That's 'cause we didn't. She tried to a couple times but I always said no. Then it was the end of that school year and Shelly's party happened and I really wish I would have known her. Could have used a friend."

That was another thing they didn't talk about. Logan knew everything about Shelly's party. But they'd never addressed it directly, only skirted around the subject, when she would wake up gasping from a nightmare, or cling to him as they lay in bed whispering, almost as a confession, "Just sleep tonight, okay?"

"I'm sorry."

She shrugged and it took her another couple seconds to remember that he wasn't there with her. That he couldn't actually see the gesture. "I know." She'd long since decided it didn't help anything to answer those kinds of apologies with 'it's okay' or 'it's fine' because it wasn't. It never had been, even if she had pretended for a while that it was.

"I wasn't lying about that case, Logan. I did get run off the road by the cheating husband I was tailing. The mistress who held the gun to my head, though? It was Emily. And that freaked me the fuck out. She was sleeping with a guy her dad worked with and, god Logan, she was a good person."

There was more she could have said. She could have explained that Neptune seemed to be rife with stories of people she put into the 'good column' of her mental list, that were damaged by the town. Lilly. Meg. Emily. Her dad, to some extent. It was naïve to think the same thing wouldn't happen to her. She'd say those things if she had to. For the time, however, she didn't speak and instead focused all of her energy on willing Logan to comprehend.

"You thought you were doomed to do the same thing? To sleep with one of your dad's colleagues?" The amusement in Logan's voice was causing a tiny sliver of self-doubt to make itself apparent. She
thought she'd been rather clearheaded throughout the whole ordeal. It hadn't occurred to her that Logan would find it funny. "On the other hand, Cliff does have that velvet smooth voice. Probably cat nip for the ladies."

"Glad to amuse you."

"Veronica, it kind of is. I mean, you left Neptune because some woman you barely knew spent her summer vacation hooking up with some old dude."

She bit her lip out of frustration, both at him and herself. He wasn't getting it, and she wanted to be done trying to explain.

"Veronica?"

"She was the only good person in that school, Logan. For a long time the only person who was decent to me. And she held a gun to my head." She was angry. And with only a few seconds of silence that feeling swelled to resemble the slightly irrational variety. It'd been more than a decade since she stopped believing in fairytales, but was it too much to ask to have one person in the town she grew up in to get at least a quasi-happy-ending? "I had to sit across the dinner table from my dad, look him in the eye and know, without any doubt, that I was the reason he lost the sheriff's job. If I stayed in Neptune, it would have happened again. It would have kept happening. And I'm not going to apologize for getting out."

"Hey." He interrupted her tirade with a sharp voice. He wasn't angry, but he sure as hell wasn't trying to comfort her. "I'm not asking you to apologize. I just wanted to understand. I didn't know what it meant that it was Emily. I didn't know."

*And this is why we don't share things, Veronica. Sharing may be caring but it fucking sucks sometimes.*

Deciding it would be too petulant of an act to hang up the phone, she remained on the line but without speaking.

"You still there?" he asked.

"Yup."

*Still here, but a little sulking never hurt anyone. Because apparently I am a child.*

"I shouldn't have laughed, it's just that -" His voice drifted off and she could almost see him tugging at his hair, trying to pick the right words, the best ones, from the air. "That never would have happened to you, babe."

Pet names were new to this iteration of their relationship, but not entirely unfamiliar. And that single syllable spoken by Logan helped rob her of any ire she felt. She was almost resentful of that fact. Was it too much to ask to maintain some of her righteous indignation?

"You were always stronger than this town, Veronica. I'm sorry about Emily, and I get that you did what you needed at the time, but it never would have taken you down."

"It almost did. A couple times."

"In the words of that wise songstress Brandy, almost doesn't count."

She snorted out a laugh at that one, covering half of her face with one of her hands. Was this really
"I'm not mad you left. I get it. And fuck, I'm so proud of this person you are now, Veronica. But if you had stayed, I think you would have been okay."

_Sweet sentiment, Logan, but I'm not sure if I believe you. I may have left swinging, but Neptune got in a few pretty good hits._

"Sorry for waking you up." It was a deliberate change of subject on her end. One that she hoped he let her get away with.

He cleared his throat and she wondered if he was deciding how to respond. "Don't be. I've found myself a little addicted to you, again."

"Sentimental son of a bitch." But she was grinning.

"You know you love it."

"Maybe." Her voice was soft when she responded and she wasn't certain what to say next. There were plenty of topics to choose from, but none they desperately needed to discuss at 12:30 AM.

It also didn't feel worth the effort to try and end the phone call. As if trying to find the right combination of words to thank him for picking up when she called was impossible. So she didn't, rather allowed the silence to hang in the air as she burrowed further into her blankets. She'd let Logan figure out how to end it.

When he made no obvious move to say anything else, she smiled and then lay the phone down on the pillow, checking to see that Logan was still connected on the other line.

She woke up eight hours later to a text message from Logan.

8:36 AM – Logan Echolls to Veronica Mars

_Your snore is cute. Kinds of sounds like you have a sinus infection. But it's cute._

Rather than puff up with pretend outrage, she let her lips curl into a wide grin and then buried her face in her pillow.

_Looks like I might be a bit of a sentimental son of a bitch myself. Damn._

"What's the plan here, Sherlock? If memory serves, Corny spent the majority of his days more baked than a geriatric in Florida."

"How eloquent, my dear Wallace. I was looking through this King kid's file. Almost spotless record, B-minus average, just good enough to fly under everyone's radar. We had five-hundred people in our graduating class. It'd be easy to stay anonymous."

"Except?"

Veronica raised an eyebrow at him and then looked to her left to check her blindspot before changing lanes. "What makes you think there's an 'except' in what I'm thinking?"

_There's totally an 'except.'_

"Give me a little bit of credit, girl. I know when you're holding back info so you can build to a big finish. Spill."
"Okay, fine. King's record is spotless, except for a one-day suspension for starting a fight with someone during his sixth period drawing class."

"And you're hoping Corny will remember who it was that the dude took a swing at?"

She shrugged, checking behind her for the fifth (maybe sixth) time to ensure that they weren't being followed. It wasn't so much that she was afraid of King (or Kirkpatrick, or Kenmore, depending on the alias) as much as she didn't want him to know exactly what leads were being chased. Though, if her suspicions from a couple days prior were correct, he'd probably get off on her getting closer.

"I don't have much to go on, Wallace. Have to take what I can get."

Wallace nodded at her response, sending her a reassuring smile. While it didn't entirely dispel the feeling of helplessness, it did make her feel the smallest bit better.

A few minutes later, Veronica and Wallace pulled up outside a small, non-descript smoothie shop located in downtown Neptune strip mall.

"This is where Corny works?" Wallace asked, more than a hint of disbelief apparent in his tone.

"According to his social security number."

"Maybe he'll give us a discount."

_That's my Wallace. When life gives you strawberries, oranges, and bananas, you make a smoothie._

It being a Wednesday morning, well after the pre-work power-smoothie rush, the shop was relatively deserted. A couple of girls, she guessed were college students, sat in one corner sipping on their beverages. At another table a mom fussed over her two daughters struggling to keep their straws inside their smoothie cups.

She made out Corny's curly head of hair at the sink, washing a series of blenders. His co-worker, a tall dark-haired boy who looked to be about the same age as the two college girls, was leaning forward on the countertop but straightened up as she and Wallace entered. His nametag identified him as Nick, Assistant Manager.

Which makes him Corny's boss. Hopefully he doesn't run too tight of a ship.

"Uh, good morning," assistant manager Nick mumbled. "What can I get you this morning?"

"Nothing, thank you," Veronica answered, purposefully ignoring Wallace's crestfallen expression. "But we would like to talk to Corny, if that's not too much trouble."

"Actually, I'd like one of those chocolate banana peanut butter smoothies," Wallace added.

Turning around at the sound of his name, Corny's appeared confused, but his face lightened once he saw Veronica and Wallace standing there. "No way! Nick, can I take my ten? These are some of my high school peeps."

Without giving an audible answer, Nick waved his hand at Corny and then took the five dollar bill Wallace offered to him. "This will be ready in a minute," Nick said, handing Wallace back his change.

"Chocolate banana peanut butter? That's not a smoothie."

"Nah, Fennel picked good. That smoothie is super grub." Corny wiped off his hands and then
stepped around to greet them, still wearing his apron. He immediately pulled Veronica into a hug and then initiated some complicated handshake that left Wallace mystified and shaking his head.

*Chances are Corny just made that up on the spot. Glad to know all that pot smoking didn't screw with his mental acuity.*

"How’s business, Corny?" Wallace asked, following him to an empty table.

"Ah, this is just my day job. I’ve been making a pretty big name for myself at farmer’s markets around San Diego, selling my art. I use mostly recyclable goods. Nick is cool and lets me get first grab at the choice materials here."

Wallace pressed his lips together as he nodded and Veronica cleared her throat, preparing to smooth on the charm. It wasn't too hard with Corny.

"Is there a rush on recyclable goods in the art world?" Veronica found herself genuinely curious as she asked the question.

"You’d be surprised. What brings you to my corner of Neptune? Just in the market for a smoothie?"

"I actually had a few questions for you about someone we went to high school with. Do you remember a Jason Dwayne King? He took sixth period drawing our junior year."

"Name isn't sounding alarms. You got a picture?"

Veronica shook her head. "He transferred to Neptune junior year and was apparently a little camera shy for the two years he was with us. Took drawing and painting junior year, again the beginning of senior year, and then art studio the last semester of senior year."

"You got any of his work?"

"No, but I might be able to track some down." She didn't know how she'd do that, but if it's what Corny needed to ID the guy, she'd make it happen. His permanent file didn't contain any examples, or else she could have just run out to her car.

*Looks like I might be taking another trip to Neptune High in the next couple of days. Chances are, though, that Clemmons has already put my face on a series of wanted posters. He's not going to let me or Logan within fifty feet of those student records.*

"He got suspended for a couple days junior year for punching someone in his art class," Wallace cut in, then turned around to accept the smoothie Nick handed him. Rolling her eyes at his overdramatic enjoyment of his first sip, she looked over at Corny.

Corny burst out into a loud laugh, smacking his forehead with his hand and earning himself stares from both the mother and the college girls.

"Corny!" Nick’s reprimand echoed in the smoothie shop. "Professionalism."

"Sorry! My bad." Corny lowered his voice, hunching over the table so that both Veronica and Wallace had to lean in. "We used to call that kid Brando. Dude, he was awesome."

Veronica frowned at Corny’s description and knit her brows together in question. "Brando?"

"He always had this sour expression on his face. Wouldn't talk to anyone. He rocked the Bieber haircut before there was even a Biebs."
Translating that to mean the guy had floppy hair that hung in his face. The surveillance camera footage from Logan's tells me the guy was tall. Tall guy, long hair, sour expression on his face? That narrows it down.

"What's so awesome about that? Dude kind of sounds like an ass."

Veronica smiled at Wallace's assessment and then nodded. She may have had a few more facts than Corny did, but she agreed with Wallace: whoever this King guy was, he was definitely an ass.

"Because it was all an act. Well mostly. I think."

"What was an act?" Veronica straightened up in her seat and scooted over to be a couple inches closer to Corny.

"Bro was an orphan, you know that?" At Veronica and Wallace's nods, Corny continued. "One day Mrs. Pozzi, our art teacher, is giving Brando a hard time about failing to turn in an assignment. He just gives her these sad eyes, says something about him missing his parents, and BAM!, she gives him an extension. Walked away, kind of dragging his feet, his head hanging, but he was kinda smiling. But, I mean, if it works for him cool. What's family tragedy if you can't use it to your advantage, right?"

"So the guy's kind of a psycho," Wallace muttered, and then turned to Veronica with his eyebrows raised.

Tell me something I don't know.

"Anything else, Corny?"

"Nah. Like I said. He was the strong silent type. Decent artist, though. Had a good eye for faces."

At Corny's endorsement of King's artistic capabilities, a small shudder went up Veronica's spine. She wondered again at Neptune High providing the training ground for the subtle form of harassment she'd been exposed to for the past several years.

The Neptune High motto of 'service, loyalty, honor' really put to the test by this guy. I guess if you tilt your head and squint a bit, though, dedicating one's self to stalking another person off and on for seven years is a type of loyalty.

"Why all the questions, though. Oh! Shit!" Corny sat back up, his voice again rising in volume. "Is this for a case thing?"

Nodding as she stood, Veronica stepped away from the table and pushed in her chair. "Yup." She scrawled her number on a piece of paper and handed it to Corny. "If you think of anything else, give me a call."

Shrugging in agreement, Corny shoved the paper into his jeans as both he and Wallace stood. Corny said goodbye in a similar manner to how he said hello – Veronica receiving a small hug and Wallace responding with more ease to the complicated handshake.

Her messenger bag secured over her shoulder, Veronica bumped Wallace to get his attention.

"I need food. What do you say to calling Mac and doing pizza at my dad's place?"

"Sounds good to me. You buying?"
"My pizza, yes. You're on your own."

Before she opened the door to leave, Veronica sharply pivoted on her heels, remembering the question that had been at the top of her list to ask Corny.

"Corny. The guy Brando punched? Do you remember who it was?"

"Yeah it was that dumb surfer kid." Wallace laughed at that description and Veronica wasn't sure if it was because Corny was calling someone else dumb or because half of the population at Neptune High surfed. "That rich one who's brother swan dived off that hotel? Dick something."

Veronica sighed, her head thrown back, eyes raised to the ceiling. "Of course it was," she grumbled, and turned around to leave.

Veronica sat at the island in her dad's kitchen, the elements of J.D. King's file strewn about demanding her attention. She was having a hard time focusing, though, and it had everything to do with Mac and Wallace sitting on either side of her. Wallace, assuming Mac had already been told everything about the case, had casually mentioned a few details that led to Mac asking several questions and demanding answers.

Now, rather than helping her sort through the file, they were amusing themselves by taking bets on who Veronica's stalker was.

Wallace sided with her dad and was arguing for Skyler, explaining to Mac, "I never liked his shiesty ass."

"You're not going to change my mind, Wallace. I'm still banking on Duncan." Mac leaned forward across the island to grab a slice from her personal-sized veggie pizza. While living in San Francisco, Mac had modified her diet so she was now vegetarian rather than vegan. It made her food needs much easier to accommodate during their gatherings.

"Duncan dated the girl. He wouldn't need to stalk her."

"Hey," Veronica interrupted, waving a hand in Wallace's face, "That 'girl' is sitting right here."

"Yeah, whatever Vee." Wallace grabbed her hand and moved it from his line of sight, focusing back on Mac.

"Come on. The guy's initials are DK. Just toss in a 'J' and he might as well be standing on a table shouting, 'I'm stalking Veronica!'"

"Not convinced. Besides, doesn't he have a kid now? He can't cart a toddler across the country every time girly here moves."

Veronica raised an eyebrow at Wallace's counterpoint and leaned forward to grab another slice from the pepperoni box. "Lilly would be almost six years old by now, Wallace. Not exactly a toddler."

"Who's Lilly?" Mac asked.

"Duncan's kid." Wiping her hands off on a paper towel, Veronica set the plate with her barely begun pizza slice aside. She picked up Rebecca James' notes about J.D. King, reading them through for what felt like the twentieth time. "And I've got my money on it being a rando. Someone who felt overlooked in general but connected to me for some reason."
When her theory was met with silence, she looked up to find Mac and Wallace staring at her, their expressions indicating bewilderment. "What?"

"You're just being very cool about all this," Mac answered.

Veronica found that assessment to be so far from the truth it was almost laughable, but she held in the bitter chuckle that threatened to escape.

_After all, Mac and Wallace haven't really been around for my frequent and ill-timed nervous breakdowns. Those have been reserved for Logan. Lucky boy._

"Thanks for saying that." It wasn't a dismissal of Mac's assessment of her behavior nor was it a resounding agreement. She didn't want to get into the specifics of how she'd been dealing with the stress of the past few days.

_Maybe some other time. Not now._

"It's just a case. I have to think of it as just being a case."

"That's fair," Mac said with a shrug. "But I still think it's Duncan. The guy is rich enough to follow you wherever."

Wallace banged his head on the counter, which finally encouraged laughter from Veronica. Mac soon joined in, both entertained by Wallace's frustration that neither one of them supported his theory.

"Girl, you keep saying that, but there's no damn proof."

With wide eyes, Veronica gasped and then covered Mac's ears with her hands. "Watch your language, Fennel. There are children present."

Mac glared at Veronica, slapping her hands away. "You're only four months older than me, you psycho."

"Mac, I'm not saying that you're wrong, but you're absolutely wrong. You seriously think it's Duncan?" Duncan wasn't even on Veronica's long list of suspects, so she wondered why he was suddenly at the top of Mac's.

"Nah. But at least being a stalker would make the guy interesting."

Reaching behind Veronica, Wallace offered his hand to Mac, who slapped it, shooting Veronica a proud smile.

"You didn't like Duncan?" That part of her life was long past, but she was still curious. In high school it had never occurred to her to ask Mac or Wallace what they thought about Duncan. Relationship chats with her friends hadn't been something she'd indulged in since Lilly died.

Mac shrugged, taking a sip of her beer. "I don't know. I didn't think about Duncan all that much. He was just kind of, I don't know, vanilla?"

Or like eggplant parmesan, maybe? Fantastic.

Looking down at her pizza, Veronica tried to summon a half-hearted defense of the boy she once dated. "There's nothing wrong with vanilla."

"No. But there's so many other exciting flavors."
"Like Dick Casablancas? What flavor is he?" Wallace offered with faux innocence, his voice perky. Shooting Mac a look of horror, Veronica glanced back and forth between her two friends, pleading with the universe to make it so that she just misunderstood him.

"Wallace Fennel! You promised!" Mac jumped up off her stool and in one long stride was at Wallace's side, punching him soundly in the shoulder.

"Damn, girl! I thought you'd told her."

An uneasy feeling settled right in the pit of Veronica's stomach. She was regretting that third slice of pizza, knowing that if she was about to hear how much Mac liked Dick Casablancas, she'd be throwing up.

*Please God, tell me that Mac is not interested in Dick Casablancas. I'll never ask my dad for a pony again if this one small thing is given to me.*

"Mac. Are you," Veronica swallowed down her question, took a long gulp of her beer, and tried again. "Do you want to date Dick?"

Mac's arm was raised, clearly been poised to hit Wallace, but then she dropped her arm to her side, shooting Veronica an incredulous stare. "Excuse me?"

"Wallace just made it sound –"

"No. God no. Nothing like that. You know that webisode series Dick made for his senior project at Hearst? I helped set up the website and produced it. He got a B-plus on the project and we went out for drinks to celebrate. We had a few beers and we kind of made out a little –"

Though she tried to keep her expression neutral, Veronica could feel her face scrunching up into one of distaste.

Mac held a hand up in concession, rushing to explain, "—but it only happened once, and Wallace here told me he'd take it to the grave."

"How does he even know?"

"Because I witnessed the whole disgusting display. You should be ashamed of yourself, Mackenzie."

"It was almost two years ago! Get over it."

*So many questions. Not sure I want any of the answers.*

Veronica placed a hand on Mac's shoulder, prompting Mac to look at her. "I have to question Dick about something Corny mentioned today. I was going to bring Logan, but maybe I should bring you along instead?"

"Like I'm the first girl to ever make out with somebody while drunk." Mac's voice was almost shrill and Veronica guessed it was more out of embarrassment than any real anger.

Veronica was poised to go on the offensive, demanding that Wallace and Mac share with her every seemingly innocuous story of college drunken antics. It was rare that she regretted her decision to leave Hearst for UCLA. At times like this, though, when she was reminded she'd missed out on their lives, a little pang was felt.
Before she could get her head around how to respond, Veronica’s phone rang. Digging it out of her messenger bag, she saw it was Agent Baxter and pointed it first at Wallace and then Mac. "This isn't over. And, Mac, I'll need an update on your hacker project. And I've got something else for you, too."

She answered the phone as she left the kitchen. "Agent Baxter, this is a new record. Only took you twelve hours to return my call."

"Places to go, balls to bust. You know how it is."

Veronica flopped onto the couch in her dad's living room, tucking her legs up under her. "Do I ever."

"Tell me more about this investigation of yours. The email you sent mentioned you told your dad. Interesting, considering two weeks ago you vehemently refused to do just that."

"Yeah, well, it seemed necessary."

"Are you having this conversation from a castle tower? You did say he was going to lock you up if you told him."

"Surprisingly, no. We're working on it together. Sharpening her tone, she sat up, almost as if Erin was in the room with her. "And so help me, Erin, if you say I told you so."

"Wouldn't dream of it. We both know I was right. This string of aliases the guy has created is an interesting development."

"Yeah, that little detail is actually why I was calling. I was hoping you could do me a favor."

Veronica was glad Erin was in her life, thankful for the mentorship she continued to provide, and the professional voice of reason she'd become. While Erin had offered her assistance a couple weeks prior, Veronica was uncertain how much she'd actually be able to do. After all, the FBI wasn't officially investigating. It was possible Veronica had already spent her favors by having Erin run the sketches and handwriting through the FBI databases.

"I might have time to squeeze one out. You know how it is, though—"

"Yeah, nothing too crazy. Is there a way for you to get Northwestern undergrad and grad student enrollment records for the past three years, filtered for those students who's initials match JDK?"

Veronica didn't rush to fill the silence that followed her question, knowing that Erin was mulling over the request. Agents did other agents favors all the time, but Veronica wasn't one. She hadn't been at the FBI office in four years. Erin had told her she'd become family to a lot of people, but Veronica also knew there were plenty of people there who wouldn't support FBI resources being spent on a girl they'd never met.

"It'll take me a couple days, but I can make that happen."

Blowing out a deep breath, Veronica almost teared up from the release of tension she felt. This was a tangible. Something that could get her ahead of the stalker and not just struggling to keep up.

"Thank you, Erin."

"Why don't you wait to thank me. What are you doing on your end?"
Interviewing people with any connection to King. My friend Mac is working on IDing the guy. After that, I'm going to play a fun game of follow the money – try to figure out just where all of King's inheritance went.

Several aliases are bound to leave a trail of some sort.

That's what I'm hoping.

Another silence met Veronica and she wondered if Erin was hesitating to ask additional questions. While she still had her PI license, Mac didn't, meaning that her investigation wasn't completely above board. Something Erin would have to suspect.

What's that old saying? Don't ask questions you don't want the answer to? Maybe one reason the FBI thing didn't work out. Never met a question I didn't want answered.

Aside from that one sketch sent to Logan's, this guy hasn't delivered anything else while you've been in Neptune, right?

No. Logan and I have been careful. Painfully aware of our surroundings." Veronica's voice trailed off, an idea occurring to her, as a half-cocked idea slowly formed in her mind. Fuzzy on the edges, she turned it over a couple of times. As she did, it sharpened to resemble an almost plan.

Regardless of who her dad or friends were, she didn't really believe the current batch of evidence would encourage the Chicago PD to take her case seriously. What she'd told Logan hadn't been an exaggeration; they had close to nothing to go on. She needed more. "Although –"

"Although, what?"

"Nothing. Just thinking."

"Don't do anything dumb, Veronica."

"I won't. I'm not. I just need to smoke this guy out. Get him to do something stupid."

Erin's sigh was loud, full of resignation. Unless she planned to track down Veronica's dad and tell him, 'your daughter is plotting something', there was little that she could do from her office in Virginia. Veronica hoped that Erin had enough faith in her to not take that route.

"Be careful. I can accept you not wanting to work for the FBI, but I'd like to keep you around so you can reject my offer every year."

"I'll bring backup," Veronica promised. She stood up from the couch, suddenly restless with the need to try something, anything, to rattle her stalker enough to get him to slip up. Make a bigger mistake. Something that could be traced back to him.

"Lots of backup."

Disconnecting the call, Veronica stared at her phone for a few seconds, debating with herself as to whether or not this was foolish.

If her idea worked, she'd be expediting the process of finding her stalker. She'd be saving herself weeks of anxiety and her friends a whole supply of blood, sweat, and tears. And if it didn't, she'd have spent a romantic night with her boyfriend. A girl had to eat.

It's a win-win situation. For everyone, right?
2:19 PM – From Veronica to Logan
Dinner tonight? You and me? I'll be wearing that backless dress of mine you used to love so much.

She tossed her phone onto the nearby couch cushion and waited for Logan's response. This had to work. She wasn't going to entertain the possibility it wouldn't. Even as her hand trembled, waiting for her to phone light up with a text, she clung to that desperate optimism.

This will work.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to my beta, scandalpants, for the tireless work. And the ever astute disdainfullady who gave some much needed concrit of the first section.
Hair in place. Eye makeup, including impossible liner, completed. The promised backless dress securely fastened. With these things prepared, Veronica was close to ready for her semi-impromptu date slash covert ops mission. Now it was just waiting for Logan to show up.

The previous afternoon, she'd only had to wait for a few minutes to get Logan's reply to her texted dinner invitation.

2:19 PM – From Veronica to Logan  
Dinner tonight? You and me? I'll be wearing that backless dress of mine you used to love so much.

2:23 PM – From Logan to Veronica  
I have a date with another woman.

2:25 PM – From Veronica to Logan  
When did we agree to an open relationship?

2:33 PM – From Logan to Veronica  
I don't share. Heather's coming over for dinner so I can edit her study abroad application. Come join?

That invitation had given her pause. She liked Heather. Wanted to get to know her better, but perhaps Veronica could use a night apart from Logan.

2:48 PM – From Veronica to Logan  
Sorry. You snoozed, you lost. Hanging with Wallace now. BFF stuff. Tomorrow night?

Delaying the date twenty-four hours allowed her to make more extensive plans for dinner. Pick a restaurant. Make a reservation. Case the joint.

Now, she was making preparations of a different sort. She grabbed her mascara and lip gloss from her makeup bag to transfer them into the slightly smaller messenger bag she kept at her dad's. It was still large enough to fit her taser and pepper spray, essentials when attempting to trap a would be stalker, but with a feminine edge. 

*If metal studs can be considered 'more feminine.'*

Sparing a moment to check her reflection one last time, she half jogged out to the living room, high heels clutched in one hand. The mature and at peace with having responsibilities Logan she'd started dating this time around was sexy as hell. He was also punctual in a way that made her want to do something childish, like saran wrap his toilet, simply to get a reaction out of him. Doing one final pass to ensure she had her keys, wallet and phone, she checked the time and indulged in a small fist pump of victory.

*Five minutes to spare. Put that in your pipe and smoke it, responsible boyfriend of mine.*

That feeling lasted only until she remembered she was still barefoot. Which was, because that's the way the world worked, the moment the doorbell rang. She hobbled to the door on one foot as she secured the ankle strap of the other, calling out to Logan as she approached, "We have got to talk
about this! Casual dates, it's acceptable to be early."

While ulterior super spy motives may have inspired the date, she still wanted to catch that stunned look Logan sometimes sported when he gazed at her. Which was why she took the time to wipe her thumb along the bend of her lips, guaranteeing her lip gloss wasn't smeared. And smoothed her hands down the front of her dress to ensure it was wrinkle free.

"If it requires me to wear heels, however –"

Her face split into a wide grin as she swung the door open, unashamed of how excited she was to see Logan, or of letting him know it.

It wasn't Logan standing there, however, and it took far longer than usual for Veronica's appraisal of the situation to order itself in a way that made sense. A classic example of the last person you expected to see appearing in the last place you ever thought you'd see them.

First, she observed for a second time that the person standing there was not Logan. She looked the person up and down. Nope. Definitely not Logan.

Second, she knew the person in question was familiar to her. Could make sense of the situation enough to know that. She should know who this person was and it niggled at her that she couldn't place him.

Her third observation caused her heart rate to increase. Because the person vaguely resembled her, if not a sociopath at least insanely manipulative, ass of an ex-boyfriend. Except it couldn't right? But -

Fourth, holy fuck that WAS her ex-boyfriend. And he was here. Standing on her father's porch. In Neptune.

The temporary paralysis she'd experienced began to abate as her anger – no, not anger – rage took its place. The churning sensation spreading from her belly to her limbs was a call to violence. Veronica slammed the door shut to quell the sudden desire to punch Skyler in the fucking face. His amused clucking at her reaction only stoked the fire within her. She threw the deadbolt, needing to put one more obstacle between herself and the man in question.

"Babe, don't be like that."

The rage was almost blinding her now, but she took a stilling breath as she dug through her bag for her phone. "Don't call me 'babe,' Skyler and, oh yeah, get the fuck off my dad's porch."

"Look, I know things didn't exactly end the best between us, but I needed to see you. Your dad coming by put a lot into perspective for me, and I –"

Her head sprung up, and she narrowed her eyes at the door. Oh dad. What did you do?

She arrived at the answer within almost the same second she asked the question: he'd gone to San Diego, where Skyler's parents lived, and interviewed a suspect. A suspect now standing on the porch. A suspect doing a bang up job of incriminating himself.

Her eyes trained on the contents of her bag, it was a self-preservation tactic to bypass the taser in favor of her cell phone. The thrumming of her pulse made it tricky to focus on whatever Skyler was saying, which was also in his favor. If she chose to listen to what her fuck-wad of an ex said then she'd be prone to do something stupid. Something like fling the door open and taze him until her batteries died. She heard enough of his diatribe, though, prompting her to scowl even as she hit the appropriate button for speed dial.
All week, he shows up on time. The one night I'd like him to, of course he's not here. Fuck you, Murphy, and all your laws.

"Ron, please, will you open the door? I'm here to talk. That's all."

The phone rang, and in tandem with the sound she willed Logan to pick up, pick up, PICK UP!, his phone. She turned her back on the door as she waited. If she didn't see the door, she could pretend Skyler wasn't there. She wouldn't have a visual reminder of how she managed to get duped, again, by another boyfriend of hers. And then she wouldn't be forced to punish him for her remembrances by kneeing him in the groin.

Groin is a gross word. She shook her head, dislodging the absurd thought even as it developed. Focus, Veronica.

Logan's sigh preceded his voice. She wished she had been recording the call because that sound was now forever going to be associated with comfort and security. "Don't tell me. You're running late," he said.

Quip? Banter? How do I ease into this? You know what…screw it all.

"Where are you?" It was only three words. There was no way he'd be able to pick up on the sharp edge with only three words, right? Maybe he'd interpret from the bite in her words that she was pissed off at him. That was something he was used to. She could roll with that interpretation.

"What's wrong?" Logan asked.

"Where are you?" She repeated the question, needing him to just give her a damn answer.

"Parked around the corner. I thought I'd give you another few minutes."

"You need to get here. Now." She squeezed her eyes shut and took a deep breath. "Skyler's here."

"What do you mean 'here'?"

"I mean, he and I are hanging in my dad's living room sharing a beer and would you like one because I was completely mistaken and he's such a nice guy. What do you think, Logan? He's here, in Neptune." She glanced over her shoulder; Skyler's silhouette created by the porch light visible through the panels of glass of the front door.

"Are you okay?" he asked. She heard the sound of his engine turn over even as he asked the question.

"Fantastic. Except for the fact I'm feeling a little murderous." Add the fact she was pissed the asshole caught her unawares. That she'd ever dated him in the first place. That her past, and Logan's past too, never felt the need to stay where it belonged. "You can get here before I do something that will get me thrown in jail, or you can scrounge up some bail money. Your choice."

"I'll be right there."

Disconnecting the call but keeping the phone in her grip, she turned around to face the door. Skyler was there, of course. Waiting for her and rapping a slow but persistent rhythm with his knuckles against the doorframe.

"Who did you call, Ron? Your dad? I understand why you did, babe. I probably owe him an apology, too. Picked up he wasn't very happy with me."
That son of a bitch. While in her mind that moniker belonged to Skyler only, she was going to level her dad with a monster sized glare for failing to mention his trip to San Diego. He was cut off from Christmas cookies for at least three days.

She heard the sound of Logan's car pulling into the driveway. The light from his headlights bouncing off the garage door and into her dad's living room only confirmed it. Logan being required to pass Skyler to get into the house wasn't something she'd considered. With a little forethought, though, this could be perfectly timed. And hopefully allow for minimal bloodshed. From both of them.

The couple that shares impulse control issues together stays together. I think that's how that goes.

Logan's footsteps reverberated off the wood of the porch. She unlatched the deadbolt and her hand was poised on the doorknob. One step, two steps, and then three.

"Skyler," Logan said. There was a menacing familiarity in Logan's voice and Veronica heard it clearly.

Skyler would be a dumbass to have not heard it. The question is whether he'll pay attention.

"Hey there. I'm sorry, I don't know, uh, who you are, do I? You a friend of Ron's?"

During their five month relationship, Skyler never once asked a question unless he thought already knew the answer. This meant that even then, as he asked Logan who he was, Skyler's purpose was to manipulate the situation. He'd seen the pictures. He might not have known who Logan was to Veronica, but he certainly knew he was important.

In that moment, she also noticed he was using his low tone – the one he took on whenever his motive was to placate her. To calm her. To convince her that he knew better than anyone how to handle a situation.

She flung the door open, took a half step to grasp Logan's hand and pulled him to stand beside her. Looking at Logan's face, she expected to see tightly suppressed anger simmering but she found him to be rather calm. When he squeezed her hand and looked down at her with narrowed eyes, his mouth thinned into a tight grimace, she realized his control was all for her benefit. He offered his presence and a quiet trust that she had this handled. But if she were to say the word, he'd strike Skyler directly between the eyes.

All right, Skyler. Ready or not…

"Ron, who is this?" Skyler asked.

"This is Logan. I'm Veronica. And you're still an asshole. So, I'll repeat, fuck off."

Skyler's smile started with his eyes and then broke into an almost pitying grin. "That's actually the first time you told me to fuck off. If we're going to be technical about it." She hated the way he nodded as he spoke, to lead her to acquiesce. To see things his way and laugh at the joke.

He took a step back then shifted to widen his stance and puff up his chest. It was an obvious attempt to compensate for Logan's superior inch of height by taking up as much space as possible. His hands, though, were tucked into his pockets. It was all calculated to make himself appear both humble and in control of the situation.

Out of her peripheral vision she thought she saw Logan roll his eyes, but he didn't make any move to intervene.
"Oh, you're the man of the hour, then, huh? The latest in the line of, uh, Veronica Mars' admirers?"
All the faux friendliness, the placid attempt at reconciliation, was absent from Skyler's voice now. In its place was the supercilious, smooth, persona he often took on when he was angling for something. It's what made him so successful in the boardroom, even at the relatively young age of twenty seven.

"Veronica told you to leave." Logan gripped her hand tightly and leaned into her. It was slight, but enough for her to take comfort from. "Actually demanded it. So run along now. Flee."

They both took a step back into the house with Logan attempting to close the door. Skyler, however, always on the offensive, moved fast enough to prevent it from closing, slipping the toe of his boot into the door jamb.

Logan's entire body tensed –his calm exterior cracking the slightest amount. Veronica was already on edge, and Logan was joining her.

Opening the door a couple more inches, she ran a hand over Logan's shoulders and then let it rest at the small of his back. "Private property, Skyler. You're officially trespassing."

"Don't you want to hear what I have to say, Ron?" He leaned closer to her, running his finger along one edge of a glass panel on the door. "We could catch up? Spend some time getting reacquainted?"

"Fuck off, man," Logan bit out. His shoulder jerked the slightest amount in Skyler's direction as he clenched his fist. It probably took all of his self-control to stop himself from giving Skyler a little, or a rather large, push towards the edge of the porch. "She dropped your ass. Take the hint."

At that, Skyler sneered, his lip curling up into an expression of annoyance. "First your dad. Then this guy. You've been talking a lot about me, it seems." While it was clear he was responding to Logan's words, his focus was solely on Veronica as he spoke, scratching his chin in inquiry. "I must have, uh, really gotten under your skin. Huh?" He lifted a hand up to her shoulder, but before he could make contact, she smacked his hand away.

"I'd be thrilled to live the rest of my life without him ever touching me again. Or seeing him nod his head like a fucking bobble head."

"Ah ah. Let's keep our hands to ourselves," she said, sliding away from Skyler. For emphasis, she held up a finger and wagged it in a 'no' gesture.

Almost as a way to shuck the memory of Skyler's touch, she clung tighter to Logan. She wrapped her hands around his arm and pulled him closer. Three deep breaths in and out, she purposefully ignored the displeasure glimmering in Skyler's eyes at Logan's proximity to her, and stared back.

Skyler had found her at a time when she was vulnerable. Still reeling from the last failed attempt at a relationship with Logan and barely surviving her first year of medical school. That was more than a year ago. He'd caught a glimpse of the bitch, but had never faced her head on.

I guess he's about to get a lesson in dealing with a Veronica scorned. Sucks to be him. In every way possible.

She inched towards Skyler, letting her hand slip from Logan's bicep to lightly press her fingers to his palm. "You're not under my skin. Never were, actually. What you were then and are now is on my last nerve. We have dinner reservations in thirty minutes, so I need you to get the fuck off my dad's porch." Logan, as if anticipating her next move, took a step back into the house, providing her with enough space to swing the door shut.

Skyler, however, didn't take the hint. Instead, he laughed, tossing his head back a little. He brought
his hand up again, this time smacking it against the door. His locked elbow prevented the door from closing. He licked his lips and then looked Veronica up and down before aiming a dismissive head shake at her.

It was something he'd done a time or two while they were dating, to communicate mild disapproval of something she'd said or done. Now it triggered a roll of her eyes.

This guy.

She noticed then that he wasn't really looking at her. Now the person he was dismissing, mocking, was Logan.

"I can tell when I'm not wanted," Skyler said, one hand still in his pocket. "Thought she'd be a decent lay, though. Old times' sake." He ended his statement with an innocent shrug. Like he'd just admitted to still drinking chocolate milk with breakfast. Or that he liked sleeping with his favorite childhood stuffed animal.

Spanning the time it took for her to inhale a sharp gasp of air, Logan managed to block her with his body, forcing her back another foot, and opened the door wide. Skyler's features hardened even as he smiled.

So much for maintaining control of the situation.

There was a specific smirk that appeared on Logan's face whenever he was about to hit someone. It was a mixture of anticipatory glee and pride, because he knew how much weight was behind the blow.

Some combination of this happening rather fast and having not seen Logan punch someone in five years made it so she didn't intervene. There wasn't enough time to get Logan to back down. Kind of. Maybe. And, okay, she kind of wanted to see Skyler get his.

There were two distinct sounds – fist hitting a jaw mixed with Skyler's groan, and then the sound of him hitting her father's porch – that woke her up. She pulled Logan back (though she could have watched this for hours) and blocked him with her body from hitting Skyler again.

They had a schedule to keep.

Now probably isn't the time to muse over what muscles he specifically engages while fighting someone. Bank that thought for later.

There were too many other things to focus on. What was Skyler even doing there? What was he trying to prove? And why was the thing that bugged her most that they were going to be late for dinner?

"Here's what I find so interesting." Logan's tone was a calculated mixture of boredom and disdain. "You went out of your way to drive all the way from San Diego to come and talk to her. Left your family, whatever holiday celebration they were having to do, what, exactly?"

Skyler sat up, shifting all his weight to one knee before standing up, wiping at his lip and grimacing at the sight of the blood, almost as an afterthought.

"I thought she wanted -" He trailed off as he raised his head and caught Veronica's eye. A legitimate answer was almost spoken but he'd caught himself. He'd been close to telling the unvarnished truth.

Skyler's next decision was just as clear: if he didn't get what he wanted, he'd try to hurt her on his
"Damaged goods," he scoffed.

Logan's fist clenched, preparing to strike again, and Veronica wondered at how much restraint it took for him to stop himself from tackling Skyler where he stood. He obviously wanted to, but when he caught Veronica's eye she shook her head, willing him to drop it. Which he did, unclenching his fist and threading their fingers together.

They both took one large step toward Skyler so Logan was now at his eyeline. Their proximity forced him to take a step back and consequently he almost teetered on the edge of the porch.

*Damaged goods.* Skyler had crafted his words to hurt her. She knew that. And found she didn't really care.

"Are you sure it wasn't me who got under your skin, Skyler?" The push she gave him lacked much pressure, but his semi-precarious position on the porch caused him to stumble gracelessly down the three steps.

She stood there, immovable, now tall enough to be able to stare down at him. Everything about this man was scrutinized. She wanted to catalogue who he was. The way he tried to casually smooth out his shirt. The way that he almost seemed sheepish. Embarrassed at being there and having not – what was it, exactly? – won her back? rattled her? gotten her to apologize for something that wasn't her fault?

She moved behind Logan, rested a hand on each of his hips to pull him back, and then stepped in front of him again. "Leave, Skyler. You come within fifty feet of me or my dad's house and you'll find yourself at the business end of a restraining order."

"And your boy toy's fist, too, huh?" he asked, glowering at them both. He touched his lip again. It was still bleeding. It was a simple thing, but arresting all the same. Skyler bled.

It reminded her of a night several years prior, during her and Logan's freshman year of college.

It had been one of the rare stretches of days where their schedules perfectly synched up and also magically coincided with her dad being out of town. Or maybe she had convinced her dad to go after a bail jumper in Seattle the same weekend that Logan had cancelled a surfing trip to Mexico. Memory was fuzzy.

This meant she could stay a couple of nights at Logan's suite without complications. She'd woken up in the middle of the night, the alarm clock shining bright in the room, proclaiming that it was after 3:00 AM. Her confusion was amplified by the fact that she was in bed alone. The light hadn't been on in the bathroom, so she'd stumbled from her comfortable cocoon of blankets out into the living room where she'd found Logan sitting on the floor. He was watching, with rapt focus, the Aaron Echolls episode of "The Tinsletown Diaries" on mute. His eyes narrowed, almost calculating, as if he was the private investigator in the relationship and that video was his mark.

She'd walked up behind him, her bare feet almost silent on the carpet, and sank down to her knees, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. "He was just a man, Logan. Come back to bed."

This person standing ten feet in front of her now, his lip bleeding and an uncharacteristically huffy expression on his face, was just a man. A non-factor in her life or influence on the person she was. And there wasn't a single additional thing she needed to say or hear from him.

There was neither resistance from Logan as she pulled him back, nor from Skyler as she shut and locked the front door. When she turned around, releasing a shaky breath and feeling the burn of
adrenaline wane, she found Logan standing with his hands in his pockets, staring at a spot on her dad's floor. He looked conflicted, as if he didn't know whether he wanted to slink away or charge out onto the porch and hit Skyler again.

Veronica stood beside him and rested a hand over his heart, taking low and deep breaths. They stood in the entryway and waited a few additional seconds before hearing the sound of Skyler's car start up and drive away.

She took hold of Logan's hand, gently, noticing that a few of his knuckles were already red.

"It's not him," Logan said. His gaze remained angled at their feet, though he rubbed small circles on her hand with his thumb, maintaining their connection. At her "hmmm?" of confusion, he looked up. "The stalker. It's not Skyler, is it?"

She shook her head, "I don't think so."

*Why spend all that time being covert to ruin it with one road trip to Neptune? A little anti-climactic and my stalker clearly has a flair for the dramatic.*

Logan sighed, the left side of his mouth quirking up into a faint smile, intended to comfort her. When he went to brush a strand of hair away from her forehead, he winced, the after effects of hitting Skyler obviously being felt.

She knew that if she had allowed it, he probably would have hit Skyler a few additional times. His knuckles would have truly been raw then. It was an odd reaction, but that thought alone made her smile.

"Let's get you some ice, Holyfield," she offered, but only because she didn't know what else to say.

It felt too weird to say 'thank you.' He had, after all, just punched a guy. And he'd done so while wearing a starched black button down and a pair of grey slacks. It served to make the whole tableau even more surreal. Instead of verbalizing any gratitude, she opted to kiss each knuckle on his right hand, including his uninjured thumb. Veronica looked up at Logan and when she caught his eye, a soft yet wry smile appeared on his lips before vanishing again.

She kissed his palm and raised his hand to her face, pressing it against her cheek. "I'm back for less than two weeks and you've blown your fight-free stretch."

His chuckle was soft and warm. In direct contrast to the one that she'd heard from Skyler earlier which had been brittle. Unfeeling. Cultivated to disarm her.

There was affection evident in each of his actions as he took a step closer, tucked her hair behind her ears, and then paused, meeting her eye. "Worth it," he said. Kissing her forehead, he pulled back with an audible 'pop' of his lips.

She was tempted to scrunch up her nose in displeasure at the sound, but he'd just helped vanquish her ex. That seemed to warrant her tolerance of some silly affection.

"We can reschedule. Stay in. I wouldn't mind," Logan said.

"I put on a dress, though."

"I can help you take it off."
Veronica laughed at his open and hopeful expression, shaking her head in response. "That's very kind of you."

And sounds kind of perfect, if I were to get exactly what I wanted out of life. But I'm not spending my night as a shut-in, method acting for a future role as an agoraphobe.

"I'm all about the service."

They'd called the restaurant to push the reservation back thirty minutes and discovered that their table had already been given away. There weren't any openings that evening, but the hostess would be happy to squeeze them in the following day.

All this only served to make her triply pissed at Skyler: not only had he subjected her to his assery, he'd also ruined her semi-date, and foiled her stalker trap. The hidden camera, carefully adhered to the podium at the restaurant, and synched to an app on her phone, was now useless. Except as a candid camera boob cam.

Veronica had pouted at Logan's suggestion they go to another restaurant, complaining about his choice of Asian fusion cuisine. When he kissed the look off her face, she didn't have the heart to tell him the inspiration behind the date. She acquiesced, and now they were on their way to plan b, although a part of her was still determined to make plan a work.

If anything, Skyler's presence that evening had only reaffirmed the necessity of her plan. She was done being a passive observer in what was happening to her.

And now it's all for naught. Fuck you, Skyler.

It had never been her intention to hide from Logan the true purpose behind their dinner excursion. The order in which she was going to reveal the information was admittedly calculated. Lure him in with the thought of her in a dress. Make the reservation. Give him an eyelash flutter and an 'oh, yeah, by the way honey' on the way to the restaurant.

Now they were on their way to a Logan's selected restaurant. He was, quite impressively, using each evasive driving method she'd ever shown him. He also regaled her with his plan to park the car in the parking lot of a different restaurant and then use the back door of the one they intended to dine at. He'd already cleared it with the general manager. She was almost alarmed by the amount of consideration.

Logan had clearly thought through each detail of the night, so she kept silent on her original plan. They could have one more night. She'd collect her camera the next day, and employ the plan then.

Maybe we can play mini-golf or something. There's bound to be a windmill I can stick the camera to.

Logan cleared his throat, interrupting her stream of scheming consciousness.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Oh nothing." She sat up, angling her body to watch him as he drove. "Except going over how fun it's going to be to talk to my dad about what happened tonight."

"You're going to torture him for this, aren't you?" Logan did his best to keep his tone neutral, but she heard the slight wary tinge of it. And all she could do was huff out a laugh – though to her own ears it sounded more like a dismissive scoff.
"You scared I'm going to be too harsh towards Papa Mars?"

"He had good intentions."

"The road to hell, Logan."

He smashed his lips together to hide his smile, opened his mouth to speak, but then seemed to think better of it and closed his mouth again. It was as if he had spoken, though, for as clear as his thoughts were.

Narrowing her eyes at him, she thumped his temple with her index finger. "You saying my intentions have gotten me a little, let's see here, off course?"

"Your words. But they bear a startling resemblance to one of my thoughts."

"He's probably going to notice the smear of blood on the porch. I should let him squirm a bit."

Now it was Logan's turn to scoff. "That's mean, and there wasn't blood." At her look, one she had perfected –arms crossed and eyebrows raised – he nodded, a tiny proud smile on his face. "Okay, there wasn't much blood. I barely touched him."

She shook her head and shifted her position so she could easily fling her left arm around the back of Logan's seat and play with the hair at the nape of his neck. "You didn't have to hit him, you know. I was fine."

He turned his head which prompted her to brush her fingers across his cheek. "I know you were, but I wasn't." She could see the immediate strain in the muscles of his shoulders as he gripped the steering wheel before he told himself to relax. "Look. We're doing really good. And it feels like we've kind of made up for the past couple years, but I know there's stuff we haven't talked about yet. I'm not naïve enough to think that you don't know about Dana —"

"– or Rachel, or Jessica?" she finished for him. "I mean, who?"

Something about the confirmation that she was already several steps ahead of him genuinely amused her, but it only resulted in his shooting her a concerned look. That sobered her enough to think and verbalize serious thoughts.

Am I really okay with the mention of his relationships past? Let's do a systems check. Scanning – scanning – we're good. I do believe I am genuinely amused.

"Logan, it was eighteen months on both our ends." Taking a deep breath, she ordered the words carefully in her mind, making sure they were clear before she spoke again. "I know who you are. I trust you love me. And if you need to tell me something about your past relationships, if it's important to you, then go ahead. But if they were just dating, or just sex, then I don't need to know." She looked down at her hands and noticed that she had overshot one of her nails when she'd painted them earlier that evening. Picking the excess off, she continued, "As long as they're not going to come back and bite either one of us in the ass, then I won't ask."

"But if I want to tell you?" His voice was even, flat, lacking almost any emotion.

She brushed the nail polish from her dress onto the floor of Logan's car. "Then I'll listen. I can't -" Stopping to take another breath she looked up at Logan again. His eyes were focused on the road, but the light drumming on the steering wheel told her everything she needed to know about his comfort with the topic. "—I have a hard time feeling like I was fooled, or taken in. You know me, Logan."
Even in the wake of MadiGate 2007, as she’d taken to think of it, Logan had known. He’d known the Madison thing would hurt her. He might not have understood why, exactly, but he knew enough to feel like he had to keep it hidden. If these versions of themselves today, a little older and, she hoped to God!, a bit wiser, could harness that self-awareness then maybe they’d be okay.

"I do," he said, reaching for her hand. "And there’s nothing you need to know. Except -" His voice trailed off and he offered her a sheepish grin. It was hard for her to tell how much of it was genuine and how much was carefully constructed adorable.

"Except, what?"

"Dana? She's one of the baristas at that coffee place where you met me. The one near my office."

"You dated a barista?"

"I went on a handful of dates with a barista slash grad student. Yes."

"Well, that explains the death stares I received that day." She shook her head. "I can't believe you dated a barista. What's next? A yoga instructor? A florist, perhaps?"

"Nope," he said immediately, gripping her hand tightly in his. "Next is a med student. Then after that, a medical examiner." He lowered his voice and shot her, what she took for, a conspiratorial look. "Those two are actually the same person."

The feeling that overwhelmed her at that particular moment was nothing like a flutter. No, it felt more like when she was a kid and she'd play with melted candle wax by dripping it onto the back of her hand. It'd always start out as a sharp burn in a concentrated area and then spread, slowly, until it felt like the entire surface of her skin was aflame.

She leaned over in her seat, tilting her head up to kiss him on the cheek. "Good answer. I should warn you, if you're talking about the girl I think you're talking about, it'll be at least another five years before the medical examinin'."

He only shrugged, lifting her hand to kiss the soft skin of her wrist. "I'll wait."

Logan was doing his best not to let his surprise show. He was staring into the face of a relaxed woman. A Veronica who was enjoying herself. A Veronica who seemed to have forgotten about the earlier events that evening the moment they left her dad's driveway. Her calm now was even a marked difference from her mood when they'd first arrived at the restaurant.

She'd seemed apprehensive when they checked in with the hostess. Her eyes had darted around the restaurant and she'd held her shoulders stiffly as they were being seated. As soon as the server left, Veronica has started buffing the silverware with her napkin. It took a fidgeter to know a fidgeter and he was concerned his girl was ready to bolt.

It seemed reasonable given the earlier events. If she was that shaken up, though, then why hadn't she even considered his offer to order in at her dad's house? True, he had taken the time to dress up, but it would have been easy enough to untuck his shirt, roll up his sleeves, and unbutton his collar. Takeout cuisine ready in forty-five seconds flat.

Maybe it's a pride thing? She feels like she has to prove to me, the world at large, and herself that this thing that happened with Skyler is something she's already moved past? And I thought I boasted a quick recovery time.
The change occurred once the food arrived. Veronica had leaned over the plates, inhaled the aroma in a rather comical manner, and then sat back. Wherever she’d been considering running was no longer a potential destination. She was just sitting there, with him.

While they ate he made a point of keeping their conversation light, choosing to entertain her with a retelling of how that day’s meeting with Kip Johnson had gone.

"When I suggested he get the puppy, I didn't think he'd get so attached." He took another bite of his coconut beef, separated out a piece for Veronica to steal from his plate, and pointed the fork at her. "I blame you for this."

"I don't see why this is my fault. If you didn't want the dog in your office, you should have told Kip." She leaned over the table, reaching for the bite he'd saved for her. "Boundaries are important, Logan."

She set her fork aside to serve herself the remains of the udon soup. "So, what'd he do? Chew the corner of the desk? Pee on your carpet?" she asked.

"No, Kip was surprisingly well behaved this meeting."

Veronica snorted, shaking her head affectionately and pausing to take a drink of her cocktail. She took a deep breath, exhaling slowly, and then sank back into her chair. Her knee was still bouncing, but not enough to jar the table.

Relaxed was good. Relaxed he could work with. She was always more prone to let him in, tell him the full truth, when she was relaxed. Damned if she wasn't beautiful when riled up, but the tension that seemed to have attached itself to her back and followed her to their table was something else entirely. She may have been at peace now, but it didn't stop him from wanting to know what had caused her earlier distress.

Aside from the Mark Wahlberg wannabe who showed up at her dad's place.

"However," he continued, setting his fork down and wiping the corners of his mouth with his napkin, "Kip did let the little princess hang out on my desk. She's still getting the hang of, ya know, walking, so she skittered around the desk top."

"And being the calm and cool headed man of business you are, you let that go."

"I was the picture of ease and grace." Veronica's eyes crinkled as she took another sip of her drink, hiding her incredulous expression behind the rim of her glass. "The lady doth think I'm full of hot air?"

"The lady doth. But, you're the cutest bag of air I ever did see." She leaned forward in her seat and Logan heard the click one of her heels made as it hit the floor of the restaurant. Frowning at the few empty plates before her, she looked up at Logan, her nose scrunched. "Yeah, I'm going to need more food."

"Me too. Since you ate most of it." He looked back over his shoulder for their server. "This is what I get for taking you to a restaurant that serves family style."

"A mistake we can learn from."

He rolled his eyes at the joke. It was one he'd heard her make before. He was a little delighted, though, that they were at that place where there were jokes they could anticipate and recognize. History and memories that spoke of closeness and not bitterness. He caught the eye of their server.
The server who was, in fact, walking directly toward their table, a bottle of wine and two glasses in hand.

*I've had two beers, she's had a couple cocktails. Why not throw a bottle of wine into the mix? If this guy 'happens' to be an inspiring actor, though, we're leaving.*

Before Logan even picked up the menu to order more food, the server set the bottle of wine and glasses down on the table.

"I'm sorry," Logan said, floating his hand over the top of the wine glass to prevent him from pouring. "We didn't order that."

"No, sir. It's a gift," he explained smoothly. The server poured the standard five ounces of the pinot noir and wiped off the lip of the bottle with the cloth draped over his arm. "Also, this was dropped off for you." He placed the folded piece of paper on the table and Logan was at once curious and suspicious. "Is there anything else I can get you?" the server asked.

Questioning the server could wait, Logan supposed, but he scanned the restaurant anyway.

*Wouldn't put it past Skyler, the scum sucking dredge of a human being that he is, to follow us here.*

Not seeing a recognizable face, he figured it could wait at least until he placed their food order. He chanced a look at Veronica, who was helping herself to the remaining sauce from one of the plates by swirling her finger in it.

Logan nodded at the server and ordered a few additional plates – including another of the coconut beef since it was obviously a winner. When she cleared her throat with a dainty, "heh hem" and raised an eyebrow, he smiled and ordered dessert as well.

"Honey, you didn't have to order dessert. I would have been fine without."

His response was a sharp 'ha!' He crumbled up the piece of paper that had been passed to him, tossing it on the table. It either contained a message from the manager, telling him how honored he was to have him eating with them, or was a treatment for a script he had no interest in. It was also possible one bled into the other.

"Don't you want to read it?" Veronica chastised. "This could be the next great American movie. Like an action film starring pregnant women. Or a hipster horror movie where the villain is the manifestations of one's self doubt." She picked up the paper to smooth it out. "You can't pass this up."

It was more out of habit, the natural need he had to make good use of his hands, than any desire to drink that he reached for the glass of wine. He found stemless wine glasses to be more about pretentious pomp than functionality and missed the luxury of twirling the stem between his fingers. As he raised the glass to take a drink, he noticed that Veronica's eyes had gone wide, watching him.

She shook her head, but it was so slight he almost missed it. Leaning forward in her seat, she took his free hand in hers and looked up at him from under her lashes. "Don't drink that," she said. Her voice was urgent but low, making it necessary for him to lean forward to catch the last few words. "Shit, fuck, shit."

*If her sudden commitment to teetotaling wasn't enough, the quick bout of Tourette's would clue me in that something's wrong. God, what now?*

Setting the glass back down he frowned and reached for the paper. "Some psycho fan of Aaron's
waxing poetic again?"

He watched intently as she shook his hand free, keeping the paper in her grasp, and then scanned whatever was on the page. She nodded, a small smile pulling at the corner of her mouth, almost like she'd read an interesting movie review, folded the paper back up, and slid it over to him.

*This woman.*

"Veronica –?" he questioned.

She crooked a finger at him, enticing him to lean a little closer and did the same herself, thereby offering him a view down the front of her dress to the uninterrupted expanse of skin below.

*Backless dress and braless? Fuck. Stupid, stupid, Logan. You've got to focus. Eyes up. Don't look down. Don't focus on her...skin.*

She traced the shell of his ear with a finger, then wound her hand to the back of his neck, fisting the hair there and pulling him closer. Their lips were only a fraction of an inch apart and he was back to being confused. "He followed us here," she whispered.

For a moment he thought she was referring to Skyler, but he'd already done that perfunctory search and the chief asshole was not in the restaurant.

"Be cool. Pretend everything's fine," she said, and leaned forward to peck him on the lips, demonstrating for him what she meant by normal behavior. "I don't want him to see us riled up. We might catch him before he runs away." She slid the paper all the way over to his side of the table until it fell off the edge and into his lap.

*Of course. He wanted to groan, and slap a head to his forehead in frustration. His guess, though, was that if her stalker was in the restaurant that wouldn't read as normal behavior.*

"This is why you were acting so weird. When we first got here? You knew this was going to happen," Logan concluded.

Veronica dismissed that thought. "I didn't for sure, but I knew it was a possibility. He doesn't like you very much. Also, he's stalking me, so his motivation is pretty clear."

He clasped one of her hands in his, gave her a teasing smile to keep up the pretense, and picked up the crinkled page.

*Clearly the added ten minutes to our drive didn't help. So much for evasive driving being a useful skill.*

"I guess I'm a little rusty, huh? This whole big case thing," she said.

What he wanted to say was, 'no shit and get out of my head!' but instead Logan played the part; he cupped her cheek and nodded. Anyone more than two feet away would only see two people wrapped up in one another. How cracked were they that they could actually be at odds with each other through smiles?

He noticed that she sounded, embarrassed, maybe? They'd talked earlier in the evening about people getting the jump on her, and here it was happening again. That lack of control had to be disarming.

It was a Wednesday night, but the restaurant was still busy enough to provide a dull din of noise to cover up the crinkle of paper as he unfolded it. And then there she was. Veronica, staring up at him.
A soft, indulgent smile on her face. It was a look that he had seen directed at himself more than a handful of times. But this version was in pencil.

*How is this okay? I am so not fucking fine with this. 'A little rusty,' my ass.*

The terror hit him hard. Faster than he expected. It slammed into him so that his natural desire was to slink off his chair and onto the ground to hide from it. Instead, he framed her face in his hands, pulling her towards him to kiss fervently. The passion the restaurant patrons may have noticed was born of desperation. He nuzzled her check with his nose, bringing his lips right near her ear.

"How do you know he's here?" he asked. "This could be old. Maybe he saw us pull into the restaurant and dropped it off."

"Look again."

He did what she asked, scanning the image like he saw her do only minutes before. Starting at the top, taking in her hairline, her eyes, down to her lips, her throat, then stopping at the neckline of her dress. An uninterrupted expanse of skin. He looked up, flicked the vee of the real Veronica's neckline with his thumb. The same neckline represented in the sketch currently in his lap.

Holding the page up, he sniffed the edge. "Smells fresh. Hot off the presses."

She nodded. "I had Wallace set up a surveillance camera at the other restaurant," she began, her voice even lower than it had been. "When we came here instead, I figured it could just be date night. I thought we were careful enough. He's been kind of absent. I didn't think."

*You didn't think? Understatement of the fucking, day, week, month, year, decade, Veronica.*

He looked over her shoulder at the hostess stand and saw their server hovering close enough for him to signal over. What he was really doing, though, was checking the bar. The only person there was a red-headed woman, probably in her mid-thirties, counting out change and chatting with the bartender. Likely the bar manager. Everyone else in the restaurant was in groups of twos, threes, or fours.

Whoever had delivered the wine and the sketch was gone now.

"You need something else, sir?"

"Yes," Veronica answered for him. "Who sent the wine over?"

"The hostess gave me the bottle and the note. Told me to deliver it. Is it not to your liking?" he asked, his eyes flicking to the still full wine glasses.

"It's fine, thank you," Logan said. "If you could box up the food we just ordered and bring us the check, please."

As the server left again, taking a stack of plates with him, Logan placed a reassuring hand over Veronica's. He may have been mad that she had used them as bait, on purpose, but this was scary as hell. Especially in light of what happened immediately before they got to the restaurant. "We'll ask the hostess on the way out. But look around the restaurant. Do you recognize anyone here?"

"No one. I -" she trailed off, looked down at her hands, and he noticed a slight blush warm the apples of her cheeks. "There's a reason I asked to sit by the fountain."

"It's the center of the restaurant," he observed, also looking around. From where they sat, they could
see each corner of the restaurant. Even with rusty investigative skills, his girl was always thinking. Logan sat back in his seat. "And here I thought we were on a date. Stupid of me, really."

"It was stupid of me, too."

He didn't know what to do, how to put her at ease, catch the stalker, or fix this, so he squeezed her hand.

It was Veronica who broke the silence first. She cleared her throat and then threw back the last gulp of her cocktail. "Did you see what he wrote?" she whispered.

Shaking his head, he picked up the sketch from his lap. There she was, his Veronica, in all her frustrating and exhilarating glory and on the other side, two short lines of text.

There is always some madness in love. – Petrarch.
He doesn't need you. Not like I do.

"Creepy sonofabitch," Logan mumbled. He hadn't intended it to be loud enough for Veronica to hear, but her short burst of a broken laugh told him she had. He looked up and she wiped at the corner of her eye. If she had been tearing up, or even thinking about crying, the reason for it had passed.

"Yeah, he really is," Veronica said, her voice resolute, almost cold.

They sat there. Her hand clutched in his. Both of them kept their heads up, scanning each person in the restaurant. Without discussing it, they agreed that keeping up appearances wasn't going to do them any good.

The instant the check was paid, Veronica grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the hostess stand. Pulling her into his side, he saw the steely resolve in her eye as she mentally prepared a series of questions. There was no doubt. Veronica was going to figure out who this guy was.

Her stalker may have been playing at being smart, but picking Veronica as his mark all those years ago was a stupid move. And, if he really believed that there was a person out there who didn't need Veronica more than Logan did, then that was further proof the creepy sonofabitch was also dumb as a toolshed.

Veronica expected that the yelling would begin as soon as they got into the car. The bottle of wine, it seemed, hadn't even come from the restaurant itself. The hostess told them she'd stepped away from her station to seat a few guests, and when she got back the wine, $20 for the corkage fee, and the note were waiting for her. In addition to that, there was a post-it included that gave instructions on who to deliver it to. Veronica fished it out of the garbage to use for hand writing comparison. After a slightly tense argument with the manager, who refused to hand over the security tapes without a warrant ("I can't compromise my guest's privacy"), Logan pulled her from the restaurant.

It made Veronica want to simultaneously burst into laughter and go on a rage bender, tearing the restaurant apart. She knew, or rather suspected, that her stalker was unstable because, hello, stalking!, but everything which transpired that evening confirmed it.

"Did you read this shit?" Veronica asked, shoving the post-it note in Logan's face. At his grimace, she nodded. "Sorry, honey, Creepy McStalksalot seems to think I'm his girlfriend."

Does he have friends asking to meet me? Or does he only call me his girlfriend when leaving notes for strangers?
During the drive back from the restaurant, Veronica spent several minutes smoothing out the sketch and taking photos of the note that accompanied it. She zoomed in on the photos until she could make out the three small dots above varying letters, then dug her notebook out of her purse. She had her suspicions as to what her stalker was trying to communicate through the hidden messages. These additional letters would hopefully confirm that.

"When you are ready for me to love you, I will mak -" Veronica said.

"Huh?"

"He added three more letters to the message. M, A, and K." She held up the notebook and waved it for Logan to see. "I'm guessing 'mak' is 'make.' He's going to make me, what? Nauseous, cause that's already happening."

"Maybe he wants to make you a sandwich."

Veronica laughed, tossing the notebook onto the floorboard of the car. "If this was about him wanting to be my personal chef, there'd be no problem."

They pulled up to her dad's house and the thought of slipping out of Logan's car with a casual wave and a 'thanks for dinner' appealed to her. She realized, though, that he was waiting for her to say something. Well-adjusted Logan may have been sexy as hell, but he also wasn't as reactionary. Which meant she had to ignore her baser instinct to run or avoid things.

"I'm sorry," Veronica said.

He huffed out a laugh, nodding along as if in agreement. "What for, might I ask?"

Clever, Logan. Making me get specific. Joanna would love you.

"Look, I didn't tell you the full reason we were at the restaurant. My original plans had fallen apart, so I, I don't know, improvised. I thought maybe it'd be nice to have dinner the two of us. Didn't think about it, I guess. I really thought we were careful enough."

"Okay, yes," he pointed at her, and then angled his body to face her, resting one knee on his seat so he was leaning back up against the door, "you not letting me know from second one was a little awful. But I get the Veronica Land logic that you used to make the decision. But that's not why I'm upset."

"You're upset? Why? What happened tonight was odd, I admit, but it's good. We shook him up enough that he's going to do something else stupid, and then --"

"That!" Logan shouted, interrupting her synopsis. "That right there is the problem. This guy is unstable, Veronica. He's been sending you letters for six fucking years. Impersonating you in some way to open up PO Boxes. Shit, he's been following you around the country. Falsified identities. Broke onto my property. Tonight he was watching you and, this --" he grabbed Veronica's messenger bag, opening the flap and grabbing the piece of paper she had received that night, "only confirms he is an insane piece of shit."

"I can't live like this. What do you expect from me?"

"I expect you to maybe open your eyes to the situation. Maybe trust that your friend Erin, and that Mac, and your dad, are actually doing things that are helping you."

"I'm trying, Logan. Do you have any idea how much it sucks for me to be the least useful person in
"I know the feeling."

She reeled back, her eyes stinging with the effort involved with holding in each emotion. Yes, she wanted to cry. She also wanted to scream. And maybe pull a Jennifer Love Hewitt and storm into the middle of the street yelling, 'What are you waiting for?' to the universe in general and her stalker specifically.

"I make you feel useless? That's great to hear." Her tone lacked any liveliness. It was flat. Hollow. Even when she was trying, she was messing things up.

_Inside him, though. I thought, if anything, that this time he'd know that I needed him._

He sighed, reaching for her to brush away a tear, or maybe an eyelash, from her cheek. "No, Veronica, you don’t. But what's going on is making me feel useless. There's nothing I can do to help."

"But you are helping," she said, clutching his hand in hers, needing him to see that. "You're with me in all of this. That's helping."

"Is it enough, though?"

_I think so._

She sat back in her seat and dropped Logan's hand so it fell to his side. Two weeks. They'd only been back together two weeks and her life was already screwing with his. She'd seen the evidence of how good this life was that he'd built. Pictures in his office of friends, who she'd yet to meet, that he surfed with. Traditions around the holidays. People at work who needed him. Younger sisters who relied on him.

"I'm twisting you up," she said, without looking up to see his reaction. Instead she focused on gathering her belongings from his car, piling them onto her lap and readying herself to sprint from the vehicle. "I'm trying, okay? But – I'm – I'm giving you an easy out. The impulsive stuff, the reckless stuff? They're always going to be a part of me in some way. I may have a different job, but it's still me." She took a deep breath, running her fingers along the hem of her dress. Love meant looking out for the other person's interests first, right? And if Logan, the man he was now, couldn't handle those parts of her, she had to know. "If you don't want that, I get it."

She needed to give him time to think. The decisions born of emotional impulse weren't always the best and she knew that couldn't happen here. Tossing a small smile his way, one she determined to be light and sunny, she made to get out of the car. Logan's hand on her shoulder halted her escape.

_Logan stopping me before I can actually run away. That's new and different._

She didn't pull away and chose to drop her bag on the floor again so she could look him straight in the eye. If that's what he wanted, to cut his losses and part as friends, she'd punch him in the throat, probably. But she'd stare him in the eye when she did.

"For the record," he said, brushing her hair back from her shoulder and then following that path with his hand, tickling the skin of her back. "Not having you around will never be what I want."

"You sure?" She'd spent her formative years watching people lie, cheat, and leave. But before they'd do all that, they'd tell the other person exactly what they wanted to hear.
"Absolutely," he said, nodding. "So don't be stupid. It's beneath you."

She chucked his shoulder with her fist, and then ruffled his hair, because she could, but mostly because it annoyed him. It was either do that or something wildly embarrassing like throw her arms around his neck and refuse to let go. "Okay. And I won't use myself, or you, as stalker bait anymore."

Almost as if it was a reward, he offered her his rare grin. The one that lit us his whole face and made him look more little boy than grown man. He brushed her hair back from her temples, kissed his way along her eyelids, down the side of her face, and then ghosted his lips across hers. "That's all I can ask, honey."

*Oh, what the hell.*

Because she could, she threw her arms around his neck, snuggling her face into the crook between his neck and shoulder. She wouldn't refuse to let go, but five more minutes sounded about right.

Chapter End Notes

My internet connection yesterday prevented me from posting this here. But I see the Rich Text button now and all is well!

Special thanks to Scandalpants (per usual) for a fantastic beta job (twice). We're currently on a road trip together - we may or may not (we totally do) have foam core cutouts of Logan and Veronica's heads that have been making appearances in photos.

Finally, this chapter is dedicated to Bondopoulos who is a total sweetheart and did some very aggressive driving on the Stanford campus in the name of getting a photo of a yellow XTerra. Worth it.
Alibis

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Veronica's pulse began pounding at a frantic rate almost the second her eyes opened. There was a residual wariness hovering over her. The effect of a real life, fist to face in Logan's case, interaction with Skyler, as well as the bottle to table encounter with her stalker. She had left Logan's SUV on an okay note, but that too was cause for concern. How long before he got fed up with dating under a microscope? He grew up that way, and took steps as an adult to live a different life.

*We never were very good at dating in high stress circumstances. I envy my friends whose biggest relationship problems include their boyfriend forgetting anniversaries.*

She heard her dad in the kitchen singing along, not well, to a song she wasn't able to make out. If the sound of clanging pots and pans were any indication, he was also making breakfast. A fact that made Veronica smile even as she raised her eyebrows.

*Pancakes will not get you out of a stern talking to, Papa Mars.*

She sniffed the air, and was that?...yup, bacon.

*Okay, that'll help.*

The closer she got to the kitchen, the more words she picked up from the radio. Her dad's back was to her, but she smiled as he punctuated 'good or bad, happy or sad' with well-timed flicks of his spatula.

"You and Alicia better stay together this time," Veronica said. "Wallace and I are over mommy and daddy fighting."

Rather than giving her a direct response, her dad pivoted on his heels, brought the spatula up to his mouth as a microphone and continued to sing along to the radio. "Woman let's, let's stay together." He reached over and turned down the song. "One fresh stack of 'pardon pancakes,' for your enjoyment."

Veronica sat down at the breakfast bar as her dad placed a stack of pancakes and a large bottle of maple syrup in front of her. Glasses of orange juice and place settings waited for both of them.

"So you picked up I was a little upset last night?" she asked, drowning her pancakes in syrup and adding a smaller pool to dip her bacon in.

"Not much subtlety with a message like, 'your ass is grass when you get home.'" He bit off half a piece of bacon in one chomp. "Not sure how I feel about us progressing in our father/daughter relationship to the point where you're comfortable swearing via text message."

"I've teased you about being a male stripper before and you're stuck on the word ass?"

"It's the little things."

"While I appreciate the pardon pancakes, what I'd really appreciate is an explanation."

"I have some questions of my own," he countered.
"That's nice." She hopped down from where she sat to pour herself a cup of coffee. "But I answered your questions when you called me last night. You, however, stonewalled me. Now, when did you go to San Diego?"

"A couple days ago."

"I told you I didn't --"

"I know what you thought, sweetie." Keith paused to take a gulp of coffee and angled his body to face Veronica more directly. "Your instincts are good, but I wasn't going to leave your safety up to hunches. I needed his alibi."

She took her place back at the counter and scrunched her forehead, looking at him from over the rim of her coffee mug.

Alibi for what?

As she savored the taste of the bitter coffee cut with sweet, she answered her own question.

"For the break-in at Logan's property," she said. It was something she was certain of. And it was a really smart move; an easy way to eliminate a name from the suspects list.

Her dad nodded. "I stopped by his parents' place to see if he was in town, but Skyler answered the door."

"Answers that first question, I suppose. Do you still think it's him?"

Her dad sighed. "As much as I'd like it to be, no. He has an alibi for the break-in. That night Skyler was en route to San Diego. His flight got in at 8:45 PM. The itinerary on his phone confirmed it and a rental car receipt puts him at Enterprise at the airport at 9:10 PM."

"The package was dropped off at Logan's around 8:30 PM," Veronica said. The timeline for that evening was still clear in her memory, and Veronica folded Skyler's whereabouts into it.

"Doesn't fit if he's the guy."

Veronica knew Skyler wasn't her stalker. She was, however, doubtful that he willingly gave his alibi without some resistance. "He just told you all this? You showed up and said, 'I'm Keith Mars. Where were you four days ago?' and he answered?"

"More or less," he replied, adding a couple more pieces of bacon to his plate. Veronica slapped his hand away and stole the strips from him.

"I'm holding this hostage until I get answers. Was it more or less?"

"He was cordial at first. Good conversationalist. When I told him who I was he put up a little fight. Believe it or not, he thought you told me to go talk to him."

"What'd you do?" Veronica asked, her tone wary. Wouldn't it be something if two of the most important people in her life punched Skyler within days of one another? She cut off a large bite of food, shoveling it into her mouth. She didn't recall Skyler's face being bruised prior to Logan hitting him, though.

"Oddest thing happened. My right elbow has this strange little reflex. When someone says something bad about my daughter it, presses right up against their vocal chords making it hard for them to talk."
She rolled her eyes at her dad's vague reply. It was impressive, she noted, that he could make a move that must have been rather aggressive resemble an affable accident. Also strangely heartwarming. "Hard to get someone's alibi if they can't breathe, dad."

"Once he choked out an apology I backed away."

"Commendable. That doesn't explain why he came here, though. You talked to him, he insulted me, you attacked him."

Her dad coughed, choking on his coffee, and held up a finger in protest. "I did not attack him. I interviewed him with gusto."

*Definitely inherited my flair for the dramatic from my father.*

"How did you leave things?" Veronica asked.

"I got his alibi. Wished him a Merry Christmas. Told him to walk the other way if you two ever crossed paths in Chicago."

She picked her fork back up and drew designs in the maple syrup with the tines before cutting off another large bite. It was in part because she was hungry and in part because she wanted a few extra seconds before she had to respond.

Once she washed it down with orange juice, she offered her dad a small smile. "Skyler doesn't like being told what to do. We had that in common." The automatic shutoff of the coffee machine beeped loud enough to startle her. She looked in her cup but it was still full. No need to add more. "I guess this has been good, though. One less suspect on the list."

Her dad nodded and reached his hand out to cover hers, giving it a quick squeeze. They ate in silence for another few seconds when the doorbell rang, prompting them to squint at each other in confusion.

"Who's that?" her dad asked.

Veronica shrugged. "Don't ask me. I can count on one hand the number of people who can stand to be in the same room with me and I saw them all yesterday."

Her dad gave her an affectionate pat on the shoulder and another indulgent sigh.

*Two semi-annoyed sighs in one morning. May be a Veronica Mars record.*

"I should have invested in charm school rather than club soccer, huh?" her dad asked, backing out of the room.

"Please, pops, I'm practically drowning in my own charm."

As she waited for her dad to slough off whoever was at the door, Veronica returned to eating pancakes. She slathered the remaining pieces with peanut butter and added more syrup.

*I wonder how much I'd need to pay my dad or Logan to fly out to Chicago once a week to make me pancakes.*

"Sweetie," her dad called from the living room. "Your gentleman caller is here."

*It's after nine o'clock. Shouldn't Logan be at work?*
Despite her wonder at what he was doing there, it was still a pleasant surprise that Veronica intended to indulge. She tucked her hair behind her ears and zipped up her hooded sweatshirt. It would barely be noticeable that she wasn't wearing a bra but she didn't trust Logan not to comment in front of her dad.

"To what do I owe this pleasure, Mr. Echolls?" Veronica asked, giving a small curtesy by holding out the edges of her pajama shorts. One side of Logan's lips quirked up as he scanned her minimal attire. "You didn't bring me a present? It's common courtesy. If you drop in announced you bring a present. Right dad?"

Keith smashed his lips together in a thin smile as he shook his head. "Look at who's the sudden authority on manners. Come in, Logan," he continued, gesturing to the kitchen with a jerk of his head, "there's plenty of coffee left. Still hot."

"No thanks, Mr. –" Logan trailed off, and then appeared to reverse course mid-thought. "Actually, that sounds great."

Veronica frowned up at him, confused by the mixed singles he was tossing her way. Noticing her expression, he took her hand in his, tangled their fingers together and followed her dad into the kitchen.

Keith set a mug filled with coffee and a little cream in front of Logan and tossed a quick, "Time for a shower," over his shoulder as he left the room.

It occurred to Veronica that her dad and Logan had been alone at the door for several minutes. What had Logan said in that time? Were her dad and Logan actually plotting together against her?

Stop being paranoid. If dad thought it was something bad, he'd be hovering in the kitchen right now, not leaving you two to talk in private.

"Good morning, by the way," Logan said.

"Good morning." Veronica grabbed Logan by his starched shirt collar, keeping her grip loose so as not to wrinkle it, and kissed him with a smile on her face. The surprise morning hellos didn't suck. "You realize you're late for work, right?"

Logan shook his head, taking a sip of coffee. "I have an author flying in I have to stay late to meet. Gives me a couple hours of wiggle room this morning."

Her pancakes were now on the far side of lukewarm, but Veronica didn't mind. She took another bite of her short stack and finished it off with a slice of bacon dipped in syrup. When she looked up she caught Logan watching her with fascination as he drank his coffee. She smiled, offering him a bite of the salty and sweet piece of bacon. Again, he looked like his first instinct was to refuse but relented, nibbling her fingers as he did.

"Looks like someone regrets putting the kibosh on sexy times last night," Veronica said, licking the bacon remnants off her fingers.

"I will never put the kibosh on sexy times. In your dad's house, however, when he could show up unexpectedly? I want to live to see my thirtieth birthday."

"Maybe I'll have to schedule a sleepover at your place tonight, huh?" Veronica bit her lip, and observed her pancakes, enjoying this back and forth teasing session. A relationship with Logan was
better for early morning mental acuity than both crossword puzzles and Sudoku.

*Dating's fun. I like dating. Dating good.*

When Logan didn't respond with a characteristically pervy remark, Veronica looked up, her eyebrows knit with concern. All Logan's attention was on his coffee cup. He turned it in slow circles, and then sloshed the liquid around the edge, doing his best to get the beverage as close to the top without spilling over.

"I've been thinking, Veronica."

Four words, half a second, and it felt like the wind was knocked right out of her. Her fork clanged on the plate and she hopped down from her stool, backing away from the counter.

*Nope. Not gonna happen.*

"You have to get to work and I have to take a shower. Thanks for stopping by," she said, turning away from Logan even as she spoke.

He grabbed her hand and, before she could jerk away from his grasp, pulled her back to him.

"If you kiss me on the forehead right now, I'm going to judo chop you," she said, her tone sulky as she stared at her toes.

*I should sweep and mop today. This floor is filthy. And give myself a pedicure. Go for a run. I'm sure Wallace would be willing to tag along. We're a little low on groceries, too.*

"What?" Logan asked, trying to meet her eye by bending at the knee.

"The last time you said that you followed it by kissing me on the forehead. Then you broke up with me. If that's what's going to happen let's get it over."

The previous evening she'd given him an out. Laid out for him who she was and how that affected things. After, as she lay in bed mulling it over, she concluded that while they were both calmer, steadier, they were also the same in many ways. She'd given up PI-ing full time, but was still occasionally reckless. He gave up heavy drinking and cathartic bimbo nailing, but he'd still punch a guy for hurting her. Despite how odd it may have sounded to anyone else, she found that comforting.

Now, less than twelve hours later, and Logan was proving her carefully constructed relationship theories were wrong.

*Not having you around will never be what I want.' Should have known that sounded too good to be something I'd get out of life.*

She stood up a little straighter, throwing her shoulders back, and tilted her chin up into what she hoped passed for a defiant angle.

"Veronica, no. That is not what's happening," he answered, smoothing a hand down each of her arms to take hold of her hands.

"Okay, then what's with broody Logan? It's too early for that."

"Not broody Logan. Smart Logan, I hope."

"So we're trying something new?" She circled a hand in the air, urging him on with his explanation
and resumed her place at the breakfast counter.

"You were right about something. This stalker, whoever it is, doesn't like me. Or this." He picked up her hand, kissing her knuckles. "Seeing us together. So I was thinking that –"

Her brain may have worked ahead of Logan earlier, jumping to the most cynical conclusion, but she knew she was tracking with him now. "That we shouldn't be seen together," she said, pulling her hand from his to rest them in her lap.

He exhaled a gust of breath and pushed his hair back, nodding as he did. "Yeah. Until you, we, everyone, I guess, figures out who the guy is."

"Makes sense," she conceded and swung her legs to the other side of the stool. She walked her dishes over to the sink and sensed Logan's eyes track her as she crossed the kitchen.

*What he's suggesting makes a certain kind of sense. Doesn't mean I have to like it. And I guess that cancels tonight's damn sleepover. Stalker man is messing with my sex life.*

As she wiped a hand over her face in frustration, she focused on replacing whatever disappointed expression she wore with one of placid contentment. It wouldn't do any good for Logan to see how upset she was. But then she turned around, and saw the slight hangdog expression on Logan's face. He looked tired and on the edges of haggard. Veronica guessed he'd been up most the night playing this conversation out in his head. Possibly searching for other solutions. Ways that they could spend her next four days in Neptune together without triggering the stalker to escalate further.

That expression on his face sparked a genuine reaction of her own. It may be a smart idea, but she hated it. She let out a small hiccupping sob and wrapped her arms around her middle. "It was going to be our first Christmas together." It sounded pitiful even as she spoke the words and she wished to take them back.

Logan was away from the breakfast counter and in front of her in a moment, gathering her close as he rested his chin on top of her head. His hands were so big, she observed, flattened out and splayed against her back. He felt warm even through the layers of fabric, and she wrapped her arms as tight around his waist as she could manage.

"When this is all over, we'll celebrate just the two of us, okay?"

Veronica nodded against Logan's chest. "Does this mean I'm uninvited to Fucked-Up Family Christmas? I was kind of looking forward to that."

"I'm sorry," he said, kissing her temple. "But take solace in the fact that our families will be just as fucked next year."

"That's strangely comforting." Veronica indulged in another couple of seconds of being snuggled up to him, and then pulled back, already equipped with her brave face. "We should probably plan a breakup."

If his narrowed eyes and shake of his head were any indication, that suggestion took Logan by surprise. Not just surprise – he hated it. "I don't think that's necessary."

"Logan, it is if we want him to back off. The only time he sends me messages, follows me around places, is when I'm in a relationship. He needs to assume we're done."

"Let me guess, it should happen in public."
"That'd be best, yeah." Logan looked like her response caused him physical pain, and he shoved his hands into his slacks pockets. Everything about what he said indicated he agreed with her. All of his actions, however, made it clear he detested the idea. Not seeing each other was one thing. 'Breaking up' was apparently another. "Where's your meeting and what time?"

"Eight o'clock at Palace, that gastropub in downtown Neptune. We'll probably be done by ten, ten-thirty at the latest."

She bit the edge of her thumbnail as she tried to picture exactly what surrounded the restaurant. "Okay, there's that chocolate shop a couple blocks away, A-C something?"

"Acacia's, yeah. I've been there."

"It's open late and they have big open windows. Let's meet there at 10:30. I break up with you, then we go on our separate and depressed at Christmas ways."

That at least coaxed a small smirk from Logan. He scratched his temple and took a step closer, right into her personal space. "Why do you get to break up with me? It was my idea."

"The breakup was my idea. Plus, if Stalker Stan is watching and sees me breakup with you, he's going to think it's because I listened to him. Realized I was too good for you—"

"—which will appease him," Logan concluded. "Got it. Must pander to the crazy."

She smiled, stepping up on tiptoes and wrapping her arms around his neck. "It's my approach with you. Works pretty well."

Logan tossed a quick glance over his shoulder, and seeing that they were still alone, cupped Veronica's head. He skipped any sort of buildup and headed straight for full on make out. When he pulled her closer she heard him groan. With the tight presses of their chest Logan had likely discovered she wasn't wearing a bra. One of his hands slid from where it clutched her lower back to grab her butt. It was an action that simultaneously short circuited her rational thinking mechanism thing (brain, Veronica, it's called a brain) and reminded her they were still in her dad's kitchen. She pushed him back away with a small groan of her own, and rested against the kitchen counter.

"Really regretting you turned down last night's offer now, aren't you?" she asked, her words coming out less confident than she'd intended. He smiled, this time from one side of his mouth, and scrunched up his face. Nodding, he tucked his hands back in his pockets. "A bit, yeah."

"Can you wait here for a minute? I have something for you."

"A pair of your underwear for the road?"

"Eww, gross," she said, chuckling at the boyish grin on his face, and left the kitchen. She'd hidden his gift between the pages of one of her text books. It was supposed to be his Christmas present but it didn't look like that was going to happen.

"Now it is officially a 'third day of Hanukkah' present."

Logan stood at the sink, finishing her job of the breakfast dishes, but the quick clearing of her throat stole his attention back. "You didn't have to do that."

"I wanted to," he said, as he dried his hands.
"Well, since I thought you came over for morning time makeouts and you ended up being here to breakup with me –"

He cut her off with a slightly offended, "Hey," of protest, but clamped his mouth shut when he saw her patented 'I-dare-you-to-argue-with-me' look.

"Fair point."

"Seriously, though, doing dishes for the girlfriend? Your mama raised you right." The words left her mouth before she could stop them. She clapped a hand to her mouth, and chastised herself all the more when she saw Logan's fleeting wince.

It had only been a few days since they'd discovered the full scope of the tragedy of Lynn Echolls' life. In fact, he'd found out in the very room they were standing. It was careless of her, but mostly she was sorry for the memories of panic and heartbreak her joke would undoubtedly remind him of.

"Logan, I'm –"

He waved a hand to interrupt her. "Don't worry about it. It's what we do, right? Make jokes about the awful."

She shook her head, kneading the corner of the paper she held in her hand. Now seemed the exact wrong moment to give it to him, but it was too late to pretend she didn't have something for him. "We don't have to do that. About this, your mom, if you don't want."

"I want," he said. He blew out a puff of air between his lips, and shook his head. "Fuck, I need things to be our normal again."

"Okay," she said. She wasn't about to lecture him on the appropriate ways to handle crisis. Self-deprecating humor was a tactic that would work for him until it no longer did. When it didn't, she'd be there. She handed him the envelope. "This is for you. I even wrapped it."

He gave her a questioning look, one eye screwed up to almost wink at her in inquiry. The envelope was from an old Christmas stationery set she'd bought in high school. The front depicted a series of snow covered houses and the opposite side showed Santa and his sleigh landing on a rooftop. When he looked to her for confirmation that he could open it, she smiled.

His present consisted of a single page, written on in loopy, semi-discrimible, blue hand-writing. She wondered how long it would take for him to figure out precisely what he was holding.

She watched as his eyes tracked the words on the page. By her estimate it was around sentence three that he figured out who the letter was from. He looked up at her, his eyes wide with disbelief. She nodded, finding herself a little overwhelmed by the warmth in his eyes directed at her. Even as he read he was shaking his head as if unwilling to trust the words before him.

Logan finished reading the letter, folded it back up with careful precision and slid it back into the envelope. "You've been keeping secrets."

She shrugged a single shoulder and held up a finger. "Just one. For us that's growth."

He grabbed her hand and pulled her into him so quickly she almost tripped over his feet. "How?"

"Wallace and I drove up to San Clemente last week to the school where Charlie is teaching now. I stormed in during his planning period and dumped the stack of letters you'd written him on his lap."
"How'd you get my -?" Logan trailed off, seemingly having answered his own question. "Forget it."

"You think my snooping is adorable, remember?"

"It's something." He looked at the letter in his grasp and then back up at her. "That doesn't explain this, though."

"I used some – colorful?" she asked, looking to the side as she searched for the right word. "Yeah, let's go with colorful, words to express how much of an asshat he'd be to continue to ignore you. I left him with my address and told him to do the right thing."

"You read it?"

It was a rhetorical question and she worried he'd see that as a violation. "I wanted to make sure he didn't say anything bad." She looked down at her feet, nudging the corner of the area rug by the sink with her toe. "Wouldn't have been much of a present if he'd been a jerk."

He lifted her chin with a finger, raising her eyes to meet his again. It wasn't like she'd done anything wrong. In fact, he seemed touched by the gesture, but she felt rather bashful about what she'd done. The brush of his lips against hers told her she had no reason to be.

*Thank God he liked it. My backup Christmas plan was sexual favors but love coupons weren't something I could have prepared with a straight face.*

"Are you okay with what he wrote?" Veronica asked.

"What? That he's not sure he wants a full brother relationship? It doesn't surprise me. " At the downturn of her mouth into a moue of displeasure, Logan chuckled. "It's okay, Veronica. He agreed to meet me. That's more than I've gotten from him in three years."

"Maybe another visit from me would convince him to be one with family reunions." She smacked one of her elbows with her hand and added to the effect by bouncing on the balls of her feet. "The elbows in my family are super bony. They can do some real damage."

"Cool it, Towanda." He kissed the end of her nose, massaging her shoulders as he did. "I didn't bring your present."

"It's okay," she said, poking him in the stomach with her index finger. He took hold of it and brought her hand up to his mouth, kissing her palm. "You can bring it tonight when I break up with you."

"I'm not getting paid enough for this," Mac complained as she took another drink of her latte. "I mean, the coffee's good, but it's not enough."

Veronica grinned, her original instincts proved right. She'd suspected Mac's acquiescence wouldn't last long. After all, it was just past nine thirty when her obnoxious phone call roused Mac from sleep.

"Would this make it worth your while?" Veronica asked, pulling a pastry bag from her purse with one hand as she did her best Vanna White impression with the other. "New vegan bakery in town." She gave the contents of the bag an exaggerated sniff.

Mac took the bag from Veronica with glee while attempting to hide her smile. "That's better," she said and opened the passenger seat door.

As she backed out of Mac's parents' driveway, Veronica double checked the address plugged into
her GPS and took another large drink of her own latte.

"Remind me what we're doing again. And why I need to be with you."

"Going to question Dick. And you're with me because if I come into prolonged contact with him I breakout into hives. Also, Logan and dad put a moratorium on me going places alone."

"The traveling in pairs thing I get. But, how am I supposed to help you with the other problem?"

Veronica gestured to the glove compartment as she pulled up to a stop sign. "There's an EpiPen in the glove box."

"You're telling me you're allergic to Dick?" Mac groaned as Veronica reacted with a mock-scandalized gasp. "Don't say it," Mac said. "I hate myself a little for letting those words leave my mouth."

The voice on Veronica's GPS confirmed that they'd reached Dick's house. From the outside it was larger than Logan's place, settled firmly in the heart of the 09 zip code. Even Veronica could acknowledge that the digs were nice, but that didn't prevent her from rolling her eyes at the sight of the nude portrait painted on his mailbox.

*All class as always, Dick.*

They parked on the street and rang the buzzer of the gate. Dick's voice came through the intercom and Mac spoke first.

"What does Dick do, anyway?" Veronica asked. She didn't expect Mac to be able to answer her. Despite any mild teasing from a couple days prior, Veronica knew nothing serious was going on (or had ever gone on) between Mac and Dick. Mac's amused scoff at her question told Veronica that she knew the answer, though, and it was a doozy.

"Believe it or not, *Dick's Big Ride* is still a thing. Except now he's expanded it to include all kinds of adventure sports. Produces it cheaply. Has gotten sponsorships, ad revenue. It's pretty viable as far as businesses go."

Veronica flung an arm around Mac's shoulder, pulling her close. "That's my girl. Helping the rich get richer."

Mac pushed her away, her tone filled with indignation as she replied. "Little 'ol middle class me is also getting richer. Locked him into a contract. I get a tidy 15% off every dollar Dick makes. My bank account has been padded nicely by this throwaway college project."

"You've got to hand it to the guy," Veronica said as she reached up to ring the bell. "It's a kind of creativity to find ways to get paid for stuff you were already doing."

"Can I quote you on that?" Mac asked.

Dick opened the door and took a second to leer at both of them as they stood on the porch. He didn't look surprised to see them, though, which told Veronica that Logan informed Dick they'd be stopping by.

"Ronnie and Mackie. Two bad-ass chicks from the Moulin Rouge. You're missing your feather boas."

"Did you get that out of your system, Dick?" Veronica asked. She crossed her arms and shifted her
weight to one hip, trying to push down the urge to leave that instant.

"I don't know. Did you get kicking Logan in the metaphorical balls out of your system?"

"Nope," Veronica said, popping the 'p' for effect. "In fact, I'm breaking up with him tonight."

Both Mac and Dick looked at her with disbelief, neither knowing whether to believe her. Mac caught onto the joke first. She looked away from Veronica and back up at Dick, shaking her head.

"Dick, stop acting like a doorstop and actually open the damn door." Without waiting for a reply to her statement, Mac pushed Dick aside and stepped into his house. Veronica chuckled as she followed her. When she looked back at the door, a properly chastised Casablancas was shutting the door.

*I could get used to a tameable Dick. Oh, god. I'm going to pretend that thought never crossed my mind.*

Mac started to lead them all further into the house, but Veronica caught her arm to stop her, keeping them all in the foyer. "This won't take long." She turned around and resumed her interrogation stance trying to remember that Dick, for some reason, was still one of Logan's friends. "Senior year of high school, you got into a fight with a guy in art class. He got suspended. What do you remember about him?"

Dick scratched his head, his face screwed up in a false tableau of pensive thinking. "Gee, I don't know Veronica. It was such a long time ago."

"And you did get punched a time or two. Must be hard to remember them all," she countered. "Apparently this kid was quiet. Kept to himself. Some of your classmates called him Brando."

This time the thinking appeared genuine. Veronica could almost see as those few details triggered Dick's memory of the incident.

*If they were triggered a little faster, that'd be great.*

"Shit, I remember that," he said, bouncing on his toes in excitement. "Guy just came at me. Happened out of nowhere."

"Do you remember what you were doing?" Mac asked.

Veronica smiled at her, and Mac offered a shrug in response.

*I guess if she's acting as part of my protective detail I can let her ask a few questions.*

He took a deep breath and huffed it out as he spoke, making him sound like a petulant child. "You really want to know?" Both girls nodded. "Fine. Man eater over here," a quick wave of his hand in Veronica's direction, "had just finished her Terminator act on Logan. Part one, I guess. Maybe I said something a little…hmmm…unsavory. I can't remember. Guy punches me in the jaw."

Veronica and Mac appeared to have opposite reactions to Dick's confession. Mac's face drained of most its color. She looked sick to her stomach and a little stunned. If Veronica were to guess, she'd say it had been a while since she'd encountered Dick's particular brand of callous. Hearing Dick insult one of her best friends, and do so casually, in her presence must have startled her.

In contrast, Veronica felt her face getting hot and redden. It made her feel an odd sort of helpless to hear Dick's warped perspective on her history. He was the kind of obtuse self-centered guy, though,
that she didn't want to bother arguing with. In her experience he responded best to short and direct admonitions or commands.

"But that was a million years ago, right?" Dick took a step forward and wedged his body between both Veronica and Mac, tossing an arm around each of their shoulders. "Logan would kill me if I said something like that now. You're with my boy again, so you know what that means?"

_Means he might take my side when he finds out I killed Dick for this side hug._

"No," Veronica said, her tone lacking any amusement. "But I bet you're going to tell me."

"Mi Casa-De-Blancas et su Casa-De-Blancas."

Mac looked like she wanted to interject, but Veronica shook her head.

She grabbed Dick's arm and stepped away, causing his hand to drop to his side. Mac did the same but added a pretend shudder for effect. "I need information, Dick. What can you tell me about the guy?" Veronica asked. "Height, weight, did you ever see him hangout with anyone? Interact at all outside of class? Notice anything off about him?"

Dick shook his head and looked around the room now, seemingly more interested in his home décor that her stream of questions. She clapped her hands in his face to regain his attention and Mac snorted a laugh. "Focus, please. Focus real hard on putting those brain cells to good use."

He sneered at her and backed up looking genuinely offended. "God, no Veronica. I don't know anything. Some loser guy with a hard on for you was not something that concerned me."

"This isn't a joke, Dick. Could you pretend to care?"

"You realize I'm talking to you out of the goodness of my heart, right? I'm practically Mother Teresa here. You should curb your bitch impulses."

"Hey," Mac started, taking a step towards him.

Veronica shook her head and rested a hand on Mac's shoulder. She tried to communicate with a smile and eye contact that she was fine and able to handle Dick Casablancas. It might include handling him in a way that did bodily harm but she had it covered.

"Mac, can you give us a second?" she asked.

A moment of hesitation and then a quick nod from Mac. Veronica waited until Mac exited the house, closing the door behind her, before she turned back around to glare at him. She'd come back to Neptune for winter break for a number of reasons, one of which was to seek closure between her and Logan. Perhaps she could also acquire closure of a different sort in the same trip.

There was tension that originated from her shoulders and spread all the way into her hands. She shook them out and took a deep breath. "How many times did you call me a slut in high school? You forwarded that video of me and Piz to hundreds of people. Fed me shots at Shelly's party then left me in a room with your brother and told him to -" Veronica paused, taking another breath.  

_That's enough Veronica. He doesn't get to know what happened and you don't owe him an explanation._

"And yet, I'm the bitch," she finished.
"Ronnie, god, that was like a million –"

She scoffed, cutting him off from completing his thought and then backed further away. "A million years ago? Good to know how you see it, Dick. You and I are not friends. Thank you for being spectacularly not helpful today."

She headed for the door without sparing Dick another moment. As she opened the door, about to step outside, he stopped her with a plaintive, "Hey." His voice sounded uncharacteristically penitent.

"What, Dick?"

"Beav – Cassidy – did he? He didn't do anything, right?"

*That's a loaded question. One I'm not prepared to answer for him ever.*

"Why do you care, Dick? It was a million years ago. Right?"

He tried to respond and as she stepped out the door and slammed it behind her. While she couldn't be sure, she thought she heard him say "Wait" even as she walked away.

*I came here to get information on one asshole and it served as a reminder of just how many still live in Neptune. That's a 'buy-one-get-one' deal I could do without.*

"You okay?" Mac asked.

Veronica hadn't expected that Mac would be there waiting for her, assuming she would choose to wait by the car. *Dear god, please tell me she didn't hear the details.* She gave a quick nod in response, fishing her sunglasses out of her purse as she walked down Dick's driveway. "Of course I am."

"If you want I'll stop accepting the residual checks. I don't really need them and –"

A light touch to Mac's shoulder stopped her nervous rambling. "It's okay, Mac. It's better you than anyone else. At least you'll do something good with the money."

It didn't take more than a fleeting glance for Veronica to confirm that Mac was uncertain whether that statement was genuine. Veronica smiled, putting an extra bit of pep into her step as she walked to the car and perked her voice up an octave. "If it makes you feel better, though, you can buy me lunch."

Mac still looked wary as she slid into the front seat of the car, but smiled in response.

Veronica promised Logan, and vice versa, full disclosure this time around, but she couldn't offer the same thing to Mac. It wasn't that she didn't trust her; they'd been friends for close to a decade and Veronica saw her as one of the good ones. But sometimes full disclosure did both parties little good. Veronica firmly believed that. Mac was smart enough to know that Veronica had very specific reasons for not caring for Dick Casablancas but considerate enough not to ask her to voice them.

*If she ever asks me about them, I'll be honest with her. Okay, perhaps a little sugar-coated honesty.*

Until that time, however, she had no intention of bringing it up. Wallace knew. Logan kn -

*Shit. How much does Logan actually know?*

As she drove away from Dick's house, she used the rearview mirror to peek back one more time. Long distance relationships sucked. Of that she was sure. But dating Logan without the added burden of living in Neptune was something she looked forward to.
Regardless of how many times Veronica joked that this was his idea, Logan couldn't see it that way. He'd suggested not being seen together. To fabricate a breakup was something else. Part of it, he thought, had to do with perception. If this stalker thought that Veronica had broken up with him, Logan worried it'd encourage her maladjusted suitor to make his big move.

Logan sat at the hot chocolate shop where they agreed to meet, unable to prevent his mind from turning over those possibilities. He had picked a spot inside, right beside the window.

While there was plenty of seating, the majority of it was outside. Its proximity to Hearst made it a draw for students who either needed a chocolate injection or a change of scenery as they studied. Since school was on break, however, it was close to deserted at 10:30 PM when he ordered two house hot chocolates and a raspberry truffle for Veronica. Inside the spot were the two baristas and a small group of students who looked like they were on a double date.

He slipped the envelope he'd brought with him out of his jacket pocket and placed it on the table, worrying one corner as he folded it back and forth. Veronica's Christmas present had been quite the puzzler but one he'd delayed thinking about, in part because he thought he had four more days to decide.

Veronica's earlier gesture in her dad's kitchen, though, had inspired him to be bold. In Logan's mind, it was more than a letter she'd provided him – she'd taken time to interweave her life with his. Even put herself in the position of being rejected by Charlie. While he had no doubt if she'd encountered rejection she would have made Charlie regret his obstinacy, having that door for a relationship left ajar was encouraging. He wanted Veronica there, mixed up with his life, and he hoped she wouldn't object to doing more of it.

Logan saw her first before she could see his place beside the window. Mac was with her and they crossed in front of the window as they walked up to the entrance of the chocolate shop.

As Veronica and Mac looked for him, then gave a half wave of acknowledgment, he had to remind himself twice that this wasn't real. Every time he thought he'd made progress, that he'd become a little more of the man Veronica apparently saw when she looked at him, he'd slip up. Little things like wanting to track Skyler down to make sure the message had been received. And in larger ways like trying to discern how much of his life she'd allow him to build around her.

It wasn't an option for her to transfer medical schools, but he'd follow her to one end of the country and back again if she gave any indication she'd be okay with that.

It must have been in high school that Veronica learned the art of walking with purpose while portraying ease. That was how she'd entered the coffee shop, laughing at something Mac said. From where he sat he could see the ease dissipate as she indicated Mac she was going to join Logan. Mac nodded and walked up to the counter to order.

Veronica's pace slowed as she approached his table. She looked back over her shoulder at the door as if planning to run out it and then took a deep breath before sitting with him.

It took him a second to remember that they were playing parts now. That she was supposed to break up with him. Oh god. They were breaking up. Again.

*But it's not real.*

They'd been able to joke about it earlier, but he didn't find it funny at the moment. He didn't want to pretend breakup with her. He wanted to never leave her side in reality. However, they needed to do
this, so he took a deep breath and reproved himself for holding on too tight.

This is the girl, Logan. This is the girl you're dating and sometimes the two of you are going to do cloak and dagger shit. Man up, play along, and let her dump your ass in a semi-public setting.

He put on his most charming smile and leaned forward to give her a kiss. She turned her face only an inch or two, but it was enough to cause the kiss to land on her cheek. He'd been out of the false bravado game for a while, so it stung for a second. Seeing his response, she took his hand and squeezed as she leaned closer.

"Thanks for ordering me a truffle. I like that shirt, by the way." The warmth of her words was in direct contrast to the pained expression she wore as she gave him a short nod and grim smile. She slid the truffle off of the table and dropped it in her purse. The same grim smile was on her face as she looked up. Her voice was so low he had to lean forward to catch every syllable. "Mac and I took a walk around the block and didn't see anyone. We only have to play the part. If he's here he's watching but can't hear anything." After she finished her explanation, she sat back shaking her head.

He couldn't make himself play along. He wanted to, god he did, for her, but this felt too similar to college. That time where everything looked fine one moment and then was broken the next. He took a deep breath trying to convince himself otherwise.

If we're taking turns shouldn't it be my go to breakup with her?

Logan nodded in an attempt to appear like he was processing what she'd said and took a drink of his hot chocolate. When he set the mug back down, he didn't steer his eyes up. Instead he focused on Veronica's fingers as they drummed on the table and the faint messages scratched into the surface by college students who'd written with too much force.

"You okay?" Her tone was sympathetic, as if she understood just why he wasn't, but when he looked up she was glaring at him. The juxtaposition was jarring, and it pulled a confused chuckle out him.

That would be in character with the moment, me thinks. Confusion. Glib laughter. It fits.

He shrugged, sitting back in his chair. "I know enough of the world now to have almost lost the capacity of being much surprised by anything."

"Chaucer?"

"Dickens. Or David Copperfield, depending on how you slice it."

"What are you not surprised by, then?" Veronica asked.

"Ducks quack. Cows moo. You and I explode," Logan said, using his hands to mime a volcano erupting. "Kablooey. We have enough experience. My approach tonight will be very method."

"No," she said. "Ducks quack. Cows moo. You and I catch the bad guy. That is what we do."

When he didn't acknowledge what she said, she kicked him under the table. He did his best to hide his reaction, but it startled him all the same and he jumped in his seat.

"Once we catch this guy, you're never getting rid of me," she said. On her part there was no pretending this time. She was actually pissed but along with that she offered him reassurance.

Logan allowed those words and that specific promise, 'never,' to rattle around in his brain as he
formulated the best way to respond. It always drove him nuts when Veronica questioned him and his loyalty, and here he was doing the same thing to her.

"Likewise, honey-bunches-of-mine."

It had been a while since he'd been an integral part of one of her intrigues and he scrambled to keep up. A deep breath bought him some time. It didn't take much longer for him to conjure up a memory of the last time they'd broken up for good. That was enough to propel him forward to take hold of her hand. She immediately removed it from the table and rested her hands in her lap. He hoped his gestures, flicks of the wrists and accusing points, communicated 'what the hell' as he asked about her day.

"How'd meeting with Dick go?"

*Another exaggerated sigh and tug of my hair for emphasis. Good thing the dramatic thing comes natural.*

It surprised him that he could see it, but Veronica went from pretending to be closed off to actually being so. She crossed her arms over her chest, pushed her chair back a few inches, and looked away from him. A quick shrug and a dismissive, "Fine."

*Which means it so wasn't fine. But that's probably not a conversation that can happen in this specific setting.*

For the next few minutes, Logan focused on distracting Veronica. It was fun for him to test her which he did by contrasting his words and actions as much as possible.

He leaned forward in his chair, luxuriating in the time he could take to leer at her, going from wounded boyfriend to jackass in less than three seconds.

*Because if she is breaking up with me, let's be honest, there will be some serious regression.*

Next, he slammed his fist down on the table, garnering the attention of the two couples finishing their date, and leaned in close, pulling his lips into a sneer. "Casey insisted on a turkey last year, but he deep fried it! What kind of a sick son-of-a-bitch deep fries a turkey."

Veronica pulled her lips together and shook her head. To the outside eye, it looked dismissive, like she was doing her best to stop herself from responding, but Logan could see the smile she hid.

"He's your friend," she said, rolling her eyes and affecting boredom. "I was always partial to honey ham, though."

Logan scoffed and then picked up the envelope tossing it with enough force that it slid from her edge of the table and into her lap.

"What's this?" she asked, her expression tight. If he didn't know better, he'd think she really did want to slap him, but he saw the hint of amusement in her eye.

"Christmas present. Open it when you get home."

She looked at her watch and cursed then mumbled an indiscernible reply from the corner of her mouth. If anything else could better communicate, 'sitting here with you is the last place I want to be,' Logan didn't know what it would be.

She stood up but Logan remained seated, doing his best to maintain a flippant air when what he
wanted was to take in every inch of her. Maybe pull her onto his lap and do something obnoxious, like try to feed her chocolate, just to see her cheeks go pink with annoyance. She placed a hand on his shoulder and then leaned down to kiss his cheek. "I'll call you as soon as I get back to my dad's."

He grasped the wrist of the hand resting on her shoulder, being careful to keep his hold light. "You better." He flicked her hand off his shoulder and then waved a hand at her in a dismissive gesture to get her to leave. This time watched her openly as she walked, his gaze unyielding as he tracked her progress across the room. She stopped by the table where Mac sat, her back purposefully turned away from them.

Their path back to wherever they parked took them past the window where he sat. Veronica paused for a moment and stood so she faced him straight on. Anyone behind her would be unable to see her face, just the sturdy set of her shoulder and clenched fists. If her stalker was watching, it'd read like a moment of hesitation. Logan focused his attention on his hands but he watched her from his periphery, turning his face enough so that she could tell he knew she was there. She pulled a face, sticking her tongue out at him and mouthed the words, 'love you.' Mac gave her arm a tug and both of them turned down the street and away from the coffee shop.

He pulled out his phone, shaking his head as he did and typed out a quick text.

10:49 PM – From Logan to Veronica
The second you get home.

It was possibly the best breakup they'd ever had and as close to a real one as he ever intended to get with her again.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, as always, to every person who has supported this story in some way. I apologize for not responding to reviews from this last chapter, but I got so focused on writing that I put all my free time there. Each little notice I got, though, was another boost to get me to chug along. So, again, THANK YOU.

My beta is a rockstar. Her name is scandalpants and she, per usual, asked some awesome questions that helped make this chapter better.
Veronica spent the following morning at home pestering everyone involved with the investigation. She needed updates. To Agent Erin Baxter, her former supervisor during her FBI internship, she sent a text asking about narrowing the list of Northwestern University students to those with any combination of JDK as their initials.

It had only been three days since Veronica requested that information and Erin was devoting resources to the case that could actually get the agent in trouble. Even though Veronica understood that intellectually, she was leaving for Chicago in three days and her stalker still didn't have a name or a face. He also hadn't threatened her with any sort of violence. To entice the police to open an investigation she wanted something more concrete. Even with the images Mac was working on, and the possible aliases coming from Erin, she worried it'd be a tough sell for the department.

Veronica sent a separate text to Mac about her progress breaking into the bank's surveillance feed. Mac responded with a vague, "My friend overnighted a couple things that should speed things up. Will get them today."

Back in their college days Mac and Veronica once stayed up all night with a super computer simply to break into a hard drive. She couldn't imagine the ingenuity breaking into a bank's surveillance feed with only a laptop and one hour of computer time per day would require. From what Veronica could gather, though, Mac talked her mom into an additional few hours—morning hours before everyone was up for the day. It had been a tough sell, apparently, but when Mac insisted it was to help a friend with a project and not herself Mac's mom relented.

_The Mackenzies: providing lessons to Neptune on how to be kick ass parents since 1988._

Veronica stalked her phone waiting for Erin's reply and additional texts from Mac. Her long list of distraction tasks and chores, mentally assembled when she thought Logan was breaking up with her, kept her busy for about three hours. By noon she was back to an intense stare down with her cell. All the clues she needed were out there and it needled at her that she couldn't be where they were.

After she put away groceries Veronica spent far longer than necessary crafting the perfect turkey sandwich. The same principle was behind that specific task as when she went running to work through a problem. In medical school she found she could focus better on flashcards when she was baking. Yes, these things were at times motivated by an unhealthy dose of avoidance, but sometimes all she needed was to focus on a new task to better understand a more pressing matter.

On that particular morning, while most of her brain focused on the ratio of mayo to mustard and slicing avocado, a small sliver of her consciousness worked on the case. Free to make connections, process, and problem-solve in a way she couldn't when she was hyper focused, she hoped she'd remember some piece of crucial information.

The sound of her message alert chime caused her to jump and drop the butter knife onto the counter, leaving a smudge of mayo.

_Erin. Erin. Please be Erin._

Veronica's face fell for a second, (_really, it was only half a second_) but then she was back to being
happy. While it wasn't Erin, it was Logan, and that provided a different kind of relief.

12:15 PM – From Logan to Veronica
Care for a digital picnic? Skype in 5?

She responded in the affirmative, but asked for seven minutes, and then stopped carefully making her sandwich. She threw the rest of the ingredients onto the bread with haste, smushing down the top piece of bread to press it all together. While she waited for her laptop to boot up she grabbed a bag of potato chips and a soda.

The sense of urgency, the need she had to see Logan's face was foreign and she worried a hair's breadth away from irrational. They'd been together just twelve hours before. When she arrived home the previous night and opened her Christmas present it took her entire supply of resolve to not immediately drive to Logan's house, stalker be damned.

Instead she had to satisfy herself with a pre-bed text message that consisted of fewer words than it did surprised punctuation. Logan had frustratingly responded only once.

11:23 PM – From Logan to Veronica
One word: gelato. Okay, one more word: pasta. Talk tomorrow.

Veronica signed into her Skype account and took what ended up being an ill-timed large bite of her turkey sandwich. Logan came into view just as her cheeks puffed out with the effort of working the bread and turkey with her jaw.

Logan laughed and she had a difficult time keeping her expression neutral and not laughing in return. The last thing she needed was to clean sandwich off her laptop. She swallowed and washed down the food with a gulp of her Sunkist.

"You started without me," he chastised, and then took a sip of his own soda.

"It's what you get for being so last minute with the date invitation. What are you eating?"

He held up his see-through glass container but all she made out was the color brown. "Leftovers from when Heather was over the other night. We made stew."

She grinned around the potato chip she chomped on. "Well, that's adorable."

"Every bad boy has to have a marketable skill."

"Yeah. I think your membership to that club lapsed a long time ago. Not many bad boys just hand out tickets to Italy as Christmas gifts."

He sat his bowl down on the desk and reclined back in his chair. When he did Veronica could better see the color contrast between his shirt and tie. She gasped and then pointed a finger at the screen. "Logan, are you wearing purple?"

He looked down at his shirt and smoothed out a bump in his charcoal gray tie. "I think the correct hue is lavender. But, sure, I'm wearing purple."

"Hmm," she smiled. She reached into the potato chip bag and grabbed another handful, popping one into her mouth. "Interesting."

Logan looked self-conscious for just a moment but soon that smug smirk Veronica often wanted to slap-kiss off his face replaced all traces of insecurity. "Good interesting?"
"I didn't say that."

"Yeah, but you were thinking it. You're undressing me with your eyes right now. And eating potato chips to boot. Is this what you look like when you're watching porn? Eating snack foods with your pupils all dilated?"

She almost did a spit take in surprise, again almost spraying her computer with orange, sticky syrup but controlled the impulse. "I don't watch – never mind. We're talking about Italy."

"Good segue."

"Logan, are you sure about this? It's feels like it's too much."

"I think that the condition of the Christmas present contract require you accept it."

"What are you? A lawyer? And I wasn't saying no."

She'd forgotten how frustrating Logan's own brand of avoidance and circular discussions could be. She sat her plate aside and leaned forward, frowning when she realized she didn't quite know where to look.

"Do I look at you or in the camera?" she asked. Logan shrugged, and she shook her head at herself, trying to get back on track. "I know what this trip means to you but when would we even make it happen?"

"This summer. I checked your med school schedule and you have May through July, right? I need to go over there and I, I don't want –" he took a deep breath and then looked down at his bowl of soup. He ladled up a series of spoonfuls and then turned the spoon over so the meat, potatoes, and carrots dropped back into the bowl.

The repetitive action provided Veronica with a moment to observe him uninterrupted. Usually he caught her mid-stare, but perhaps the nature of talking through a computer screen made it more difficult to feel her focused appraisal.

"You'd really be okay with me coming with you?"

He nodded his head and then looked up at her. Logan opted to look straight into the camera rather than at her face on the screen. It almost felt like they were making true eye contact. "I know the schedule might be tough to work out, but, I want - I need you there. Please."

Veronica nodded and looked away. She felt bad for breaking eye contact, but that was absurd. Right? If Logan was looking at the camera he wouldn't be able to see she'd broken eye contact, but that thought was enough motivation to look back up all the same.

"Have you called Rose or James yet?" she asked.

Logan shook his head and sat up straighter in his chair. It was similar to the disinterested mask he used to slip on when around her senior year, but this was moderately different. There wasn't any coldness in his expression. Now the hard glint in his eye allowed him to appear almost business like. Professional. He was trying to apply his business acumen and problem solving to the current scenario with his mom, and it hurt to watch.

"No. I haven't. But I talked to my accountant and he said that if everything your dad found is true, then that money my mom hid away goes to me."
"Even though it's not in her name?"

"Might cause a few problems, but he thinks we can get it worked out. If I want to."

"You're still not sure?"

Logan looked away from the camera and replaced the lid to his stew. He had eaten less than half and Veronica felt a twinge of guilt. This probably wasn't what he'd anticipated talking about during their Skype lunch.

*And it started so well with all that talk of lavender and porn.*

"Not really. I mean, I have plenty to live on. Not sure I want that reminder sitting in my bank account. Probably sounds dumb."

She shook her head and instinctively reached a hand out to reassure him then remembered they weren't in the same room.

*Stupid damn computer.*

"Not dumb at all. If my mom showed up tomorrow with a wad of cash I'd have a hard time not setting it on fire to spite her."

This conversation would have been better in person. She wanted to see his facial expressions up close, thread their fingers together, and comfort the both of them with proximity.

"You'll have to talk to Rose and James eventually, you know?"

Logan sighed and leaned back from the computer. "Thanks for the unsolicited opinion. I'm well aware."

His tone was much harsher than she had grown accustomed to hearing from him these days and it caused her to physically recoil. She blinked away the resultant hurt of the sharp rebuke. In high school and college they'd said much worse things to each other, even while they were dating, and that idea sat heavy in her stomach. She could do without repeating that part of their relationship again.

"I'm sorry, Veronica. I'm – it's a lot to deal with."

She nodded but kept her gaze focused on her hands. Her jaw was clenched and she reminded herself to count to five before she said anything in reply. The smile she eventually offered him was slight and rather grim but it was also genuine.

*I don't know how to make this better for him.*

"I know," she said, and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Of course I'm going to Italy with you. You had me long before gelato."

"That sealed it, though, huh?" Logan's answering smile was tremulous. "When do you leave for Chicago, again?"

The cadence of his voice contained a second apology. The questions were almost whispered, and she chose to imagine him speaking them into the crook of her neck while they slept in the same bed rather than through the internet.

She took another breath. *Not possible.* This was the nature of long-distance and it was time to begin
the acclimation process. "Day after Christmas. Wallace and I both have flights out of LA."

Logan's incredulous expression and narrowed eyes were almost comical. Even more so when she remembered that both Wallace and her dad responded similarly to the news they were flying in and out of LA rather than San Diego. And that they were leaving so soon after Christmas. "Pour que?"

"I saved seventy dollars each way on my ticket! That's like a whole week's worth of groceries. And I have to get back to prep for the new term. Wallace agreed to keep me company."

In response to her well-thought out explanation, Logan snorted. "Seventy dollars? Your dad has and will probably spend that in gas to get you there."

"Haven't you heard? He's practically upper middle class these days. He can afford it."

"Gold digger."

Veronica shimmied her shoulders, dipping closer to the screen at each downbeat of the rhythm playing in her head. "Eighteen years, eighteen years, she got one of your kids got you for eighteen years." She brought her dancing to an abrupt halt and then shrugged her shoulders, a sheepish grin on her face. "Give or take six years in my case, I guess."

Logan's adoration for her was visible even through the pixels and stops and starts that resulted from the internet connection. He leaned forward and then sat back in his chair with a huff, blowing out a breath of air. It appeared that he too had forgotten himself and their actual distance for a moment.

The sound of her stomach grumbling was a reminder she'd barely started on her lunch. She slid the plate back in front of her and took another drink of her soda. "I will say one thing about this Skype thing," she said, injecting a disingenuous amount of pep into her voice, "good practice for long distance."

She took a large bite of her sandwich and wiped off the smear of mayo from her chin. Logan, however, wasn't eating – the cover still on the bowl of stew on his desk. He looked deep in thought and Veronica wondered whether it was a new topic troubling him or if he was still thinking about his mom. While she couldn't see from the angle of the computer, her guess was that he was drumming his fingers on the desk. Or fiddling with the Northwestern stress ball she gave him her first day back in Neptune.

That feels like it was a lot more than two weeks ago. Time flies when you're reconnecting with an ex, evading your stalker, and sorting out big life and career decisions. Maybe that's why high school is such a blur.

She took another bite of her sandwich and then held it up to the screen for Logan to see. "Hey, buddy. You asked me out to lunch but I'm the only one eating."

He reached across the desk and out of the camera's view. When he pulled back into the frame he held up an apple, 'Satisfied?' the wing of his eyebrows seemed to ask, and then took a large bite.

"I'm getting a cupcake," Veronica announced, and hopped down from the counter to get a frosted high fructose cupcake from the pantry. She almost offered to get one for Logan but stopped herself. It was mystifying why that was taking so much time to get used to. Maybe because he had been constantly buzzing around her the past few weeks? The furthest apart they'd felt while she was home was during their semi-fight in her dad's kitchen and her subsequent catharsis run on the beach the Sunday before last. Even then, though, he'd found her on the beach. Almost like it was the universe making sure there was never too much distance between them. She smacked the side of her head to
dislodge the sappy thought.

Sitting back down at the counter, she saw that Logan was still munching on his apple, staring off in the direction of the large window in his office.

"Logan?" she asked. "You okay?"

He nodded, crossed one arm over his shoulder, and tossed his apple core in the direction of the garbage can. The clang led her to believe he made it, but Logan's cringe indicated he missed. "What if-" he started and cut himself off. He cleared his throat and began again. "What if we didn't have to do the long distance thing?"

Veronica felt her heart speed up to the point she was certain it was going two times its normal pace. This was a conversation she'd wanted to avoid for several reasons. Her guess was that Logan had come to the same conclusion she had a couple days prior – that her moving back to California at this point in her career was not an option. However, she doubted he followed her along the mental path to the next logical conclusion: it made just as little sense for him to move to Chicago. If he did that he'd put his own career on hold for her.

Despite knowing it was a conversation that needed to be had, Veronica feigned confusion. "What do you mean?" she asked and took a bite of her cupcake. Her eyes darted from one side of the screen to the next. If Logan was in front of her that would have been an absolute giveaway she was avoiding him. Odds were it communicated the same motivation through Skype.

"Veronica." His voice was firm and she looked up to, as best she could, meet his eyes.

"Yeah?"

"You know what I'm getting at," he cleared his throat again; now the drumming of his fingers against the desk was pronounced enough she heard it through the computer. "There's plenty – I mean what if I got a job out there? And Casey said -"

Logan's abrupt end to the conversation made her frown, but he'd said enough for her to follow the trails of his thoughts. Just like her, this was obviously something Logan spent a good deal of time considering. Enough to research what kind of publishing jobs were available and to ask Casey for his perspective.

Fuck. I don't want to be the bad guy here.

Fuck. I'm going to be the bad guy.

When she looked back up from scraping the frosting remnants off the cardboard that came with her cupcake, Logan was staring at her. Absent was the look of uncertainty she'd seen. In the place of the tentative man she'd looked away from was one who knew exactly what he wanted.

"I want to be with you. And you're in Chicago so that's where I want to be. It's math. And probably science."

Logan's voice lilting up at the end. It wasn't a question as much as an invitation to clue him into her thought process.

Veronica indulged in another second of silent avoidance. She bit her lip and took a deep breath, sitting up straight at the counter and squaring her shoulders to face the computer directly. "I want that too, eventually, but it can't happen now, Logan. Not in Chicago."
Logan's shoulders sagged, his confidence draining from his face in an instant. "Yeah. I figured." It was as if he never expected her to actually say yes. He reached out of frame again and she heard the tinkle of metal falling on his desk.

*Likely a stack of paperclips that will now be sorted in a maudlin manner. And wait a minute, buddy. That's not fair.*

It felt as though some of Logan's nervous energy made its way through the internet connection. Her leg bounced against the stool in an erratic rhythm. "Logan." He flinched at the sound of her voice but didn't look up. This was the Logan she thought was gone.

*Guess that part of him was merely in hibernation.*

"Logan, look at me." He agreed to her request but didn't look happy about it, which only served to piss her off. She considered childishly slamming down the lid of her laptop. Instead she folded her hands tightly and held them in her lap. "I made Wallace a promise. We're roommates for another year and some change and I'm not going to forget him."

At, what she thought was a perfectly rational explanation, he seemed to relax a bit. *Good. He agrees with me.*

"I could still –"

She held up a hand to silence him. "No. You couldn't. Third year, Logan. It's beyond rough. I'll be working seventy hours a week, studying when I'm not working. It's constant. I'll barely see Wallace and that's gonna suck enough. At least he'll be in the same boat. You, though? I wouldn't be able to handle it if you left everything you have here for that."

"I'd do it."

"You want to move for me? Only to have me ignore you for a year? I love you for wanting to but I'm telling you no. I'm telling you no for you."

Her emphatic statement sat heavy between them and Veronica hated it. She knew herself well, or enough to know that if Logan did move to Chicago for her, either this next year or the following one, it'd be a disaster. She wouldn't have the time to give and he'd be cut off from everyone he cared about. On top of that, she'd be moving two years later for residency. Was he really going to pick up and move again?

As much as he might have thought he wanted to do just that, she hoped eventually he'd realize it wasn't a good idea.

Still, a part of her liked the idea of him in Chicago. Getting to meet her *three?* friends and see the world in which she currently resided. It'd be comforting.

How to do that without further aggravating her stalker was an idea to toss around later. Not while Logan was attempting to crack open all her secrets with only an intense look.

"That the truth?" he asked.

She wanted to be offended but the question had more to do with Logan's insecurity than her. "That's the truth. Believe me?"

"Yeah." He gave a slow nod and then repeated his reassurance, "Yeah." The second time was surer.
"Hey, you didn't tell me how talking to Dick went." Logan's voice was clear and he offered a little smile as he spoke. He looked like himself again.

Not an interaction I'd like to rehash. Not even something I've been able to sort out my very complicated feelings about.

She was hedging and maybe dodging the question, but she truly needed more time to think about this. Veronica saw the photographic evidence herself that Logan's support network had grown in size over the years. It wasn't a vast network of friends, but he had a group who was important to him. The idea, though, of saying anything that might cause Logan to discontinue his friendship with Dick didn't sit right with her.

In large part because she didn't want to give Dick or Logan the impression that Dick's words or actions affected her in any substantial way.

And what would that mean for Logan's relationships with Heather and Melinda?

Logan loved being a pseudo-big sister to Heather. By his own admission that relationship helped save him when he and Veronica broke up in college and now she refused to do anything to jeopardize it.

"It was okay. Back in high school Dick apparently said something dick-ish about me and el stalker hulked out and punched Dick in the jaw. Actually considering letting the guy catch up to me to thank him." It was a rather lackluster attempt to keep the mood light but it was all she could muster.

"I could do without the jokes about compromising your own safety," Logan admonished.

"That knocks out half my repertoire."

"You're a smart kid. You'll figure something out." Logan laid his forearms on his desk and leaned closer to the monitor. The background behind his desk chair was obscured so all she saw was his face. "Seriously though? It didn't seem like nothing last night."

Veronica shrugged and resumed the bounce of her leg against the frame of the barstool. "Dick isn't my favorite person, but I can deal."

"Veronica." He sounded exasperated by her continued avoidance of the subject. She should have known he wouldn't let her get away with such a simplistic explanation. She was determined, though. Not going there. No matter how many times he said her name.

"Logan. He's your friend. He's not mine." She tossed her hands out and raised her eyebrows in a gesture she hoped communicated, 'and that is that.'

"You're okay with that?" he asked, his tone laced with skepticism.

"Yes. Are you?"

"Yeah." He elongated the word so it stretched out to several syllables. While he agreed with her, Veronica wondered how long she could avoid the subject without Logan pushing her to share more. She hardened her mind against the idea in a form of preemptive stubbornness.

"Shouldn't you be getting back to work?" Veronica asked.

"Is that the official change of topic?"
"I'm just looking out for you."

"Liar." He stretched his arms out in front of him, tugging at the edge of each of his shirt sleeves. "I miss you, ya know. Which sounds stupid. But I do."

This time Veronica didn't suppress the desire to reach up to the screen. She held her hand up, watching her hand on Logan's screen until it hovered over his head and then pretended to ruffle his hair. Logan responded by batting her hand away.

"Hey, watch the hair!" he said. His protest made her simultaneously laugh and almost collapse onto the counter with the weight of missing him. It was some kind of cruel torture to be this in love with someone, exist in the same city, and be unable to see them.

"You're a dork," she said.

"I love you too," Logan said. Leave it to her boyfriend to cut right through the subtext.

Veronica had every intention of spending that night holed up in her room with her phone propped up so she could pounce the moment it alerted her to a new message. It didn't matter if it was Erin or Mac calling, she needed information from someone. But Veronica didn't think the FBI agent would take well to pestering, and Mac had stopped responding to her texts. In between phone obsessing, she planned to get ahead for the next quarter, reading several chapters in her pathology text book. A time consuming, albeit necessary, process.

Her books were spread around the floor and she had her yellow highlighter poised for action when her dad rapped his knuckles against her door and stepped into her room.

"Whoa, pops! You're supposed to wait for the 'come in.' Did years of having a teenage daughter teach you nothing?"

"Yeah. If you wait, they have time to hide stuff or change what's on their computer screen." He raised an eyebrow in a very deliberate nod to her, and Veronica beamed in response.

"I will not be slandered thus. What's up?"

"Our dinner guests are here," he said.

"We have dinner guests?"

"I mentioned it last night."

Veronica frowned at him. She was ninety percent sure he was bullshitting her, but wasn't certain enough to call him on it.

With my dad you have to be at least ninety-five percent certain.

"Wasn't my fault you were distracted and didn't pay attention to what I said. When will you learn, darling daughter, every word that comes out of my mouth is certified gold." Her dad took a moment to lean against the doorframe and scan the piles of books and notecards on her floor. "Aren't you on vacation?"

"Rest is for the weak." She held up her hands and wiggled her fingers. "Highlighting callouses. For the rough and rowdy grad school crowd." She recapped the highlighter and tossed it in the pile.

"Also, I'm waiting to hear from Mac and Erin about some things they're working on. If I don't do
something I'll go crazy."

After Mac dropped Veronica off the previous night, Veronica gave her dad a quick summary of the plan she and Logan concocted. Despite her attempt to keep discussion of the events to facts and speak without emotion her dad had wrapped her up into a considerable hug.

The night before the gesture was definitely needed, but after her talk with Logan that afternoon she felt better. Especially considering she had a plan to share that would appease both her dad and Logan's worrisome and protective nature.

He pushed away from the doorframe and held out a hand, which she took, and then pulled her up. "Well then, come eat dinner," he said and tucked her under his arm.

"Who are these guests?"

"Alicia, Wallace, and Darrell."

She extricated herself from the loose hold he had on her shoulder and gave him a slight push. "The Fennels were coming over and you didn't even tell me? For shame, daddio."

"That's why I'm here. To tell you."

She shook her head at him and walked into the kitchen. "Men, am I right?" she asked the room.

In unison Wallace and Darrell responded with, "You're right."

"These two I like. I'll keep 'em," she said with a smile, now talking to both Alicia and her dad. Veronica moved a few feet closer to Alicia and threw an arm around her shoulder. "What say we leave the men to the cooking?"

"Actually, I thought we could do the cooking this time."

Veronica frowned at Alicia's suggestion and both Wallace and Darrell laughed. Her dad, however, had the common decency to hide his grin in his sleeve. "This goes far against my feminist sensibilities."

"In the name of equality?" Alicia asked.

"What the hay. But only because it's you who asked."

Her dad, Darrell, and Wallace excused themselves to the living to play a game of Risk. Within minutes, sounds of her dad's distress were audible from the living room. If the alternative to making dinner was playing Risk, Veronica figured she'd gotten the better end of that deal. In addition, after the discussion with Logan about Lynn and the reminder of the type of mom her own had been, it was nice to be in the company of one of the good ones.

Alicia, thankfully, kept the conversation light. She broached the Skyler topic once with a casual, "Your dad mentioned that Skyler stopped by."

Since it had been in that very kitchen a few weeks prior where Veronica had sought advice from Alicia about new beginnings, and Alicia mistakenly thought Veronica was talking about Skyler, she thought she owed Alicia at least some of the truth.

She opted for a stalkerless version of the events and explained that back in Chicago someone was hassling her. Her dad thought it was Skyler and confronted him about it, which led to Skyler
showing up on their doorstep.

The crease between Alicia's eyes, which somehow gave the effect that she saw more than someone with twenty-twenty vision, informed Veronica that she knew there was more to the story.

*It was a version of the truth. Which some people would say was a growth step for me.*

Dinner was rather quick to assemble as Veronica had already filled the fridge with plenty of groceries and Alicia brought chicken to shred for tacos. Veronica's only misstep occurred when she pulled out a package of taco seasoning and Alicia waved it away. While Alicia grilled the chicken and onions in a sauce of her own making, Veronica busied herself shredding lettuce, slicing limes, and setting the table.

Once all the food was on the table, Alicia made a move into the living room to tell the guys, but Veronica reached out to stop her from leaving.

"Veronica? You okay?"

She nodded and let go of Alicia's hand. "I wanted to thank you for your advice. It was good, and I," Veronica stumbled over the words, suddenly feeling awkward and incapable of sufficiently expressing her gratitude. "It meant a lot."

Alicia knew her well enough to understand that Veronica didn't revel in the big shows of emotions. Rather than make a huge deal out of the moment, Alicia offered a nod of acknowledgment and grabbed Veronica's hand, giving it a quick squeeze. "You're welcome."

Veronica smiled, suddenly bashful in a way she hadn't felt since she was in her pre-teen years. She rolled the hem of her shirt in between her fingers and then dropped it, shaking out her hands and crossing them across her chest. "And as weird as this is going to sound," Veronica said, softening her words with a smile, "thank you for loving my dad? He's – well, just thank you."

Her dad's frustrated shout interrupted the moment. "We had an alliance, Darrell!"

"Sorry Keith. Colonialism is war!"

The look of amused disbelief on Alicia's face mirrored the one on Veronica's. Alicia looked more pleasantly entertained while Veronica rolled her eyes. "I'll go get them," she said.

"I'll get the lemonade," Alicia offered.

As she left the dining room there was a second shout from Keith in the living room. "Et tu, Wallace?"

"Dinner's ready," Veronica shouted.

Darrell came running into the dining room first and patted Veronica on the shoulder. "Your dad is mad." The amount of glee present in his voice was almost maniacal.

"Madder than a hornet," was Wallace's addition as he passed by, bumping her with his hip.

"Just you young 'ens wait. After dinner the real demonstration of power will occur."

"Sure it will, dad," Veronica said, and pressed up on her toes to kiss him on the cheek.

The condiments and food were passed around the table and soon everyone's plates were loaded with chicken tacos, rice, and chips and salsa. As they started to eat, Veronica's dad cleared his throat in the
universally acknowledged sound of an announcement being made.

"Well, kids, Alicia and I thought with Wallace and Veronica being home for the holidays –"

"'Cause there's no place like home for the holidays -" Veronica sang.

"Thank you daughter," her dad responded, a smiled tinged with indulgence on his face.

"You're welcome, father."

She looked down at her plate and shoveled some of the remaining rice on her plate into a tortilla. There was little doubt what her dad was announcing, but she wanted to let him have his moment.

"It's that," he began again, "we're getting married! That means this time next year the Mars-Fennel alliance will be legally binding."

Veronica wanted to have an appropriately significant reaction to the news, but it was kind of anti-climactic. And also a given with how much her dad and Alicia loved each other. Darrell, however, was the first to respond and didn't bother to temper his response.

"That's great, Keith. Mom. Veronica, pass the salsa."

Wallace gaped at Darrell and then chucked him across the back of his head.

"What?" Darrell asked, rubbing the sore spot. "It was obvious! I mean, they've been dating forever, and we have dinner together all the time, and they're always whispering."

"What I think Darrell is trying to say is congratulations and we're thrilled." Veronica stood up and wrapped her arms around her dad's shoulders, kissing the top of his head. "That'll do, pig, that'll do."

"When's the big day?" Wallace asked. Wallace seemed genuinely interested, and Veronica was too. Their flights back to Chicago left in few days and that meant soon they wouldn't be privy to all the details as Alicia and her dad merged lives.

Darrell, in contrast, was now helping himself to his fifth taco.

"And where's the ring?" Veronica chimed in. "Alicia, do I have to sing you 'All the Single Ladies'? There's an order to these things."

Her dad patted her on the head and Veronica frowned at the placating gesture. "We're picking it out next weekend."

"The wedding probably won't be until May," Alicia said. "We want to wait until you and Wallace are out of school for the summer."

"I approve of those answers," Veronica said. Her eyes met Alicia's across the table and Veronica beamed. There was no one who deserved happiness more than her dad and here he was, actually taking hold of it with both hands.

"Not quite the reaction your dad was looking for, huh?" Logan asked.

"Nope," she laughed. She rolled onto her side, keeping the phone up to her ear by resting it on the pillow. It was just past eight o'clock in the morning and she'd already been up for a few hours. Logan texted her right at eight to see if she was awake before he tried to call. She could hear Logan making coffee and putting around in his kitchen.
The Fennels hadn't gone home until late the night before. When they played a second round of Risk, Wallace and Veronica against the other three, she took great pleasure in sprinkling in as much trash talk as possible. The years that Veronica and Wallace had spent as roommates, strategizing about how to get the biggest bang for their light bill buck, paid off as they out maneuvered their family.

"Darrell had a point though," she continued. "I mean what were they going to do? Break up? Again? I don't think so."

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't know. The on-again off-again thing gets a little tired after a while, right? Either be together or don't." A loud yawn swallowed up the final syllable of her sentence, and she stretched out in bed, pointing her toes.

Veronica hadn't wanted to risk missing a text or phone call from Erin, so she set her alarm for five o'clock Neptune time. She was on her fourth cup of coffee and refreshing her memory on the nervous system.

_I could also say yes to a nice mid-morning nap._

She reached across her bed to grab her mug and took a large gulp before it could properly register her coffee was now cold.

_I wonder if dad would object to me just moving the coffee pot to my room whenever I'm back for visits. It would greatly impact how much I enjoyed my time in Neptune. And it's been a while since I've played the only child card. We'll see how far that one stretches now that he's soon to have two stepsons._

After a few seconds with no response from Logan she checked her phone to ensure the call didn't disconnect.

He spoke then, his tone wary. As if he was waiting for a trap to spring. "That's an interesting theory."

"What?" And then it clicked. Pure exhaustion was the only reasonable explanation for why she allowed that summary of her dad's relationship to pass her lips. She spoke it with innocent intentions but she suddenly felt like she was plonked down in the middle of a dense forest with nary a compass to guide her.

_Which way is north and how do I get out of here?_

"Logan – I was talking about my dad, and Alicia. I didn't mean anything by it."

"Noted. So when shall we schedule our next off-again phase, hmm?"

She allowed herself a moment to process his words. While on their own they indicated bitterness or trepidation at their current relationship state, Logan had spoken them with such good humor that she was a little confused.

Veronica decided to take Logan's hint and keep it light. If they needed to address the elephant-sized impending long-distance relationship negotiations now, then so be it. The first batch of them had gone well enough.

"I have plans to get out dodge in a couple days. We could call it off if you want. Give us both some space to sow our oats. Although, knowing you, you're probably all out of oats."
"We're doing whole grain innuendo now? That's what our relationship has come to?" he asked.

"That's what you've reduced me to. My mind was sharper than ever before our reunion."

"You're saying you're smarter than me?"

"I'm saying your sarcasm game is weak, Echolls. You've clearly gone soft in your old age."

Veronica's groan coincided with Logan's and she smacked a hand to her forehead, rolling her eyes at herself.

*You're not even going to try to make it difficult for him, Veronica?*

"That's not what you said –" Logan said, preemptively raising his voice in preparation of Veronica's protest.

"Okay!" she boomed. The sound of her own voice, loud in an otherwise quiet house, almost startled her. She lowered her voice and hoped she hadn't woken up her dad. "Okay. Moving on. I was thinking, actually."

"Are there any more fearsome words in the English language?" Logan asked. To his credit, he did in fact sound frightened. Given the nature of their serious conversations over the past couple days, she understood.

"Shut up. You know how we said we'd celebrate Christmas just the two of us?"

She heard Logan's deep 'hmmm,' and then he added a "Yeah" as if concerned his monosyllabic response was not sufficient. "Yeah. I recall."

"What if we scheduled that celebration sooner rather than later?"

"How much sooner are we talking about?" All fear was gone now. Instead she could hear the way he was holding himself back until he knew exactly what she was offering. It was guarded enthusiasm.

On her part, Veronica didn't understand why she was so hesitant to put the offer out there. It felt intimate to make plans like this and hope he accepted her invitation. Although she reminded herself multiple times the previous night that there'd never been a time where Logan hadn't reciprocated her affection (unless she chose to dwell on the great postcard and letter debacle of 2009 which, for the record, she did not), she was still tremulous. She sat up to pull her knees to her chest, wrapping an arm around them.

"Okay. I know you have a real big-person job and everything."

"I do."

"And that you have a life here."

"Your ability to state the obvious is unparalleled, Mars."

"Shut up. This is what one may call last minute. But I thought maybe, if you wanted to, you could come to Chicago the day after Christmas." She cleared her throat and resisted the urge to fake a reason to get off the phone. This was her boyfriend and not a complete stranger. He wouldn't leave her hanging. Right? "I am opening this up to your thoughts, questions, or queries."

"I don't know if that's a good idea, Veronica."
"Of course," she said vigorously shaking her head. "Like I said. Totally last minute. What time is your dinner tonight?"

"No. No – it's not that I don't want to. But, there's a reason we're having this conversation over the phone and not in person."

"Because as much as my dad likes you he wouldn't let you stay the night?"

"You know why."

"Oh! That." Mr. Creepy McStalksalot. The shadow I didn't ask for. "Yeah, I know. But, I have a plan."

"Tell me more."

"Does that mean you're saying yes?"

"Well you have a plan –" Logan said. She could already tell that he was attempting to play this casual but his excitement was evident. "I have a ton of vacation time, Benny owes you since he now has a dog who rules my office, and according to my preliminary search I could get a last minute ticket from L.A to Chicago leaving on December twenty-sixth for around five-hundred bucks."

"Not L.A." She'd revel in the fact that Logan was coming to visit her later, but that one rather significant detail was in need of immediate clarification. "And not Chicago. Not really."

"Wait. Why? And what?"

"We can't be seen going to the airport together or head back to my apartment at the same time."

"One of these days we'll have to discuss just why it is you're embarrassed to be seen with me," Logan sighed, and his frustration with the hoops was as apparent as hers had been. "I don't want you traveling alone."

It didn't seem the time to argue the point that given all the Homeland Security requirements that an airplane was probably one of the safest places for her. "I won't be. I've got Wallace."

"How did you manage to convince Wallace to travel the day after Christmas?"

"I had a free companion ticket. These were the only dates that worked."

"Sucks to be Wallace."

"Hey, it saved him four-hundred smackeroos. He should be thanking me."

"My girlfriend the philanthropist. She'd never dream of throwing her kind acts in the faces of those to whom she bestows her kindness." His voice carried that same appreciative lilt it did back in college whenever he found himself particularly impressed by her. She didn't hate it, nor would she mind hearing it from him more often.

*I'm an accolades junky. So sue me.*

"Never in a million years. I'm warning you, though, December in Chicago is unpleasant. Like bone chilling cold."

"I'll bring a sweater. Hell, I'll bring twelve."
Veronica grinned at the image. They'd never gone on a cold-weather trip together before. In fact, she wasn't certain she'd ever seen Logan in anything heavier than a Henley. "And Wallace is my roommate so –"

"– we'll be strategically using pillows to muffle sound. Got it."

A short bark of laughter escaped her and if her shout before didn't startle her dad, she was certain that would have. "No. Bad idea. You're going to get a hotel the first night."

"And after that where will I be?"

This was the trickier piece for her to explain and to admit. It was Christmas Eve. She left Neptune in two days and it was unlikely she was going to ID her stalker before then. She'd made a promise to Erin that if when she got back to Chicago she hadn't found the guy, she'd go to the police with whatever information she had. Logan being there would serve two functions. First, it'd ensure she had a constant companion for those days as the police investigated and she filed the report. Second, as soon as she told him she was in fact going to file a police report, he wouldn't let her renege on the deal. It was self-imposed coercion tactic and she was okay with that.

"I told my friend Erin that I'd talk to the police about my case. She said she has a contact there. That even with the tricky evidence she could probably get someone to look at it."

There wasn't any hiding it now. All that remained to be seen was how Logan would handle this bit of news. "What are the police going to find that you, your dad, and Mac haven't been able to?"

She smiled as his confidence in her. "Mac is neck deep in surveillance footage. She didn't get to start on tracing the aliases that this guy has been using. I think if the police start there, they'll figure out just how many laws the guy has broken, and –"

"—and, maybe find the alias he's using now."

"Exactly," she said.

"So where do I fit into all this?"

This was the plan she'd been working on for hours the night before. She'd examined it from every angle and couldn't find any major flaws. Hopefully Logan would be amenable to it. "You'll meet me at the police station the day after you fly into Chicago and once I file the police report, and we both give our statements, we'll leave town for a couple of days."

"Veronica –" he sighed.

"We'll be careful," she rushed to reassure him. "Beyond careful. Rent a car. Double and triple back to make sure we're not being followed. Only use cash. He won't expect me to come back to Chicago only to leave again the next day."

"It'll piss him off."

"We'll be a hundred miles away."

"If anything were to happen to you –"

"Nothing is going to happen to me," she interrupted. "Plus, you already said yes. No take backs."

Logan laughed, a warm and hearty chuckle, and that went a long way in communicating he hadn't
changed his mind. "You're sure about this?"

"Absolutely. What's that definition of insanity? Doing the same thing and expecting a different outcome? If I go back to Chicago and pretend like everything's okay, that'd make me certifiable. Pretending isn't doing anything for me."

"Okay. Let's do it."

Veronica grinned and hugged her knees closer to her chest. As much as it meant to her that he invited her to Italy, this was an even better Christmas gift.

"I think I'd like to meet this friend Erin of yours," Logan said.

"Oh really?" Veronica asked, curious what sparked that particular thought for him. "You should know she's in her mid-forties and married."

"You say that like those things are obstacles."

If he was being even a little serious there wouldn't be anything amusing about his statement. As it was she could appreciate some dark humor that touched on their less than stellar adolescent choices. Maybe. It was possible.

*On a good day when we both got out of therapy and then followed that with sex and then more therapy.*

"Hardy har. You were a manwhore. Hilarious." She stacked up her textbook and the pages of notes she was working on to set them aside. Logan was obviously in a chatty mood, she was hungry, and the Fennels were coming over for Christmas Eve brunch in less than two hours. Her window for studying was closing and she didn't feel compelled to keep it open.

"I resent the term manwhore," Logan said, his tone conversational and not the least bit affronted.

"Then you shouldn't have been one," she snapped back. "What would you prefer as an alternative? Slut? Tramp? Tart?" she asked, mostly to appease him.

"I like tart."

"Mantart it is."

"And you can be my little tartlette."

"God no," she laughed, and rolled herself off the bed.

"And we're back to the main point of all this which is that I would like to meet this Erin person."

She flipped through the hangers in her closet and groaned at the thought of having to pack everything up in the next couple days. "Again I ask why?"

"Did you in fact ask that question?"

"It was implied." Get on my level Logan. Selective telepathy. It's all the rage.

"Someone who can get you to relinquish control of a situation is someone I'd be interested in meeting. Maybe I can discuss with the city the possibility of having her likeness sculpted in bronze."

"Yeah," she said, and swallowed down her most biting comment. And then her second most biting.
"That Veronica Mars she's a real control freak. Good thing someone finally puts her in her place. Am I right?"

"You don't sound very jovial."

"Picked up on that?"

His answering laugh was hesitant. "I was joking, Veronica. It's what we do." His statement came out as more question than observation and it gave Veronica pause.

Is that what they did? Poked at one another's soft places in challenge? In high school as soon as someone's taunting revealed she still had a vulnerable place she'd work to harden it until zero vulnerabilities remained. Even quips about her mother abandoning her could be met with a sardonic smirk and a 'fuck you' stare.

"Let's back up. I didn't say anything about putting you in your place. Unless I blacked out and just don't remember." So he was going to try to adorable his way out of this?

"Don't do that." Veronica yanked a hunter green v-neck sweater from the closet and tossed it on her bed. "I want to hang up the phone right now," she said, and crossed the room to her dresser. Her next objective was to find her knee-high reindeer socks. She remembered packing several pairs of Christmas socks to wear with boots, but that was almost three weeks ago and she couldn't remember where she stored them.

"Okay."

Despite the knot of hurt and anger she was currently working to unravel, she heard the worry in Logan's voice and told herself to slow down. She tossed the socks on the bed and counted to three, letting out a steadying breath.

"But I'm not going to," she reassured him.

"Okay."

A black skirt joined her pile of clothing on the bed and she pulled her Santa hat from where it was still packed in her suitcase. She acknowledged the semi-hilarious contrast before her: assembling a Christmas cheer ensemble while fighting with her boyfriend on the phone. She paused in her determined movements long enough for her eye to catch on the postcard of Poirot still hanging on her bulletin board.

Even at the start of her pursuing medical school Logan still reminded her of the person she was. His note on the back of that postcard said he was proud of her. He didn't accuse her of running or being a coward for leaving Neptune. If she wanted to finish the med school thing he'd buy her a white coat. He just didn't want her to forget who she was before all that.

He was a good man who loved her, and who sometimes said bone-headed things. And it was Christmas. She could cut him a tinsel strand's length of slack.

"I'm not going to hang up. But maybe in the future our gaping insecurities could be hands off for fun coupley jokes."

She didn't think that what she said was all that amusing, but Logan's short burst of genuine laughter made her smile. It was, maybe, a little humorous. "Like I don't joke about your abandonment issues and in return –"
"I won't joke about your abandonment issues," Veronica said.

"Ah, honey. We have his and her abandonment issues."

"It's a modern romance."

"How are you so alert this early, by the way?"

"I've been up for hours waiting for a text from Erin. In the meantime I've been playing doctor."

"Interesting," Logan said. "Tell me more."

As a reward for having successfully navigated a bevy of relationship issues that morning, Veronica was going to let herself indulge in some sentimentality disguised as phone sex. The beep of her phone, signaling she had a text message, diverted that thought and served as a reminder of why she'd been up for the past three hours.

She let out an involuntary 'oh' at the implication of getting a text at eleven thirty in the morning eastern time. Erin didn't often work Christmas Eve, but the favor Veronica had asked for wasn't exactly for work.

"Veronica? You still there?" Logan asked.

"Yeah. Give me a sec."

She didn't wait for his reply before checking her phone. Sure enough, she had one unread text from Agent Erin Baxter.

Veronica swiped her finger across the screen to open the message and, as she did, prayed for a small number. Maybe fifteen people. Fifteen people she could easily background check before the Fennels arrived and maybe after they left.

8:21 AM – From Erin to Veronica
I emailed the list to you. We're looking at 155 names.

"Fuck me," was Veronica's immediate response. She clamped a hand over her mouth and looked up at her bedroom door, expecting to see her father's disapproving face appear.

The sound of garbled speech coming from her phone speaker reminder her Logan was still on the line.

"Veronica?" he asked. "What's going on?"

"Erin ran the numbers, Logan. There are one hundred fifty-five male undergrad or grad students at Northwestern who could be the guy."

"Fuck me," Logan exclaimed.

Veronica chuckled and flopped herself back onto her bed, covering her eyes with her hand. "My thoughts exactly." Verifying each person's identity on the list was going to take hours.

"What are you going to do?" Logan asked. Even if he didn't understand every implication of having such a long list of names, he knew this wasn't the news she'd been hoping for.

"I don't know. Start at the beginning, I guess." She rolled onto her stomach and the sound of a bell jingling alerted her she'd hit her Christmas hat.
She put it on her head, batting the bell like a disgruntled cat. "Merry Christmas to me," Veronica said.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay in posting. The holidays, am I right? Hopefully two chapters posted at once will be a nice little balm!

And, per usual, many thanks to my beta who's the bestest, scandalpants.
In moments of high stress, Veronica fixated on small and practical tasks. Which was why she opted to shower and get dressed before heading into the kitchen to talk to her dad. Since almost a full pot of coffee was already running through her veins it wasn't a necessity for her to insert her morning caffeine drip. Stat.

Oh god. Did I just think the word 'stat'?

By her count she had thirty minutes before the Fennels arrived. Knowing her dad the Christmas day activities would be constant. Brunch followed by baking cookies while watching old Claymation movies, a Risk rematch, dinner, and then A Muppet's Christmas Carol to round it all out. It felt selfish and wrong to try to take the focus off Alicia and her dad. More than that it seemed futile to spend the holidays fixated on a case when little more could be done with the information she had.

During that morning's phone call with Logan, she was at ease and almost blissful. Now, she was nearing the edge of panic.

After they hung up she called Erin to discuss the details of her email. Additional information, outside of what Erin emailed, was slim. Erin had done just as Veronica asked but wasn't able to go beyond that. Pulling a database of students from a university wouldn't raise any eyebrows, but running more than a hundred names through background check databases would raise several. Especially considering earlier that year Erin had taken time to run sketches, letters, and envelopes through databases unrelated to any open cases. Veronica rebelled against asking Erin to further compromise her career.

"I'm a big girl, Veronica. Or, a professional FBI agent. Let me deal with my supervisors."

"And let me deal with my investigation. All I need you to do is call your friend in Chicago. I'll do the rest."

"Veronica –"

"It's Christmas Eve, Erin. Get off the phone with this trouble maker you are not responsible for and go spend time with the one you birthed."

This swell of ethical behavior made her feel stalwart and strong, but it did little to bring any clarity to what her next steps should be. Was this it? Was it over?

Two weeks of investigating again and I'm already a failure.

Most of the leads were either accidental (her dad providing the magnifying glass) or discovered by someone else (Logan and the initials of the photographers). Little resulted from her prowess as an investigator. Maybe it would be best for her to let someone handle it who knew what they were doing.

As opposed to someone who's mostly self-taught, and primarily specializes in figuring out whether their classmates are getting cheated on.

Stalking, trespassing, and surveillance issues? The last two times she involved herself with crimes of
that sort her dad lost the sheriff’s election and someone almost killed her.

These days she was focused on school and thriving and her dad was working for the sheriff’s department again, but it took them five years to get back to that good place. And a rather significant course correct for both of us.

Veronica dried and curled her hair, foregoing the Santa hat. She put it back in her suitcase and glared at it. The bell gleamed in the light mocking her with its cheer. Her steps felt weighted as she walked down the hall. At the sound of her dad singing in the kitchen, she forced them to lighten and smiled.

This time he was doing his best Louis Armstrong impression as he sang along to "What a Wonderful World."

"You’re never going to convince me this is a Christmas song," she said.

He saw her and smiled, cracking another egg into the bowl. From the looks of the ingredients on the counter Christmas brunch would consist of omelets, bacon, and toast. Couldn't argue with that.

"I'm sorry Logan can't be here, honey."

"Shit. And the Fennels won’t be here for another twenty minutes which means I have plenty of time to talk about my feelings."

"Eh. I barely like the guy," she responded, trying to keep her tone upbeat.

When her dad frowned, obviously not believing her, Veronica worked extra hard to make the answering smile authentic. She needed to lighten up before she ruined Christmas for her whole family.

Alicia put a moratorium on a Risk rematch the instant she walked through the door. After brunch she further explained that the holidays were no place for world domination. Veronica and her dad, united in their mission to be as obnoxious as possible, argued that nothing was more American, and thus in the spirit of Christmas, than colonialism.

Wallace and Darrell smiled as they watched the bickering match between their mom and the Mars’. Veronica misunderstood their mirth, assuming they simply enjoyed the lively debate. Then Alicia set aside the board game without an additional word and brought out Bananagrams instead. It was apparently game, set, and match when Veronica thought their debate was just beginning.

Thankfully that moment of defeat provided a strong enough cover for Veronica to slip out of the living room and into the kitchen for a moment to herself. As much as she was trying to be present with her family, she couldn't focus.

She served herself a mug of apple cider from the crock pot set to warm and hopped up to sit on the counter. She swung her feet back and forth, hitting her heels against the front of the cupboard. The consistent thump of her heels in addition to the warmth of the mug was comforting and she let out a deep breath.

"I thought you'd be all over Bananagrams," Wallace said, walking into the kitchen. When he’d shown up wearing all grey and blue, Veronica declared his lack of Christmas spirit appalling. He was forced to wear her Santa hat and the bell that annoyed her so much before was now her favorite part of the day.

"What do you mean?" she asked. Belatedly she remembered to force her smile.
"Not many seventeen year old girls have the words persnickety and abject as part of their regular vocabulary. And I know med school has done sick things for your vocab."

He hopped up onto the counter next to her. The bell jingled and she smiled, one of her first genuine smiles since hanging up with Erin.

"Needed a breather. Someone as prone to cynicism as I am can actually overdose on holiday cheer," she said, and then leaned into Wallace to rest her head on his shoulder.

"Want to talk about it?"

She shook her head and set her mug on the countertop. "Not particularly."

"Anything I can help you with?"

"Not at the moment."

Except kind of play chaperone when I got to the police station. Which is something I have yet to mention.

She sat up straight and wrinkled her nose, uncertain how he'd react to the news. Logan and Wallace liked each other. They were friends even. However, there had never been a time when Logan as her boyfriend overlapped with Logan as Wallace's friend. Those epochs of time had the tendency to be separate and distinct.

Are we going to have to flip for him?

"What's with the face? You look like you're smelling somethin'. Somethin' bad."

"I told Logan he should visit us in Chicago."

Wallace shrugged and reached behind Veronica to grab her mug and drink the rest of her hot cider. "That's cool. I like Logan."

"He's coming in two days."

Wallace's eyes bugged out as he attempted to keep the large amount of liquid he'd gulped in his mouth. "In the future more than forty-eight hours' notice would be nice. But it's all right."

"He's going to stay at a hotel the first night."

Wallace cocked his head to the side in question. "What about after that?"

"We're going to get out of town for a couple of days."

He gasped and pressed a hand to his chest. "And you didn't invite me? I'm offended."

"Sorry, Wallace." She wasn't really. The alone time with Logan was sorely needed. But, she could at least pretend to be repentant.

He waved away her apology with a flick of his hand. "Yeah, you sound real sorry. It's cool. Some engineering buddies were thinking of going skiing over New Year's. I might go with them."

Her jaw dropped and her face twisted into an expression of mock indignation. "And when were you going to tell me about this? Stranded on New Year's Eve. The shame."
"When were you going to tell me about abandoning me for Logan?"

She felt the apples of her cheeks warm and shrugged her shoulders. The man had a small, although she'd never admit it, point.

He rolled the mug between his hands and looked down at his feet. One of the wonderful things about Wallace was that she rarely had to wonder what he was thinking. Either his facial expressions betrayed his opinions or he'd come out and share.

"How are things going?"

And here was the second best thing about Wallace. There were more than six ways to interpret that question. How were things with Logan? How were things with the investigation? How were things with being back in Neptune for the first time in two years? And he always left it open for her to decide which door she wanted to walk through.

"Okay," she shrugged. Veronica brought one knee up on the counter, hugging it to her chest. "I think I have to give up looking into the stalker thing."

"Why?"

She raised her eyebrows and waved a hand around the kitchen. The gesture brought his attention to the racks of cooling Christmas cookies, the turkey defrosting in the sink, and the chocolate advent calendar on the countertop. "Because Christmas. What am I going to do, Wallace? Say 'I know this is the first time I've been home in two years, dad, but I'm going to lock myself in my room for twelve hours to run some background checks'?"

"He'd probably let you do it."

"Yeah," she said, and she smiled slightly at the implication. Her dad loved her more than anything. If she insisted there was something she had to do, he'd agree. "But there's Mac, too."

"Mac what," he asked.

She lifted up from the counter and slipped her phone out of her skirt pocket. A quick scroll through her phone and she brought up the conversation between her and Mac.

1:10 PM – From Veronica to Mac
Am I going to be the recipient of a Christmas miracle?

1:48 PM – From Mac to Veronica
If you are, not from me. We're heading over to the grandparent's house. Mom says I need to leave the laptop at home. I can work on it tonight though.

1:50 PM – From Veronica to Mac
Honesty time?

3:15 PM – From Mac to Veronica
I'm scared. But okay.

3:22 PM – From Veronica to Mac
Honestly, waiting until tonight won't change much. Spend Christmas with your family.

3:25 PM – From Mac to Veronica
Who is this? Give Veronica back her phone!
Wallace handed the phone back to Veronica and nodded, as if the string of texts explained everything.

After her last text, Mac had followed up with a phone call wherein Veronica assured her that she was fine. More than fine, she was serious. Being friends for eight years made it so they each had a long list of tells that the other discovered. Over the phone, though, she could maintain some secrecy.

"Fourteen hours at the most."

"Until what?" Veronica asked.

"I'm plugged into the bank's ATM system. It's 4% decrypted and I have it set up at home. I should be able to check it out as soon as I get back from the grandparent's."

"That's fantastic, Mac. Really. But I'm going to be on a plane in fourteen hours." If Veronica sounded a hint annoyed, it wasn't on purpose and she didn't intend to direct those feelings at Mac. She had a terrible habit of letting her frustration in one area of her life bleed over to others – or to be directed at other people.

"I'm sorry, Veronica. I tried."

Veronica, realizing her error at once, rushed to reassure her. "Mac, no. I asked you to do something that on the best day is difficult and on a bad day is impossible."

"I'll get it."

"Please. Don't put this pressure on yourself. I never should have asked you in the first place. If I –" There were too many ways to finish that sentence, and she couldn't commit to one. "I just shouldn't have asked you. I mean it's your vacation. And Christmas."

"Veronica –"

"No. Mac. This isn't on you."

By the time they got off the phone, Mac agreed to come to Chicago for spring break and Veronica would spend two weeks of her summer in San Francisco. Since Veronica was hoping to get residency interviews at both Stanford and San Francisco University, there would hopefully other spots of designated time to see each other in the upcoming year.

Wallace looked almost impressed when he handed back her phone. "Did you mean that? You just want her to spend Christmas with her family?" he asked.

"Like eighty-five percent of it."

"What about that other fifteen?"

"See, this is why you're going to make a great engineer. You're good at the whole math thing," Veronica teased, hitting the bell that dangled from Wallace's hat. "I don't know, Wallace. I don't know if I want to go back. Even after everything, I feel safer here."

Wallace slung his arm around her shoulder and brought her closer. The proximity made it easy for
her to rest her head on his shoulder once again. "I'll be there. Logan will too. We'll get this guy," Wallace assured.

Veronica wanted to believe him, but she wasn't as certain anymore. Maybe they wouldn't. Maybe this was her life now and she was beholden to the whims and machinations of a guy who, in the words of Dick Casablancas, had a hard on for her. "Yeah," she said, because Wallace didn't need to lose any of his positive outlook on life just because she had. "Yeah, we will."

"What's Logan doing for Christmas?" Wallace asked.

She shrugged, swinging her feet back and forth. "Tonight one of his surfing buddies is hosting a game night and tomorrow he's doing the Fucked-Up Family Christmas thing."

"Ah, yes," he said and nodded in remembrance. "Sorry you can't be there."

"No big deal." It wasn't a statement she put much effort into selling.

"You and Logan? It's a good thing, right?"

Veronica looked up at Wallace and smiled, her eyes round and soft. Her life was a little complicated at that moment, but there was no doubt it was absolutely a good thing. "Yeah, it's a good thing. I think we make each other better."

"Finally," Wallace teased, bumping her shoulder.

"Veronica!" her dad's shout startled both her and Wallace. "How many n's does the word persnickety have?"

Veronica let out an offended gasped and looked at Wallace who hopped down from the counter. He was still holding her mug and without her asking he refilled it.

"You guys shouldn't spend any more time together," she said.

"Deal with it, sis. You're stuck with me for life now."

It was an unexplainable phenomenon how doing close to nothing led to utter, bone-weary exhaustion. Veronica poured herself into bed around midnight and was asleep less than five minutes later.

Christmas morning began with another phone call with Logan. Except this time, when Logan attempted to disarm her with innuendo, she was prepared.

"Check your email, Logan."

"Why?"

"Because I sent you an email."

"Let me guess," he said. She heard the startup chime of his laptop and him typing in his password. "A chain letter. If I don't forward it to twenty people I'll have bad luck for a year."

"Nope."

"Perhaps a quiz. What my favorite Christmas movie says about me?"
"Negatory."

"Christmas porn?" he sounded naively hopeful. Like a pre-pubescent boy who had yet to see a pair of breasts in real life.

At that suggestion, Veronica bit her lip, a smile teasing the corners of her mouth, and waited.

"Veronica?"

"Hmm?"

"Christmas porn?" A much huskier tone replaced the boyishly hopeful one.

*I doubt the little baby Jesus would approve of this.*

"I plead the fifth. And the sixth and the —"

Logan inhaled sharply and Veronica beamed at her ability to get him to sound like *that.* She'd double down that he just opened the picture she took the night before of her in the black lace trimmed bra and Santa hat.

"Ho, ho, ho?" she asked.

"Don't talk about my woman like that," he said. "Are there any more of these? Like could I put them in a stack and make my own nude flip book?"

"I think we'll work our way up to that."

"It's good to have goals," Logan said. "I approve of any goals that involve you in see through underwear."

"Did I mention I have that same ensemble in red?" she asked, doing her best to sound pleasantly distracted and unconcerned by that bit of news. Before Logan mustered up a properly lecherous comment, she burst out in a perky voice, "Merry Christmas, I love you!" and disconnected the call.

In a move reminiscent of freshman year of college, Veronica had orchestrated that call to avoid anything that resembled even a half serious conversation. She was out of coping mechanisms. She'd see Logan in less than forty-eight hours once he got to Chicago and they met at the police station. Two days. What was two days? No need to draw out the conversation further.

As the day wore on, Veronica's attitude internally worsened even as she put in extra effort to project enthusiasm for her family's sake.

She'd come to Neptune with two goals: 1) find closure with Logan and 2) make headway on her case. Her pursuit of both goals had taken unexpected turns. Now because of one (the stalker) she couldn't spend time enjoying the other (the non-closure that was her new relationship with Logan).

Every time her mind drifted to the list of names sitting in her inbox, a list she spent a few minutes scanning with no specific epiphanies triggered, she'd smile a little brighter. Or, if she caught herself staring out the window, trying to figure out how her stalker opened PO boxes in three different cities using her name, she'd skitter off to the kitchen for cookies and cider.

By the end of the night, besides the Italy tickets from Logan, her haul consisted of a personalized stethoscope from Wallace, an e-reader with a gift card from her dad, and a 'cookie-a-day' cookbook from Alicia.
After Christmas dinner, Keith and Veronica helped load leftovers and gifts into the Fennel's car.

"Wallace, why don't you just stay here tonight?" Veronica asked.

"I suggested that, but someone didn't pack last night." Alicia said.

"And pass up the opportunity to have you hassle me one last time before I head back? Nah." Alicia smacked him upside the back of his head and Veronica knew her well enough to interpret that as a sign of love.

Wallace got into the driver's seat as Alicia slid into the passenger's seat with Darrell in the back, complaining about not being allowed to drive home.

"Four-thirty, Fennel. You better be up."

"This is the last time I let you book the tickets, Vee. I'll pay full price if it means we never have to do the drive from LA again," Wallace said. Veronica frowned and stuck her tongue out at him as he started the car.

"I give, and I give, and –"

Her dad bumped her hip with his own and pulled her under his arm. " – and you give, and you never say one word about it."

Wallace beeped his horn once he pulled out of the driveway. Veronica and her dad waved as they drove down the street.

Veronica's plan was to be packed and in bed before midnight. It would mean only four hours of sleep but that was something she'd spent two years dealing with and her continued future as a med student.

It wasn't until after one, though, that she actually crawled into bed, willing her body to sleep and quick.

After what felt like mere minutes, a shrill tone startled Veronica awake. She woke up with that uncomfortable combination of confusion and panic. Her alarm clock said it was half past two but that didn't make any sense. She reached for her phone, awake enough to understand that if someone was calling at two in the morning it was probably important.

"Hello?" she said, sitting up and rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

After a half-second of silence, an automated message played. "Hello, and good morning from United Airlines," the woman's voice cooed. Even in her sleepy state Veronica knew that if her airline was calling at two in the morning it couldn't be good news. She grabbed a pen and pad of paper from her nightstand and turned on her side lamp. "Due to a mechanical issue with the aircraft, flight two zero two zero, direct from Los Angeles to Chicago, is cancelled. Please call one eight-hundred, five united, to reschedule your flight."

Veronica wrote down the number and listened to the message repeat to ensure she correctly understood the instructions.

She called and spoke to a woman who was surprisingly pleasant given she was probably fielding hundreds of calls from angry passengers. Despite the small pique of annoyance Veronica felt, the least she could do was be kind in return. And the lady could count on Wallace. He'd be nice too.
It took less than five minutes for the customer service agent to book her on another flight leaving from LA at two in the afternoon. Which meant she and her dad were entitled to about eight more hours of sleep. Something he needed to know immediately.

Now awake enough to take a direct route to her dad's room without bumping into anything, she knocked on his door several times and cracked it open.

"Dad?"
He grunted in response.

"Dad?"

"Hmm? Veronica? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. My flight's cancelled. They put me on a different flight so we don't have to leave here until ten-thirty."

"Okay," he said. "Need me to do anything?"

He didn't sound the least bit tired anymore, and she wondered if that was due to his cop training.

_Must be alert at all times. In fact, he'll probably be mad it took him so long to wake up._

"No, dad. Go back to sleep, okay?"

"Mmmhmm," he agreed. "You too, Veronica."

"I will."

At first she wasn't sure she would be able to. On a normal day an early morning wake-up call would just mean more hours of study time, but she was surprisingly well rested these days and her body needed the sleep. If she only had one more full week of enjoying eight hours of bliss per night, she might as well enjoy it.

That was her last cogent thought before she drifted off.

The second time her phone interrupted her sleep, she was less disoriented and significantly more pissed.

"Christ," she said, and grabbed her phone from the nightstand. When she saw it was Wallace calling her at four-forty in the morning, close to the original pick-up time they agreed upon, she swore under her breath. She suspected this call wasn't going to make anyone, least of all herself, very happy.

"Wallace, did you –"

"Where are you guys?" he asked, cutting her off. "Did you just wake up? The running through the airport thing isn't as glamorous as _Home Alone_ makes it out to be. We don't have to do it every trip."

"Wallace. Check your messages."

"What?"

"Our flight got cancelled. Something with the airplane. Give the airline a call and reschedule your flight."
"When is yours scheduled for?" he asked. His voice was low, a very direct and pronounced whisper, and Alicia's whispers were also audible in the background. Darrell was probably still asleep.

"Two o'clock today out of LA."

"Damn it," he muttered. "I'll call you right back." He hung up the phone, and she issued a warning to herself, repeating it over and again in her mind.

*Bad news, Veronica. Prepare for bad news. Bad news, Veronica. Prepare for –*

For the third time that morning her phone rang. Wallace again.

"Bad news, Veronica –"

And even though she thought she'd prepared herself for it, she wasn't any more ready for those words.

"I couldn't get on your same flight. They got me leaving out of San Diego."

She laughed outright, the sound a little hollow in her ears, and muffled it against her hand. "You expect me to believe that, Mr. Engineer? You probably snuck to LA and caused the mechanical failure."

"That's why I'm a criminal mastermind."

"What time do you leave," she asked, turning off the light and already settling back under the covers.

"Three-thirty."

"That's the same flight as Logan. At least you guys can carpool to the airport," she said. Really she was just glad that the two of them were arriving in Chicago at the same time, and only two hours after she was. In fact, if she waited for them at the airport the three of them could share a cab and drop Logan off at his hotel first. Stalker pandering be damned.

"I'm sorry, Vee."

"Don't worry about it, Wallace. I should have called to make sure you got the message. I'll call Logan and tell him. Go back to sleep, okay?"

Veronica didn't have it in her to make another phone call. Logan would wake her up even more with his panic that she was travelling on her own and she couldn't handle it so early in the morning. Besides, she wouldn't leave the airport without her guys. Instead she opted for a text message. She started to drift off to sleep even as she typed.

4:50 AM – From Veronica to Logan
*Flight cancelled. Still at home. New flight 2pm, LA. Wallace on your flight now.*

She just wanted a longer stretch of uninterrupted sleep. She reset her alarm for nine-thirty, silenced her phone, and fell back against her pillow, throwing the covers over her head.

It was no great surprise to her that she didn't sleep all the way until nine-thirty. Waking up at eight in the morning, though, meant she almost had seven hours of sleep. If you didn't include the wake up calls from the airline and Wallace.

There was also the third wake up that resulted from a nightmare.
Nightmares in some form had been a part of her life since she was sixteen and they'd made another unwelcome appearance the previous night.

Crashing airplanes (always unpleasant) and sad eyes from people whose faces she couldn't make out. In one dream someone followed her but every time she turned around the person morphed into someone else. First it was Duncan. Then Piz, followed by Jared, her boyfriend from UCLA, and Griffith, the art student she'd mentioned to Logan. Logan and Skyler were both missing; it didn't take a masters in psychology to understand the link.

She was having nightmares concerning the 'nice guys' that she'd dated. Even if in retrospect that title didn't apply to all of them, in the moment that was one of their most appealing characteristics.

*Come on, subconscious. Who are you pointing me to? Which nice guy am I leaving out and what does this mean?*

Maybe she was wrong. She'd been working off the assumption the stalker was a stranger to her. Erin and her dad had encouraged her to keep an open mind and she'd blown them off.

She sighed as she got out of bed. At the very least she had a four hour flight in which to mull the thoughts over.

Also unsurprising were the three text messages and two missed calls from Logan.

His protective nature was one of her favorite things about him, but she couldn't appreciate that part of him without coffee.

When she walked into kitchen, her hair smoothed out into some semblance of order and Logan's sweatshirt pulled over her pajama tank, her dad was already on the phone. His reassuring tone made her tilt her head in question.

He mouthed 'Logan' to her and she widened her eyes, shaking her head with a smile.

"Actually, she just woke up."

Veronica held up a single finger in the air, asking her dad for a minute until she made herself a cup of coffee.

She listened to their pleasant back and forth for a few minutes as she sipped on her coffee and pulled out some leftovers to make a turkey sandwich for breakfast. At her dad's look she offered him a bite, but he shook his head and handed her the phone.

"Good morning, sunshine," she chirped.

"You know, some people might interpret silencing your phone as avoidant behavior."

"Are you one of those people?" she asked. Her mouth was full of turkey so it came out less clear than she'd intended.

Logan laughed and she imagined him shaking his head at her. "Perhaps. Those people might also see you eating breakfast as we're on the phone continued avoidance."

"Logan, I'll be fine. My flight gets into Chicago at nine. Yours gets in, I'm guessing, around ten-thirty. I'll be at the gate when you guys get off the plane."

She expected to hear a sigh of resignation, or even of frustration, but Logan laughed again. She
pulled back from the phone and frowned at it. *Not the reaction I was expecting.*

"Your dad explained all of this to me."

"Oh," she said. "I guess you have no use for me now, do you?"

"Actually, my primary reason for calling was in the hopes of getting some post-Christmas porn."

"Logan," she warned. She turned away from her dad, who was reading the newspaper with a far too casual expression on his face for her liking. The last thing she needed was her dad seeing her blush while on the phone. "My dad is in the kitchen."

"Say hi to him for me," Logan said cheerfully.

*I'm going to kill him.*

"Is the only reason you called this morning to give me a hard time?"

"I want to give you a hard something."

She pressed a hand to her cheek and shook her head. "Stop," she whispered.

"Also, I wanted to casually mention that I got Wallace upgraded to first class. The perks of flying out of San Diego."

That wasn't what she expected. "I hate you."

She leaned back against the sink and caught her dad's quick roll of his eyes. 'I'm sorry' she mouthed but the pleased smile she wore on her face probably didn't sell that apology. Her dad grabbed his coffee and his paper and left the kitchen in the direction of the living room.

"Oh. You love me? How much do you love me?" Logan asked.

She could imagine him propped up against his bedroom doorframe, picking at the molding as he did that wrinkly forehead and puppy dog eyes combo.

*Adorable little shit.*

She held her mug up to her cheek and smiled into her hand. Her cheeks burned redder now, but she didn't think this time it had anything to do with embarrassment. She'd go around in circles with Logan on the phone every day if it always made her feel like this.

"Logan, do you have any push pins or sewing needles nearby?"

"Curious question, but I'll bite. Why?"

"Because your ego has swollen again. You need to drain it and put on some antiseptic cream to prevent infection." Okay. It wasn't her best comeback or her most clever, but it got the point across well enough. Sometimes a retort, no matter how pathetic, was better than no retort at all. *Or something.*

"Thank you, Dr. Mars. Can I tell you about the other parts of my body that are swollen?"

*Point Echolls.*

"Oh god, Logan. What is wrong with you?"
"I told you. I have a swelling problem."

"In your brain, clearly." She attempted to sound stern, but her voice cracked in laughter on the final word.

"I've missed you the past couple days. Why did we agree to this stupid plan?" Logan asked.

She opened the fridge, searching for a piece of something sweet to go along with her turkey sandwich. Despite the fact that he wasn't there to see her, she shrugged her shoulders in response to his question. "Your stupid idea. Never forget."

"And if I ever do, you'll always remind me."

"You're the one who said I'm philanthropic, remember?"

"Charlatan is more like it," he mumbled.

"How was FFC?" Her family was experiencing a significant downturn in fucked-up-ness but, it still stung that she wasn't able to share that tradition with him.

"It was good," he said.

She waited for him to continue his explanation and then chuckled when he didn't offer any. "Well, that's vague."

"If I get specific I'll say something embarrassing like 'it wasn't the same without you.'"

She sat the apple pie she pulled from the fridge on the counter and grinned. The sentiment was a little predictable, but that didn't prevent her from grinning. "You're kind of cute when you're embarrassed."

"And you're kind of cute when you're jealous."

She didn't respond, just allowed the expectant pause to linger between them.

"Fine," he sighed. "People came over. We ate a lot of food. Heather asked where you were approximately twelve times."

"And…?" Veronica asked. She was kidding, a little, but she wanted to hear him say it.

"And I missed you. Then I got sad, because I missed you. Then I got angry, because some asshole is the reason I missed you. Then I got sad again."

His words tugged at her emotions in a way that was new but not wholly unfamiliar. The missing him wasn't going to get better in Chicago, but his presence there would postpone it for a week or two longer.

"Oh!" he said, in a much perkier voice that almost startled her. "Melinda and Heather bought me a new surf watch. That was cool."

She laughed at his delight but she was also so thankful. Thankful that Logan had people, aside from her, who knew and loved him. Who would invite him over for dinner and games, and with whom he felt safe enough to say yes.

"Your fan club has grown and knows you well."
Veronica removed a knife from the butcher block and cut herself a piece of pie. Her concentration on the task made it so she took far longer than usual to notice Logan fall silent. She popped the apple pie into the microwave and set the timer.

"Logan?" she asked and cradled the phone between her chin and shoulder. "Everything okay?"

"You'll wait at the gate?" he asked, his voice just a touch tremulous.

"Yes," she said, not hesitating to reassure him. "I'll wait at the gate."

Chapter End Notes

Chapters 23, 24, and 25 have all been first-drafted but have some MAJOR revision work to do. I'm hoping to have them all posted by the end of the month. Thanks for your support and encouragement as I get this thing written!

And always big time thank yous to my beta, scandalpants.
Defining Risk

Chapter Notes

Previously: Veronica and her dad prepare Christmas Eve breakfast and celebrate with the Fennels. That evening Veronica and Wallace have a best-friend chat where she confides she needs to give up on the investigation. She leaves Neptune in two days and she has a list of names of potential suspects but no time to background check all of them. On Christmas day Veronica and Logan celebrate with a pseudo sexy phone call and that evening she reminds Wallace to be up bright and early so they can head to LAX. Early in the morning Veronica receives an automated call that due to a mechanical issue her flight's cancelled. She calls the airline right away and reschedules her flight for that afternoon. Wallace calls and tells her the airline couldn't get him on the same flight as Veronica. Now he's flying out of San Diego on the same flight as Logan which gets into Chicago about an hour after hers. As she and her dad have breakfast, she talks to Logan on the phone again. He expresses his excitement to be with her in Chicago but also his concern that she's going to be travelling alone. She promises him that she'll wait at Wallace and Logan's gate for their flight to arrive. Also, they are squishy and adorable.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For Veronica the extra hours in the morning with her dad and the one-on-one time during the drive to LA were an unexpected bonus. While she empirically knew they'd spent a good amount of time together, it didn't feel like enough.

That feeling only reinforced her commitment to return to California for her medical residency. She liked seeing her dad in his house with Alicia; and she didn't want to give that up for another four years.

Despite her protests at the airport, her dad insisted on parking the car and walking her to security. "Be safe, kiddo," he said. When he said goodbye he squeezed her much tighter than he had in a long while.

"On my way into Neptune you lied to TSA agents. Now you're dropping me off like a puppy at the pound?"

"You call me when you land. You call me when you talk to the police. After you fill out the report, when –"

"I got it dad," she said, squeezing him back almost as tight. "I'll call you."

The return flight would be significantly less pleasant without Wallace there to keep her entertained.

Her seating assignment was in the far back of the plane. She was one of the first to board after families, military personnel, first class, and the several rewards groups granted priority boarding. By the time she got on the plane a several first class passengers were already securely settled in their seats. One passenger had a sleep mask over her face in anticipation of takeoff. A number of seats remained vacant, likely to be filled last minute by business travelers who didn't arrive one minute earlier than necessary. The ample amount of legroom and proximity to the front of the plane made Veronica envious.
How is any of this fair? Wallace gets first class when I was the responsible one who answered my phone. The lucky bastard.

Once she stored her carry on Veronica pulled out her new e-reader, a stack of articles she had to prep for her upcoming pathology section, and her cell phone. Her new seating assignment for this flight was mercifully on the aisle. She felt sorry for the poor sucker beside her in the middle seat: a thin woman in her mid-fifties with startling thick salt and pepper hair that fell just below her chin.

"Nancy," the woman introduced herself and offered Veronica a perfunctory wave.

Veronica hesitated and opted against introducing herself with her real name. Call me paranoid. Until she filed her police report and they arraigned her stalker everyone was a suspect. Veronica gave a nod in response. "Amber." She preemptively cut off any further discussion by turning her attention to the first article on her lap.

That only held her attention for so long. When Veronica pulled out her phone and flipped through text messages, her seatmate grimaced.

She understood the reaction, having plenty of experience with being caught on the L and public transportation next to a loud cell phone talker. Mac's string of texts began at eleven that morning and Veronica laughed as she received another.

Enough, Mac. I get it, you're sorry –

She opened their text string and read the most recent text first.

1:38 PM – From Mac to Veronica

WHY AREN'T YOU CALLING ME?!

Rather than spend her time sorting through past messages to determine what had Mac all-caps texting, Veronica opted to call. As the phone rang she offered her seatmate what she hoped passed for an apologetic look.

Mac answered after the first ring, her voice high and semi-panicked. "Where have you been?"

Veronica frowned and consciously worked to keep her voice down as she replied. "I've been with my dad. The airline cancelled my first flight but I'm on the plane now," she shook her head, getting herself back on track. "What's going on?"

"I got it."

"What?!" Veronica's voice was sharp and almost as high as Mac's had been. Several people turned to look at her. Veronica cupped her hand around the receiver and lowered her voice. There was little doubt as to what Mac was referring.

"I stayed up all night but I got through. I need to filter the results which will take another couple hours –" Mac sounded breathless and, understandably, delirious with exhaustion. "But, I got it."

"How many pictures were there?"

"A little over two-hundred. I expanded the search, though."

"What do you mean?"

"The only tricky feed to get into was the ATM right beside the coffee shop. Both the boutique you
mentioned and a parking lot on the opposite corner had CCTV feeds that were a breeze to access. I tossed those in for good measure."

"For good measure?" Veronica asked. A small smile of relief quirked the corner of her mouth and she closed her eyes. She hit her head back against the headrest several times in quick succession. There was no way to know, once they filtered for assumed age and gender, how many photos would remain. Hopefully the results compared to the names list Erin gave would provide a positive ID. "Mac. God, I don't know what to say. Just, thank you."

"I'll email the files to you. They'll be there when you land."

"What are you talking about? In-flight wifi baby." Because there was absolutely no way she'd be able to wait the four and a half hours of the flight, another in the airport, and the ride home to take a look at those pictures.

"Good luck," Mac grunted. Whether that was a dig at the airplane's wifi or the task Veronica had before her, she wasn't certain. "I'm sorry that –"

"Mac, you've done – I don't even -. But, thank you."

"Call me as soon as you know something?" Mac asked.

"As soon as I land. When they're ready email the photos to my dad. And Logan. Okay?"

"I will. Be safe."

The call disconnected and Veronica checked the time. The flight was scheduled to take off in three minutes so Veronica powered down her phone. Nancy no longer looked upset but was unabashedly curious.

*Note to self: angle the computer monitor away from this one.*

The forty-five minute wait for the all-clear to use electronics would be torture and she couldn't entertain the thought that the airplane wifi wasn't working. She signaled the flight attendant and almost threw herself at him when he paused at her seat.

"Yes miss?"

"The wifi. As far as you know is it working?"

"The last we checked but that is subject to change. If you ask -"

Veronica nodded along, but stopped listening after 'the last we checked'.

*I'll be more patient once I get this stalker off my ass and out of my life.*

If her seat neighbor thought sitting next to someone on the phone was unpleasant, she was about to assign a whole new word to Veronica on the trip. Veronica's knee bounced in an erratic rhythm and she had to take a series of deep measured breaths to calm her heartbeat.

The tricky thing was going to be figuring out how to occupy herself as the flight attendants went through their safety demonstration and prepared the cabin for takeoff. She had a stack of articles that absolutely would not be read, a hardcopy book that would stay in her messenger bag and a computer poised to be turned on. Once she was granted permission to get online Veronica intended to hit 'refresh' on her email until the message from Mac came through.
Until that time, she occupied herself by studying her cuticles and kneading her hands together. *Patience, patience, patience,* she internally chanted. While she kept telling herself that she’d been working towards this for years and another thirty-five minutes wouldn’t kill her, her brain wouldn’t pause.

In the absence of a task to work on, she kept going over her nightmare from the night before. She picked apart every element until she doubted her memory. Veronica wished she was on the ground and able to call her dad and inform him Mac’s email was coming. At the moment, though, he was still driving back to Neptune. If she remembered correctly he, Alicia, and Darrell were planning to coast through some after-Christmas sales in pursuit of a new television. Logan and Wallace were likely at the airport, gorging themselves on pre-flight burgers and fries. Her family was together but in pockets while she was on the plane by herself.

Once she landed in Chicago, Logan and Wallace by her side, she’d storm the police station and provide them with an odd attaché of evidence: illegally obtained surveillance photos, a list of suspects that would require hours of background work, and a couple dozen hunches. With the only proven crime a break-in to Logan’s property in a different state, Veronica didn’t know who Erin was trying to kid.

*Yeah. That'll show 'em all. No one will laugh us out of the police station.*

Unless Erin was a miracle worker and her contact was committed to hearing Veronica’s side of the story. And even if the contact wasn’t, being laughed out of a police station was something the late Sheriff Lamb uniquely prepared her for.

The pilot announced they reached cruising altitude and the rush of people throughout the cabin turning on their electronics was almost comical.

She logged into her laptop and pulled out her credit card, more than willing to pay twice the rate for wifi as long as it was quick. There was no email from Mac which was disappointing but not surprising. According to Mac’s estimate, Veronica had another hour to wait.

Veronica’s seat mate was now wearing earplugs in an attempt to block out her nervous maneuvering. There were no more curious glances from Nancy. The persona of an anxious flyer was one Veronica was happy to take on if it meant she had relative privacy.

Veronica rallied her attention long enough to begin reading one of the articles, a study by a doctor at the University of Washington. At the end of each line she read, she refreshed her inbox. Each time she highlighted a concept or scribbled a note, she refreshed her inbox.

She knew quite a bit about Seattle, in large part because Wallace dropped not so subtle hints about her joining him on the west coast. The city boasted one of the premiere and most competitive residency programs in the country. She was almost certain that half of her classmates, and all of those specializing in oncology or pediatrics, were planning to rank UW high on their residency match list. The competitive side of Veronica wanted to throw her name in just to see if she would match, but the risks behind that were too great. Namely, *what would happen if they matched me there?* Veronica finished the article, hit refresh, returned it to her bag, then spent some time re-sorting the list of residency programs she planned on applying to. While that process was still a year away, it never was far from her thoughts.

As she worked, Veronica had her inbox open in a separate tab on her screen and she kept one eye trained on the display. When the text on the tab changed from ‘inbox’ to ‘inbox-(1)’ Veronica pounced, accidentally startling Nancy beside her.
Mac uploaded the images, a little over one hundred of them once she filtered the results, into an online site that required a password. It must have pained her to do so, but Mac included the username and password to access the files in a separate email. Mac’s email also explained that there were sometimes multiple photos of the same person because the surveillance camera caught them at multiple angles. Rather than pick the clearest image, Mac opted to send them all.

This is sending her security protocol sensibilities into a frenzy, I’m guessing.

Her dad and Logan were cc’d on both emails. Though Mac sent the email to her dad’s personal account, Veronica knew he had his personal email forward to his work account and synced his work account to his phone. With any luck he’d be accessing the information right about the same time she was. Logan and Wallace were likely boarding the airplane and were about an hour away from reaching their cruising altitude.

She dashed off a quick reply email that used an excessive amount of exclamation points and reaffirmed she’d call once she looked through all the photos. She also told Mac to shut down her computer and take a very long and much deserved three day long nap.

Veronica resisted the urge to rush her way through the images. She had ample time before the cabin would be prepared for landing so closely examined each one. After each photo, Veronica made a series of notes about the potential suspect. She entered any distinguishing marks or characteristics into a spreadsheet and then formatted the data as a sortable table.

Being in grad school has even made me a more efficient snoop. Not sure that’s what Dr. Jeffers meant by the medical field touching all of our lives on a daily basis.

She thumped her own forehead as a reminder to resume focusing on the images in front of her. She was in medical school and not a full time PI. That was the choice she made. The medical field would not continue to touch her life in this way.

In the meantime, though, she tightened her imaginary PI hat and continued to catalog the photos Mac uploaded.

She assigned each person a number and planned to cross-reference those photos to DMV and school ID records once she had access to her PI database again.

**Person thirty-four. Mole at his right temple. Person thirty-five. Cleft in his chin and brown buzz cut.**

She knew person forty-three, or vaguely did. An international student from Korea who was in Wallace’s engineering class at Northwestern. They’d met at a post-finals dinner celebration that Wallace invited her to the previous spring.

**Person forty-three. Shure forget last name.**

She took a break from her work to accept a beverage from the flight attendant. When she turned back to her computer she had a new email from her dad.

*Mac sent me the files, he explained. I’m cross-checking them now against the list Agent Baxter sent you and will let you know if I find anything. I’m glad you told Mac to send them to your Chicago team.*

Veronica smiled, understanding the unspoken meaning behind her dad’s words. He wanted to be in Chicago with her but post-holidays were a busy time at Mars Investigations. She clicked back to the images, more than two-thirds through the slideshow, and almost upended her drink as she got to image seventy-three, the sixty-sixth suspect.
Person sixty-six. Long brown hair, puppy dog eyes, pediatric student and a Veronica Mars certified nice guy.

"Fuck me," Veronica muttered. She'd have to thank Logan later for allowing her to steal one of his most colorful conversational phrases. The look on Nancy's face communicated that the older woman had much less appreciation for the phrase than Veronica did.

"Sorry," Veronica said, not even attempting to sound contrite. "I rescind my offer. I have a boyfriend."

Veronica opened a new email to her dad. The subject line was "Image 73."

She saved the image to her desktop and then attached it to the email, drafting a quick message to point her dad in the right direction. There was little Logan and Wallace could do from the sky, but she cc'd Logan on the email to prep them both.

Fuck nice guys.

The thought was on repeat as she opened the list of suspect names Erin sent and confirmed her suspicions.

Fuck them all.

4:40 PM, Pacific Standard Time – Direct flight from San Diego to Chicago – 3 hr 5 min to landing

"Hmm," Logan mused. He had more unread messages in his inbox than he anticipated. An unexpected trip right around the holidays left some work tasks at loose ends that he could hammer through in the four hour flight. His eyes went first, though, not to the email marked 'high importance' from Benny, but to one from Mac and another from Keith Mars.

"What was that?" Wallace asked as he leaned over to take a look at Logan's inbox. He removed his earbuds and stared at Logan's screen. "What's going on?"

"Back up, nosy." Logan pushed his face away. "And nothing's wrong. Just got emails from Mac and Mr. Mars."

"About what?" Wallace asked.

Logan quirked an eyebrow and wagged a finger in censure, chastising Wallace again for being nosy.

"Yeah, I know," Wallace said and rolled his eyes. "I'm prying. But, I don't particularly care. What did Keith and Mac say?"

"Keith? Shouldn't you be calling him daddy," Logan asked and then clicked on the aforementioned email.

"Shouldn't you?"

For a moment Logan wanted to interrogate Wallace and ask him what he meant by that. Was it a poorly phrased retort or had Veronica mentioned something to Wallace about one day getting married?

He still needed to have a long conversation with his inner romantic. Get that side of himself to shut up before he spent a full day in Chicago shopping for an engagement ring he attempted to play off as a casual symbol of – shrug – whatever.
"Despite what you might think, Wallace, Veronica and I aren't into the kinky stuff."

"Gross, man," Wallace said. His curled lip and narrowed eyes told Logan just how unwelcome that particular mention was. Logan heard the downbeat of the song Wallace listened to as he put in his earbuds and turned up the iPod.

The email from Mac was sent to Keith as well. The email from Keith had the subject line 'Surveillance.' At first Logan assumed it was on behalf of the Balboa County Sheriff's department. Some less than helpful information about the break-in on his property but the short explanation corrected that belief.

Logan,

As you know there is a chance, albeit a slight one, that surveillance in Chicago caught Veronica's stalker on camera. Mac narrowed down the suspects (you were cc'd on that email). You and Wallace should take some time and look through what Mac found.

Make sure Veronica calls me after the trip to the police station. I'm not talking three hours later and once she's processed everything. I mean right after.

Keith

Logan dashed off a quick email to Veronica thanking her for including him in these next steps, 'The couple who sleuths together stays together?' He then opened the link to the file sharing site and entered the password Mac told him to use. A quick glance at Wallace showed him to be in his own world, reading a book as the beat from his music continued unabated.

"Wallace," he said, but there was no response. Logan tried again a few times, raising his voice each time. When it became clear that Wallace was oblivious, Logan opted for quick decisive action and removed one of Wallace's earbuds.

"Whoa! Boundaries man," Wallace said and backed further into the corner between the edge of his seat and the window.

"Keith needs us to look at something," Logan said and gestured to the screen.

Wallace smiled and shook his head, directing his attention to the computer screen.

"What?" Logan asked.

"You called him Keith. What happened to Mr. Mars?"

Logan opened his mouth as if to explain, but then clamped it shut, not quite knowing what to say. It wasn't something he consciously said but Logan's place in the Mars family dynamic felt less tenuous. It didn't feel like he was one misstep away from having that family taken from him. Even if it wasn't his family, exactly, he'd gotten a little more comfortable over the past couple of weeks. Still, maybe that ease was too presumptuous of a step to make?

"Mr. Mars," Logan said, aiming a pointed glance at Wallace, "wants us to take a look at these pictures."

"What are they of?" Wallace removed the other earbud and wrapped the headphones around his iPod, storing it away in his carryon.

"There's a chance that the guy following Veronica was at the coffee shop she went to a couple days
before she left for Neptune. And I guess there were a few surveillance cameras nearby Mac hacked into."

"Both of those girls are scary as hell."

"Awww," Logan teased and tweaked Wallace's cheek. "Does someone have a little crush on Macky?"

Wallace smacked his hand away and glared. "Believe it or not, you can be friends with a girl with our trying to nail her."

"I've heard of such things."

There were more than a hundred images to look at and a quarter of the way through Logan was unclear what Veronica and Keith thought he and Wallace could contribute. It wasn't like Logan had ever been to Chicago or like Wallace would be able to place a hundred different people in the greater Chicago metropolitan area.

He flicked through a few additional photos and was about to suggest they take a break when he decided he was taking entirely the wrong approach. Rather than approach the task like Veronica and Keith would, he called on his career training and looked at each photo as if they were clues planted in a novel.

Each individual became a character and with Wallace's help they eliminated several individuals from the suspect pool. One man held a bouquet as well as a bottle of wine. It was apparent his destination was not a coffee shop. Logan also eliminated anyone below an obvious five foot ten.

They ruled out a dozen others whose appearance was distinct enough that they would have drawn attention to themselves.

Still, their list was vast with more than fifty separate individuals that were possibilities, and they weren't even three quarters of the way through the slideshow.

"I forgot how dull this investigating stuff is," Wallace said.

"You don't help Veronica with her cases in Chicago?"

"No need. It's basic stuff she can usually get done in a hour or two."

Logan nodded, remembering more than a few nights where the two of them sat in her Le Baron or Saturn for hours without much to do or see. Each time he tagged along, Logan committed himself to getting Veronica to make out with him and each time Veronica pretended to be unamused.

_It was the best of times it was the – nope, scratch that – pretty much just the best of times._

The flight attendant did her final pass through the first class cabin for additional drink orders. Logan shook his head, focusing on the images, but Wallace asked for another beer. For someone who claimed to have never been in first class Wallace was adapting admirably.

The next picture was of a guy about six feet tall, dark floppy hair, half of which was hanging in his eyes. According to the caption on the photo it was from the ATM camera. The next photo came from an external surveillance camera by the boutique and showed him turning to head into the coffee shop.

"Something interesting?" Wallace asked. He flipped out his tray table and set the beer down.
Although Logan shook his head, this guy has Piznarski hair circa 2006, he angled the computer for Wallace to take a look. He opened one of the other images in a new window and then resized both of them to be seen side-by-side.

Wallace frowned at the photos and reached out for the laptop. A comment about Wallace keeping his grabby hands to his own property was at the tip of Logan's tongue but he refrained. He saw Wallace puzzling through something and so waited.

Wallace's eyes narrowed and he tilted his head at the image, almost as if trying it from a different angle. When it appeared he was going to speak and offer an opinion, Wallace instead shook his head and looked out the window. He moved his lips in a silent mumble and Logan wasn't certain if Wallace was talking himself into or out of a conclusion.

In the next second Wallace became a man possessed with a singular directive. He zoomed in on the photo and pointed to the face of the guy with the floppy hair, gesturing emphatically. Wallace leaned closer to Logan and did a cursory glance around the cabin. Logan followed Wallace's example and did the same

"I know this dude," Wallace insisted. "Met him once at a med school thing."

Logan took the laptop back from Wallace and brought the image closer to his face.

This guy? Really?

"He's a med student?" Logan asked. "You mean - this guy has been around her?"

"I think so."

"You think?"

"It was a mixer. Veronica didn't want to go but I insisted. I went with her, met a few people, including this guy. I didn't – he was normal and everything – Veronica barely knew him."

"What's his name?" Logan asked.

There was a sharp edge to the worry gnawing at Logan because this guy hadn't kept his distance like they all assumed. If Wallace was right, and if there was a chance that this was the man obsessed with Veronica, then her profile of him was more than a little off.

This meant they had all underestimated the guy and none of them knew what his next move would be.

Seventeen days earlier

Veronica stopped walking and turned to look at her fellow classmate. A classmate apparently waiting outside their ethics classroom for her to complete her exam. "Devon, didn't you turn in your exam 20 minutes ago? Were you waiting for me?"

Stupid question, Veronica. He was obviously waiting for you.

Her straightforward question clearly surprised him. "Yeah, I just, um – I just wanted to make sure to wish you a Merry Christmas."

"Well, Merry Christmas to you, too." Knowing that Devon did not want to simply wish her a Merry Christmas but having no desire to hear his actual reason, Veronica turned away quickly. She cursed
her twenty-eight inch inseam for the way it prevented her from taking long strides down the hall.

*Three…two…one.*

Veronica heard the footsteps and groaned inwardly as Devon ran ahead to stop her from walking any further down the hall.

"I also wanted to ask you if you wanted to go and get a cup of coffee, now that we're both done with finals." He looked down at her hopefully.

*Shit, not again. What am I? The cuddly boy version of cat-nip?*

Veronica was just thankful she actually had somewhere to be and didn't have to lie to this soft and friendly boy. Her medical school class' equivalent of Winnie the Pooh. If Winnie the Pooh was 5'11", had hazel green eyes, and dark hair. "Thanks for the invite, Devon, but I'm helping a friend with a project."

"You don't have an hour for coffee?"

"My flight leaves early tomorrow, so I don't." Totally content to leave it there, but unable to be the source of Pooh's misery, she threw him a bone. *More like a pot of honey.* "But, maybe when I get back?"

Devon knew it was a pity offer, and simply put his hands in the front pockets of his jeans, nodded his head once and said, "Of course. Yeah. Sounds great."

"Merry Christmas."

"You too, Veronica." Giving her a small wave he headed back down the hallway as Veronica looked after him.

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*4:40 PM, Pacific Standard Time – Direct flight from Los Angeles to Chicago – 1 hr 35 min to landing*

"Devon," she whispered to herself and focused on the list of names from Erin. There he was; his name on page four of the Northwestern student list.

*Jeremiah Devon Kent. JDK.*

In her year and a half at Northwestern she'd spoken to Devon no more than five times. He was at a study group once, there was that awkward as hell mixer event Wallace made her attend, and then a few times coming and going from class. She never took the time to learn his last name.

The amount of margin in her life for the people she loved was paltry enough let alone her classmates. Once she started dating Skyler that margin of time shrunk even more. People called her antisocial but it didn't bother her. The moniker of 'antisocial' was far from her worst nickname.

Now she saw that her pattern of isolation had left her vulnerable and weak. Again she'd overlooked the devil she did know in the false belief that the bigger bad was out there.

She based much of her stalker profile on the idea he'd purposefully kept himself away from her. However it looked like Chicago was, for some reason, the place where Devon decided he would make his grand gesture. And hadn't he asked her out the day of her last final? The one for ethics?

*Was that his big move? Did he think I wanted him?*
Veronica searched her memory of that day. What would possess him to finally -? She stopped the question mid-thought, remembering what Agent Baxter suggested. Erin had posited that Veronica's conversation with Joanna in the coffee shop was the catalyst for her stalker's, Devon's, erratic behavior. Veronica's insistence in that meeting that she was over Logan, finally, and was returning to Neptune to close all doors to that relationship sounded like an invitation to an unstable man.

That was the day her stalker sent the package to Neptune with the message that broke his pattern, reaffirming his devotion for her.

She clicked over to her email and breathed out a tiny exhale when she saw Logan was online though idle. They were hundreds of miles from one another in separate planes but it still provided some comfort.

**Me: You there?**

She stared at the yellow dot beside his name, willing it to turn green. After three minutes of staring and writing then deleting follow up messages yielded no response, she gave up. Veronica opened a new window to compose an email to her dad, Erin, and Logan, taking deep measured breaths. Her clothes felt too tight and the recycled air through the cabin of the plane seemed insufficient.

*Dear Team Mars,*

*Great day to travel, don't ya think? In other news, I know what happened –*

Veronica spent the next forty-five minutes typing out her best approximation of the sequence of events over the years.

She maintained it all started to unravel the day she met Joanna for coffee. Devon must have sat in the coffee shop and eavesdropped. Maybe he went there looking for her. Maybe it was coincidence. Either way, he overheard their pre-Christmas break conversation about Logan and closure, and what Veronica wanted out of her time in Neptune. Even if she had seen Devon there and recognized him, Veronica wouldn't have found it unusual. They were in the same class at Northwestern and it was a popular spot to study.

The timestamp on the second surveillance photo showed he entered the coffee shop six minutes after Veronica and Joanna got there. He could have easily kept his distance and found an unobtrusive spot.

The overheard conversation, where she made emphatic statements about being ready to move on from the memory of Logan, must have emboldened Devon to act two days later and ask her out on the date.

His message to her, composited from the series of sketches, was clear now: "*When you're ready for me to love you, I'm going to make –*"

And that's what this all came down to. He had decided she was ready to be with him, to love him. If she was breaking free from her past relationship with Logan then she was ready to move on fully.

In high school and college her relationship with Logan was always her most closely held secret. How much she cared for him and how much it hurt whenever they imploded was not something she discussed. And yet she saw the silent questions plain on her dad's, Wallace's, Mac's, and even Duncan's faces from time to time. The wondering and the confusion.

*Is it over? Do you still love him? Are you really moving on? Are you okay?*
No one ever asked her, though. Not really. In part, she figured, because they suspected she wouldn't answer. So she remained silent and that door to her care for Logan remained ajar but unvisited. Until she was healthy and stable enough to talk about it openly and some psycho with self-aggrandizement issues misinterpreted her meaning.

Veronica's rejection though, two days later in the halls of her school, must have sent Devon mixed messages. So he flew to Neptune to make sure she didn't backpedal. He didn't have any family to speak of. No one would have missed him for the holidays.

If Devon started watching her from her first day in Neptune, her initial reception to Logan likely thrilled him. She remembered vividly the day she yelled at Logan from her dad's porch. And the kind fight they had on the beach when she went running. But then the night of the pool party at his house, everything shifted. All of a sudden the situation looked bleak for Devon. Not only was Veronica back with Logan but Devon would have concluded she lied to him. She said she was ready and wanted to move on, and then she changed her mind. So he needed to act. Devon needed Veronica to see what a mistake she was making.

Veronica finished typing her explanation and sent it. Her request to Erin and her Dad was for both of them to work on proving some of this. Or, in Erin's case, pass it on to her friend in Chicago so he could prove some of it. They had to prove that Jason Dwayne King was the same man as Johnny Kirkpatrick and J. David Kenmore and now Jeremiah Devon Kent. She'd done what the man wanted – followed the breadcrumbs and discovered his identity. Now she had to figure out what to do with that information.

"Follow the money," she entreated. With the way states wrote their stalking laws, Devon (Jason?) would likely serve more time for falsifying documents, purchasing false identities, and potentially bribing US Postal workers than for stalking her. Stalking was a charge she was still going to have a hard time proving. With him in custody, though, a handwriting analysis could be done and travel receipts and itineraries would prove he was in Neptune over the Christmas holidays. Still, a well-paid lawyer could argue that at no point was her safety threatened or compromised.

Veronica leaned her head back against the seat. The plane was going to land in about an hour and then the next few days were going to be a whirlwind.

She remembered the woman, Meryl, she met freshman year at Hearst. Meryl stood by Sully's innocence and good nature when the biggest piece of evidence was Sully's circles. She had been vehement and Veronica had looked at her like she was bat-shit crazy.

Which is exactly what these detectives are going to think about me.

She almost dreaded the impending landing for that very reason. At least she'd be safe in the airport gate. One benefit of having to take your shoes off to get on an airplane were the security checks and protocols. She could get a burger of her own and wait for an hour. Except – what if -

Veronica sat up in her seat and opened her email again. She saw that Mac was online and clicked the window to send her an IM. Her fingers poised above the keyboard, she hesitated as she weighed the likelihood of what she was about to ask for.

When did Jason – Devon – whoever the fuck he is leave Neptune? Maybe he's still there?

Me: You there?
Mac: Yup. You okay?

That was a loaded enough question to require several bottles of wine and not one easily addressed in
that moment.

Me: Can you do me a favor?
Mac: Of course.
Me: Would it be easy for you to pull airline itineraries for someone named Jeremiah Devon Kent? Try flying out of Los Angeles into Chicago.
Mac: Give me twenty minutes.

As she waited, Veronica tried to avoid jumping to the worst possible conclusion, though that proved to be much harder than she anticipated. Her optimistic tendencies, born from the good moments of this past holiday, were already slipping away. Occasionally her eyes would drift to Logan's name in her chat window. His account was still idle.

Mac: Got him. He flew out of LA today. Booked first class ticket on United Flight 2575. It left at 2pm.

Veronica squeezed her eyes shut and pressed a hand her chest. Her heart was beating so fast she worried it would burst out of her rib cage. *We're on the same flight.*

Me: Did he change his itinerary at all?
Mac: Nope. Booked the ticket three weeks ago and never changed the itinerary.

She lifted herself up in her seat, trying to look out over the mass of passengers, but couldn't see anything of import. Fate had fucked Veronica more than once in her life. *Why not one more time for good measure and in the spirit of Christmas?* If her flight had departed as scheduled she'd be safely at her apartment by now, with Wallace, and not inadvertently trapped on a plane with a potential stalker.

Me: Seat assignment?

He was on a plane with her and she'd bet good money on the fact he hadn't wanted that. Perhaps he was one of the first class passengers, purposefully hiding his face as she boarded. Or one who waited for the absolute final boarding call and slipped onto the plane.

Mac: A3.
Me: That first class?
Mac: Yeah.

She considered creeping to the front of the airline and trying to get a look at him. What would he do if he saw her there? What excuse would he make or explanation would he offer for being on the same flight?

Mac: Everything okay?
Me: You already asked me that.
Mac: You didn't answer me before.
Me: …
Me: …
Me: Let me get back to you on that. Thanks again, Mac.

Veronica shut the chat window and closed the browser. What was she going to do? Devon (*fuck! Jason?*) was unwittingly in a precarious position. For years Devon had been calculating and kept the right amount of distance. Except he hadn't planned for a cancelled flight.
That knowledge sent a thrill through Veronica. Messing with his pattern to follow her to Neptune was making him sloppy and perhaps this was one mistake she could use to her advantage. It was a three week trip and if he wanted to stay hidden he never should have followed her to Neptune.

Logan told her only days before that together they were going to make this guy regret ever coming after her. The flight attendant's voice crackled through the intercom and announced that they were experiencing a mild amount of turbulence. They asked all passengers to raise their tray tables and fasten their seat belts. The cherry on top of Veronica's anxiety inducing sundae (stalker on plane and turbulence? Fucking hell is what this is) was that the wifi cut out. She hadn't received a reply from Logan in all that time.

And now I'm stuck sitting here. So much for stalking my stalker.

With nothing else to occupy her time, Veronica stored her laptop for the duration of the flight. She sat and fumed and plotted.

Mac, her dad, Logan, everyone, kept telling her to be safe. Be safe? I can't be safe as long as Devon is following me. And I'm not going to run away.

If she could take advantage of the fact that her stalker was so close now, surprise him for once, this set of awful coincidences might work in her favor. It'd been awhile since she'd had to save herself. The last time she tried she landed in a ditch with a gun aimed at her. Yes, she had changed a bit over the past five years. Yes, she was pursuing an alternate career path but neither of those things required her to be a passive observer to her own life.

The previous week Logan was emphatic that he would not let her be beaten by this situation. Maybe it was more important she didn't allow herself to be beaten.

She could feel in the dip of the plane's flight path that they were close to landing. Out of habit she offered her 'I hate this part' sentiment to the woman sitting beside her. Veronica had no guess as to what Nancy thought transpired during the duration of the flight. The woman likely inferred it was bad and her response to Veronica's statement was a kind smile. She also offered a quick pat of Veronica's hand where it gripped the arm rest.

Veronica heard the intercom click on and a second later the voice of one of the flight attendants sounded in the cabin. "Welcome to Chicago, ladies and gentleman. We ask that you remain in your seats with your seat belt fastened until the aircraft has come to a complete stop and your pilot has turned off the 'fasten your seat belts' sign."

That was going to be a difficult instruction to adhere to. At the moment Veronica already felt like her skin could barely contain her skeleton. She didn't anticipate being able to remain in her seat for much longer.

"If you want to adjust your watch, it is currently 8:18 PM in Chicago. The weather in Chicago at this time is slightly overcast and thirty three degrees. More snow is expected tonight so bundle up, stay warm and safe, and enjoy your time in the Windy City."

Veronica scoffed at the voice. Great. Now even my flight attendant is telling me what to do?

"On behalf of the crew, thank you for choosing our airline and have a pleasant end to your holiday season."

The 'fasten your seat belts' sign clicked off at the same time the flight attendant stopped speaking. Veronica wanted to stand but her brain wasn't sending the right signals to her legs and feet. While
she doubted the flight attendant intended for her words to sound ominous, the phrase 'pleasant end' sent a slight chill up Veronica's spine.

*Something tells me there is going to be very little that is pleasant about the next few days.*

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5:52 PM, Pacific Standard Time – Direct flight from San Diego to Chicago – 1 hr 35 min to landing

"Devon. So you've met him and he's been around Veronica before?" The panic was choking him and Logan concentrated on the breathing pattern Veronica prescribed that awful day in her kitchen. He could not suffer another anxiety attack. Especially not when his girlfriend apparently had made a habit of socializing with her stalker for the past year and a half.

*Not fair Logan. Panic makes you a judgmental edgy bastard. Calm the fuck down and think this through.*

"Like I already said a dozen times, she barely knows the guy" Wallace said, his voice rivaling Logan's for the shakiest.

One glance reminded Logan that Wallace was just as freaked by these implications as he was. The two of them needed to get their shit together and come up with a plan. Wallace leaned over to get a better view at Logan's screen and jabbed his finger at the mail tab. "Who's that from?"

Logan clicked over to his email and, sure enough, had a new unread message from Mac. In addition there was an unanswered chat window from Veronica. It had been easiest to see details of the images by putting the slideshow in full screen mode. Consequently, he missed her repeated attempts to talk to him. He swore under his breath when he saw her string of messages.

Veronica:

*You there?*

Veronica: I hope your silence means you and Wallace are bonding.

Veronica: Logan! Your girlfriend demands you jump!

Veronica: Damn it. I was hoping your response would be 'how high?'

Logan looked at the time and figured his plane was about an hour from landing, meaning Veronica's had hopefully already touched ground or was about to. It was absurd, but he felt like he'd failed Veronica by not answering her messages.

He turned his attention to the email from Mac. The subject line, 'What is happening? Did the world go phishing?' made him smile even as he empathized with her. He'd been there before, feeling like he was on the outside of events looking in and unsure of how to be the most help. Veronica had told him everything Mac was trying to do for her and it was definitely above and beyond.

He opened her message, and found it was essentially just a copy and paste of an in-flight chat she'd recently had with Veronica. It felt like he was in the midst of experiencing an allergic reaction; like his tongue was swelling and he was about to choke on it. This was going to kill him. And then after this killed him, Mr. Mars was going to kill him for failing to keep his daughter safe like he swore he'd be able to do.

"What?" Wallace asked, and he sounded more weary than freaked. "What now?"

"You know how Veronica has the worst luck and the universe hates her?" Logan asked.

Wallace nodded and reached for Logan's computer. He watched as Wallace's eyes tracked down the chat and then threw himself back in his seat with the heels of his palms pressed firmly against his
eyes. "That's my sister, and he's on the plane with her, and –" Wallace dropped his hands. The smack of skin against denim in the otherwise quiet cabin was startling.

As Logan reached over to pat Wallace on the shoulder he caught out of his periphery a chat window popping up.

**Mac:** I apologize for my computer pun. Please tell me you're there.

He sent a quick glance in Wallace's direction, assessing just how close the man was to unravelling before he responded.

**Me:** Yeah I'm here.
**Mac:** You don't think she'd - you know -

The IM window showed that Mac kept typing and then deleting her words. She was flustered even as she typed.

**Me:** Go after the guy on her own? She said she was going to wait at the gate.
**Me:** Have you met her?
**Me:** She said she'd be there. I trust her.

As he typed the words he ignored the voice that said Veronica made that promise to him before discovering she was on the plane with Devon. If he had found out Devon was on his flight, he would have had to bank his impulse to pummel the guy and then hold him out an open plane window.

**Me:** Can you get me more information? I'm thinking his address. School records.

**Mac:** Okay. Got it.
**Me:** Send everything you find to me and to Mr. Mars.
**Mac:** What do you think she's going to do?

His temples buzzed with tension and Logan took a deep breath to stave off the sensation of fainting. There were far too many ways to answer her question.

**Me:** I think Veronica is going to do what Veronica does best.
**Me:** She's good at a lot of things.

*My sentiments exactly, Mac.*

"She'll be fine. Dumb for Veronica is like mensa level for other people," Wallace reassured.

"It's not the dumb thing I'm worried about," Logan countered. "It's her definition of what's risky."

Wallace nodded and leaned back again, his eyes squeezed shut. "I used to think that was a good thing."

"I need to check in with Mr. Mars."

Though his eyes remained closed, Wallace smiled. "What happened to 'Keith'?"

"I think the respect thing is going to be useful when I convince him to lock his daughter up in an insane asylum."
Veronica was in line waiting to deboard the plane. She kept standing up on her tip toes to see further down the line, but Devon had flown first class and was already off the plane.

Much of her investigation into the identity of her stalker over the weeks was reactionary. No matter how hard she and Logan tried, they couldn't get a jump on the guy. This time, though, fate might be doing her part to apologize for all the past times she fucked Veronica over.

For someone who took such pains to remain in the shadows, Devon couldn't be happy about ending on the same plane. It was a risk that even he wouldn't want to take. And one Veronica had every intention of capitalizing on.

Veronica pushed past several people on the jetway, pointedly ignoring their glares and dirty looks. She doubted Devon checked a bag and since she didn't either injecting a little spring in her step would allow her to catch up with him.

As she hustled through the terminal her eye caught a reader board and the guilt hit her in the gut.

Logan. Wallace. I told them I'd wait at their gate.

But she also promised herself she'd do everything to catch the bastard who'd been stalking her, and she had a chance here. If she was wrong about Devon, there'd be no harm and less than no foul. The two of them were almost colleagues and friendly-ish. A wrongful accusation was something she was certain she'd be able to find a graceful way to recover from.

She approached the terminal exit. The pair of large 3’ x 5’ signs made it clear that if she stepped past the security guard and left the terminal she wouldn't be granted reentry.

Again, she stepped up on her toes and tried to draw up Devon's build and stance from memory. The bulk of jackets and scarves obstructed the silhouettes of those leaving the airport.

Veronica took a deep breath, clutched the handle of her suitcase and stepped closer to the terminal exit when her phone beeped. As much as she wanted to ignore it to establish plausible deniability, she couldn't.

She pulled it out of her pocket and her eyes went straight to Logan's name. The subject line read, "I'm the strong silent type."

Sorry I never responded to your messages. I was doing some cracker-jack investigating. However, if you're planning to do something even 20% risky please, wait for me.
-Logan

She looked up and out to the taxi queue, her brow furrowed. He'd obviously written the email in haste. What did he think she was going to do?

Subject: Re: I'm the strong silent type.

Cracker Jack, you say? I forgive you but I wouldn't say no to groveling. And what do you mean by 'risky'?
Call me as soon as you land. I love you.
-V

Wallace and Logan's flight would land in a little less than an hour. The taxi ride from the airport to Northwestern was about forty minutes. She hit 'send' on the email and gripped hold of the handle of her suitcase.
Chapter End Notes

This chapter dedicated to irma66 who sent me a lovely PM after the last chapter and pointed out a silly little typo I made that actually had HUGE impact. Don't know how it escaped me.

Thanks to the best beta in the business, scandalpants. In person friendship in 17 days!

Also, thank you to every single person who reads this story here, on fanfiction, or follows me on tumblr. Your quiet support and encouragement has meant the world. Thank you, also, to each and every person who reviews. It can feel risky to put your thoughts out there, but I appreciate and value each one. You all make me feel brave.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 24: Plan C

"I'm going to kill her," Logan all but growled. "No. I'm going to put her under house arrest, attach a monitor to her ankle, and if she leaves the house it'll explode." He pushed past a distracted business traveler in the jetway. Logan didn't look back for Wallace but he trusted him to keep up.

"Maybe we could not make with the bomb humor while in an airport," Wallace said. "You'll be on my mom's bad list for a good long while if I end up in federal prison."

"Sorry." And Logan truly was. Even in his agitation he could see that those they passed found his jokes to be distasteful. "Nervous humor."

Forty minutes before landing Logan had to turn off his computer. The moment the flight attendant said it was okay he turned his phone back on, but there was no word from Veronica or Mac. The latter was likely in a research fog she wouldn't move past until she exhausted her options. It was a self-imposed radio silence and Logan found it unacceptable. As for the former? He had a theory. His calls to Veronica all went straight to voicemail. Which meant either her phone was turned off or she was choosing to ignore him.

"Well, stop. We don't even know what's going on."

"Oh. I know." Logan felt it was an absolute certainty.

How many times had Veronica explained there wasn't enough evidence to open an investigation? How many times had she insisted that if the case was going to be solved it was up to her leading her rag tag group? He hadn't responded with pleasantries or aphorisms because she was right. Still, he hoped Agent Baxter's connection in Chicago was willing to investigate the stalker's identity based on what they had. Veronica, though, wasn't the type to hope and see what happened. In the current absence of evidence she'd be out there finding some.

Logan spoke a hurried 'thank you' to the flight attendant at the gate and crushed the strap of his carry-on in a tight grip.

"Where are we going?" Wallace asked.

That was a good enough question to slow Logan's pace, and he found he didn't immediately have an answer. Mac! I have to call Mac.

"Mac was working on getting the guy's address. We'll start there." He searched through the contacts of his phone even as he kept moving.

"Logan?"

The voice he heard behind him was significantly more feminine than Wallace's. He turned around and saw Veronica in the waiting area beside the gate. She slurped down some of a soda and stood up, brushing crumbs off her lap.
"Where are you guys going?"

As she wheeled her suitcase over to where he and Wallace stood, she tossed the bag labeled R.J. Grunts into a nearby garbage can. Wallace's expression was relatively placid but Logan caught the exhale of relief. Logan pinched the bridge of his nose, willing the tension in his head to abate.

"You didn't answer your phone," he said. It came out more accusatory than he'd intended but he was still reeling.

"I just got done talking to my dad." Her eyes darted back and forth between the two of them. "Why are you guys looking at me like that? And why aren't you speaking." She waved her hand in front of Logan's face. "Loganbot? Is that you?"

"Devon was on your flight," Logan said.

"Yeah. Mac looped you in, right? We should go."

Logan dropped his carryon and reached for her, folding her up in a hug. After a second of resistance her body softened and she wrapped her arms around his waist. "Hey, it's okay," she reassured. "He didn't see me. I think he was trying to avoid getting caught, actually."

Why would he - ?

"I'm sorry," he said. He had been so certain she was going to lead him on a chase of her own. Despite the fact they'd been a team while they were in Neptune. Despite the fact Veronica made sure to include him in every step of her investigation. Despite everything he'd doubted her.

"Why are you sorry?" she said, pulling away. Her defenses were up now – he saw it in the furrow of her brow and the strong set of her shoulders. Again she looked from Wallace to him.

"We thought -" Wallace trailed off, running a hand over his head. "We thought maybe you weren't gonna be here."

"Where was I going to be?" While it was phrased as a question she didn't sound confused. Her tone was edged by flint and Logan didn't want to say anything that would cause her to spark there in the airport.

"Mac told us she sent you some info. I thought you might be chasing a lead," he said, hoping she ignored what his statement implied.

She inhaled sharply, and held the air in her lungs for a moment, then hissed out the breath through the space between her lips. "I told you I'd be here."

Okay. So she caught the implication. Now it's your turn to cowboy up, Echolls.

Logan nodded. "You did."

"Try believing me next time. Both of you." She grabbed the handle of her suitcase and, without sparing another glance, walked toward the terminal exit. "Hurry up. I have a plan and I need you both to help me."

For once it was his trust issues that were going to be a source of conversation. Fucking fantastic way to start the trip. I wonder if she wants her grovel served up fast and dirty or long and slow.

"Thanks for not throwing me under the bus," Logan said to Wallace, half-whispering the words from
the side of his mouth.

Wallace responded with a single nod. "I thought it too. Should have known better."

"Yeah, I like that. Let's blame this whole misunderstanding on you."

"Hey for kicks let's pretend we're in a time sensitive situation. The daylight is burned, friends. We've got planning to do."

Veronica was properly annoyed, but still it made Logan smile. And not only because he enjoyed seeing her worked up and snarky. He was back in her orbit. Back in her inner circle of people who were close enough to frustrate her. He hastened his pace and threw an arm around her shoulder. She gave a perfunctory shrug to shake his arm off but he kept it where it was.

"I'm glad I was wrong." He pulled her close enough to whisper the words into her temple. "And I look forward to the ways you'll make me pay for my insolence."

She let out a 'harumph' of agitation but there was a slight twitch at the corners of her mouth. "Let's give the whole trust thing a whirl shall we?"

"What? We don't get to keep any of our bad relationship habits?"

Veronica veered to a less populated corner of the airport and sat down. Both Logan and Wallace followed her but remained standing.

"I have a plan," Veronica started, all business. "Tomorrow morning we'll march our butts down to the precinct where Erin's colleague works and lay out the evidence. If, as I suspect, they blow us off then we'll need to gather some evidence."

"You still don't know if it's Devon," Wallace said, ever the voice of reason.

"Right now I know it could be. So that's what we're working with."

"Which means what exactly?" Wallace asked.

"Look, if Devon ends up not being the guy, I'd really like to avoid being pegged as a psycho myself for the next two years of med school."

"Aren't most doctors crazy?" Logan asked. She shot him a glare and the unspoken 'Now, Logan?' was plain in the rise of her eyebrows. "I watched all of Doctor's Diaries. I know what I'm talking about."

"I wish I knew what you were talking about," Wallace said. He too sounded exasperated.

Logan, however, wanted to live in the moment a bit longer. His girl was in her city, he was with her, and she was safe. Yes she had some sort of plan to go after a stalker, but that was a problem for later.

She waved a chastising finger. "This is why you shouldn't drink on airplanes."

He beamed, barely resisting the urge to kiss her there in the airport. It would add an element of romance to dip her dramatically near baggage claim, but not under the circumstances and not in front of her best friend.

*I mean the guy might learn something but it's probably not the right time. Right?*

He nodded to himself that postponing the makeout was a sensible choice. Seeing her take charge of a
situation and boss people around did things to him he'd probably need to discuss with his therapist at some point.

"I may want to get into Devon's apartment. If so, I'll need him distracted and you two are forbidden from trying to stop me." She leveled Wallace with a stare. Almost as if she expected him to disagree with her.

"What?" he asked. At her look took an involuntary step backwards. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Wallace, how rusty are your lookout skills?"

"Now that's a leading question."

"Step into my office." She waved a hand at the open chair beside her.

Logan grinned. "Said the spider to the fly."

"Hush," she said, smacking his arm.

"The glint in your eye tells me I should say no to whatever you are proposing," Wallace said.

"Any chance you'd reconsider that?"

Wallace was assessing in his stare and, to Veronica's credit, she didn't squirm under his appraisal. She did, however, extend her fingers so they were within Logan's grasp. He squeezed her hand in reassurance.

"The last time you asked me that it didn't end so well."

Veronica tilted her head to the side but not in her 'falsely innocent to lower someone's defenses' way. She was trying to place Wallace's statement and figure out to what he was referring.

Her eyes widened and she shook her head in vehement denial. *Looks like she placed it.*

"Wallace, no. Forget I asked."

"Hey," he said. He sat down in the plastic seat beside her. "We're family, Vee. I'm just making sure this plan is better."

She placed her hand over Wallace's and gave him a firm nod. "It is. And, it might not even be needed. My plan could go poof if things work out with the police."

"Better plan than what?" Logan asked. The two were speaking shorthand he wasn't picking up on.

Veronica and Wallace locked eyes and he read a request for permission in the slight raising of her chin. As much as he loved all of their history together, even the most complicated and emotionally overwrought aspects, he sometimes envied that Veronica and Wallace had *that*. Ease and comfort not weighed down by years of a sometimes bleak past.

"Back at Hearst when I investigated who distributed my –" she circled a hand in the air and Logan nodded.

*Got it.*

"—it led me to a secret society called The Castle. They recruited Wallace as a potential new member.
He went in for initiation at my request and they made him wear a shock collar."

"Which they were not afraid to use," Wallace said. He rubbed his throat at the memory.

"But what you need Wallace to do now −"

The words tumbled out in her rush to explain. "This won't be anything like that."

"Then let's hear it," Wallace said. He clasped Veronica's hand and gave another nod of encouragement.

Veronica and Wallace left the airport first, sharing a cab, while Logan waited inside. There was no sight of Devon but they couldn't risk being seen getting into the same cab. By the time Veronica opened her apartment door, it was almost 10:30 PM and too late to do anything further with the investigation. She texted her dad to inform him she'd arrived home safely and reminded him they planned to go to the police station the following day.

The next morning, after a needless (she thought) detour to buy sunglasses and a grey trilby, Logan met Wallace at the back stairwell to their apartment. She stood in the doorway waiting for them and rolled her eyes when Logan, instead of walking, slid his body along one side of the hallway. As he approached her apartment he tucked his body into an impossible looking summersault and stood up inches in front of her. The move appeared effortless and she didn't know whether to be impressed or annoyed by his Jim Phelps impression.

While he looked absurd in the getup, (the trilby pulled down low on his brow, the red frames too big for his face) she admitted to herself that his appearance loosened the knot of tension lodged in her chest. Having him there rather than meeting them at the precinct added a degree of risk to the day's events. It was important, however, that Logan understand each facet of the plan. And they figured Devon couldn't possibly have the resources to stalk her every hour of the day. Now that Logan was in Chicago, she found she needed the specific assurance of his presence. If the way he kept reaching for her hand was any indication, he needed it too.

Veronica told herself the plan was simple. It was well thought out, necessary, and easily executed. But sitting with Logan and Wallace in her living room, organizing bugs and GPS trackers felt wrong. Or at least foolish. Not that she'd betrayed that feeling the night before at the airport. Call it maturity but she had long ago discovered there was no such thing as a failsafe plan.

A part of her remained skeptical they'd be taken seriously by the police commander but they had to try. Especially since Erin had gone through the trouble of setting up the meeting. If, upon hearing the details of their investigation, a detective agreed look into Devon the three of them would hunker down and gather additional evidence from home. If the officers laughed them out of the station as Veronica feared, Plan B involved Veronica and Logan stalking the stalker. Wallace would serve as the agent of distraction. The climax of Plan B included Veronica breaking into Devon's apartment and planting listening devices. Problematic if the police later investigated and found the bugs but worth it if they yielded anything useful.

"What's this one?" Logan pointed to a listening device on the coffee table.

"Voice activated transmitter," Veronica said. "I borrowed two from my dad. I'll put one in the living room and one in his bedroom."

"And this one?" Wallace asked.

"GPS tracker. Not sure yet but thinking we can sew it into the lining of his backpack?"
"It's small," Logan said, picking it up and turning it over in his hand.

She took it back from him. "Yes. And very expensive."

"Your dad know you stole these?"

"Please, Wallace. I borrowed them."

*Without his permission. But I have every intention of giving them back. Eventually.*

"So, the answer is no."

Veronica shrugged and picked up a device that looked like a flash drive and handed it to Wallace. "In case you get a chance to grab Devon's phone. Plug this in and it'll copy the information from his SIM card."

"Sounds easy enough."

"Only if it's no risk."

Wallace shrugged, concentrating instead on the SIM card reader. "Sure, yeah."

"I mean it, Fennel. We've got to be smart about this. We don't want Devon to –"

"I'll be the smartest, Vee. Investigatory skills so smooth I put Sherlock to shame."

"Which means I am left with the roles of escort and eye candy," Logan said.

She pecked him on the cheek. "You should get business cards."

"You really think we'll need all this?" Wallace asked.

"I hope not. But, he'll have to leave his apartment some time and I'd rather be prepared."

"Aye aye Captain Mars," Logan said, saluting her. It was cute enough that Veronica thought about kissing the smile off his face. Maybe it would do her good to burn off some of her tension. Under normal circumstances she'd be anti-kissing in front of Wallace but these were special circumstances.

Besides, the night before at the airport she knew Logan had wanted to kiss her. Out of respect for Wallace he'd refrained. He was owed a reward for good behavior.

*It's a reward for him and for me. Win win.*

She lunged forward and pressed her lips against Logan's. He let out a little 'oof' of surprise and Veronica smiled against his lips as she kissed him again. She felt the couch shift as Wallace stood up, grumbling at their display of affection. Logan's lips quirked up into a larger grin as she pressed closer.

She sighed into it, concentrating on this moment. This feeling of security she got from being with Logan. She wanted to savor this beautiful feeling of stasis and anticipation at the top of the roller coaster before the inevitable plunge. *Just a little more.*

Her arms circled Logan's neck, hauling him closer. There was a desperation to her movements she hoped he didn't notice. A need to get as close as possible. She tugged on the hair at the nape of his neck and Logan wound his fingers though hers, tilting her head back. She expected him to deepen the kiss, lay her back on the couch and settle his body over hers; instead he pulled away pecking her
once more on the lips.

The tenderness of their embrace coupled with the unbelievable fact that Logan was sitting on her couch in Chicago almost had her crying with relief. She closed her eyes and exhaled deeply as Logan kissed each of her cheeks, her eyelids, and forehead.

"God. I want all this to be over," she said.

"That makes two of us," Wallace said. He stormed out of the kitchen, past where they sat, and into his bedroom, slamming his door shut.

Logan smiled. "We scandalized Wallace." She rested her cheek against his chest and snuffled out a laugh. "I'm also a tad offended," he said.

"I wasn't talking about you, idiot. But these are the lifestyles of the bold and the scandalous."

"Isn't that the rich and the famous?"

"I'm neither of those things."

"So we forge our own path? See, this is why you're the captain. You have all the good ideas."

Her bones ached with weariness and she wanted nothing more than to curl up on the couch and sleep for days, forgetting everything about the task that lay ahead. Logan's arms dropped from where he'd wrapped them around her back and he tilted her chin up. When they made eye contact he cupped her face and kissed her once more on the nose.

His lips flattened out into a thin smile and she braced herself for the inevitable suggestion to come. Something like bagging their surveillance plan. Or hiring a personal security detail until the police arrested Devon. *Yeah, because that idea went over real well the last time he tried it.*

Instead, he reached for an item on the coffee table. "A GPS tracker, huh?" He held the bug out on his flattened palm. It was approximately the size of a quarter and would send out a signal they could track remotely using her laptop.

"Top of the line."

"I should get some of these for my problem child authors. The ones who won't return my calls. Would make it much easier to track their asses down." He tossed the tracker up in the air and easily caught it.

"Logan!"

"What? I've got very soft hands." He raised an eyebrow and looked her up and down. "Want to feel?"

She rolled her eyes. "I need you to be gentle with the merchandise."

"I'm always –"

She clapped her hand over his mouth, preventing him from finishing his sentence. "It's the only one we have."

"I am as mild as a summer breeze." He tossed it in the air, a little higher this time. "As docile as a little lamb," Toss. "As gentle as –"
"As the male ego?"

"That's not gentle. That's fragile." He smirked as he tossed the tracker in the air again.

There was something so endearingly juvenile about his behavior. It reminded her of freshman year of high school when he turned Boggle into a drinking game. Or the afternoon he overheard her arguing with her mom on the phone and jumped into the Echolls' pool fully clothed to make her smile.

Still, it made her panic to think of what would happen to the tracker if he dropped it. He went to throw it again, an unmistakable mischievous glint in his eye – like he was daring her to stop him – and she clasped his hands between hers, protecting the tracker. She palmed the device and held it above her head.

"You cannot be trusted with such things."

He made a move to take it from her and she put her hands behind her back, switching it from one fist to the other. She narrowed her eyes at him, daring him in return. The phone connected to the apartment building's intercom buzzed and Veronica jumped.

"God, I hate that thing," she said. Even when she was expecting company it never failed to startle her.

Logan saw her momentary distraction for the opportunity it was and reached around her. She pushed herself back on the couch, the arm pressing into her back.

"Not today, buddy."

"It's important to share, Veronica."

The buzzer sounded again.

"You gonna get that?" Wallace called out from his bedroom.

"No!" she shouted. Logan reached for her hand again and she thrashed as he leaned over her. "Back off, mister."

"I thought we were partners. Your reticence hurts me."

She raised her knee and pressed it against his stomach as he leaned over. "One more move and I can hurt you even more."

He bobbled his eyebrows, his gaze on the neckline of her shirt. "In the long run that would hurt both of us."

She snorted and let out a whine of protest as he pulled her hands from behind her back and tried to pry the tracker from her grip. "You a little more than me, though."

The buzzer sounded for the third time but neither she nor Logan attempted to get up. She smiled when Wallace's door opened.

"Of course I'd love to get the door. Don't worry about getting up."

"Thanks, Wally." Logan looked down at her. "You going to play nice now?"

Veronica tilted her head and scrunched her brow in consideration. "What's in it for me?"
"My love. My eternal devotion. A discount at any bookstore in Neptune."

"Hard pass." She elbowed enough space between the two of them and slipped the tracker into her bra.

Logan grinned, his eyes aglow with delight. "That's simply incentive to continue." He wiggled his fingers in the air.

She couldn't help the laugh that escaped as she tried to twist away from him. He leaned down to kiss her but she turned her head away at the last second so his lips brushed her cheek. As she pushed him away she saw Wallace slam down the receiver for the door buzzer. She frowned.

"Wallace? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's fine." Wallace jumped as the buzzer rang again. "Damn it."

Either Wallace has a secret life and he's now dodging members of the seedy underbelly of Chicago, or this is related to me.

Veronica sat up, pushing Logan off of her.

"Who –?"

The phone buzzed again and Wallace pressed a finger to his lips instructing both of them to be quiet.

"Hello?" Wallace squeezed his eyes shut and a hiss of air passed through his lips. "Yeah. Sorry man. I – uh – yeah, I uh dropped the phone."

Veronica stood up from the couch, stepping closer to Wallace. Logan followed.

"What's going on?" Logan asked. He'd barely spoken above an audible whisper but Wallace glared at them.

That was enough to stop them both from asking further questions. It was a look she'd never seen from Wallace before. At least not when he was being serious. Once he looked at her like that when she ate the last of his good cereal without asking. And again when she suggested they dress up as Sonny and Cher for Halloween.

"I'm sorry, man. She's not here. Where? Oh – uh – she mentioned something about studying at the library? I think."

Logan pressed his lips to her ear. "Skyler?"

She shook her head. If it had been Skyler, Wallace would be more furious and less flustered. And he definitely wouldn't have answered the phone a second time with an apology.

"Yeah. I'll tell her." When he hung up the receiver he backed away from it.

If this was a horror movie it'd be the perfect time for the phone to ring a third time. She counted to five but nothing happened. The unease in the apartment was palpable, settling over them like a lead blanket.

"Okay, Wallace, now would be a grand time for an explanation," Logan said. He was standing close enough for her shoulder to press into his side.

Wallace looked to her for confirmation and she nodded. "Just say it. Tell us."
"It was Devon," he said. "Or Jason. Or whoever he's pretending to be today."

That information was enough to shatter all her preconceived notions that this situation was under control. None of them had anticipated Devon making such a bold move. Veronica nodded, concentrating on taking deep and even breaths. She sat back down on the couch, flattening her palms on her knees to stop them from shaking.

"What'd he say?" Her voice was soft and tentative and she hated it.

_and what does he want? And why now?

Wallace took a deep breath and looked between her and Logan. "He said the two of you guys, you and Devon, had made plans or something. He wanted to take you out for coffee? I don't know. Vee, you didn't, right?"

Now that hurts.

A slight fissure of pain zipped up from her gut into her heart at Wallace's doubt but she took a deep breath. This was stressful for Wallace, too, and he was trying to not let that show. He'd done an amazing job at being a source of support. She didn't bite back – just breathed once more and shook her head.

"Right before break he asked me out. I brushed him off and said we could grab some when I got back." Which made her wonder why Devon now saw that invitation as a sure thing. "Did he say anything else?"

Wallace shook his head. Logan sat down next to her and attempted to wrap an arm around her shoulder in comfort. She scooted away slightly, leaving a few inches of space between them. She ignored his look of confusion and hurt and flopped back on the couch, squeezing her eyes shut. Logan's touch had the ability to calm her and she needed a couple minutes to be angry. To channel the adrenaline coursing through her and focus.

She didn't want to open her eyes, to see Wallace and Logan's twin expressions of worry and fear, but she felt Logan shift and heard Wallace sit down. She settled for looking up at the ceiling.

_We've been a team throughout all of this. They want to help. I need their help._

"The thing I want to know is why now?" She didn't expect an answer, but the questions were pounding in her head. "Why hide for so long and then show up without an invitation?"

Wallace's eyes locked with hers as she turned her head. "I have no idea."

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Logan reach for her hand and then stop himself. He curled his fingers into a fist and pressed it to his knee. She smiled at him, a weak and warbling offer of thanks.

He cleared his throat. "If I could offer a suggestion?"

She nodded, resting her hand in the inches of space between them. Her pinky brushed against the denim of his jeans.

"Of course," she said.

He smiled, reassured by the small bit of contact. "Now that Devon thinks I'm out of the way, he's going to try and date you. My guess is when he does he'll sit you down and tell you his version of the truth."
"The truth that he's a stalker. How romantic. My sarcasm is aimed at the crackpot in question. Not you."

"For once," he said.

"So this is the dude's big romantic gesture then?" Wallace asked.

Logan nodded. "Yes and no. I think the past few years have been the big romantic gesture and now we reach the third act – "

"Let me guess? The big declaration of love?"

"If think so, yeah. He's trying to write you a romance."

"When really it's a psycho-thriller." She reached for Logan's hand and turned it over, tracing the lines of his palm with her eyes. He let out a breath at the contact.

What Logan was saying made a certain kind of sense. While she might be a surveillance expert, Logan had insight into romance and storytelling.

"This is his story. He's controlling it. And now he's ready for the next part to begin," Logan said.

"Which is why he didn't want me to see him on the plane."

He nodded. "If you'd seen him on the plane – "

"– then I would have messed up his plan."

Wallace cleared his throat. She tilted her head to listen but continued to inspect Logan's hand. He had a callous on his index finger caused by the way he held his pencil. And a freckle at the base of his thumb.

"He said you knew how to get in touch with him," Wallace said. "He wants you to call him."

"Does he know I'm here?" Logan asked. "'Cause that would be -"

"Bad." Logan and Veronica summarized in unison. She smiled, lacing their fingers together and resting them on her thigh.

"I'd guess no, but –" Wallace trailed off helplessly and shrugged.

Logan's theory seemed to be compatible with everything they knew about Devon; especially with how Devon felt about him. Logan functioned as the villain to Devon's protagonist.

"We follow the plan," Veronica said. "We go to the police station. See what they have to say. Nothing changes."

Logan tried to pull his hand away. *And for the first time ever, Logan is the one who seems to need some space.* She held on and met his stare. The clench of his jaw was a clear communicator of his disagreement with her statement.

"You want to just walk out the door even though he could be out there? He knows where you live, Veronica."

"What else are we supposed to do, Logan?" He looked away and she tugged his hand, bringing his eyes back to meet hers. "Do you want me to walk past him in the hallways at school not knowing?"
The fear was something she'd been doing an okay job of hiding but it almost choked her now. *He was at my apartment.*

"Or I guess I should flee the country. Maybe there are online medical schools I could transfer to. Here's hoping 'I'm being stalked' is grounds enough to transfer." She wrapped her free hand around their clasped ones. "Tell me what you guys want me to do? Run? Change my identity and hide? Tell me what alternative I have."

Veronica refused to blink or turn away from Logan's stare. The silence stretched out, her words resonating with each of them.

"Fuck," Logan said. He broke eye contact first, choosing to focus on a spot over her shoulder. She let out a hiccupy breath of relief and waited.

*He heard me.*

"Okay. We follow the same plan. With a small change." He looked back up at her and squeezed her hand. "Can you call Erin?"

An hour later, Veronica, Wallace, and Logan sat on the couch watching *The Three Amigos*, each holding a bowl of ice cream. Wallace dubbed it late-morning snack. Veronica recognized it as a poor distraction. She busied herself with scooping spoonfuls of the melted ice cream and watching it drip back in the bowl. Wallace and Logan kept shooting concerned glances back and forth over her head and she opted to do the mature thing and ignore them both.

Logan's amendment to the plan was to ask Erin to call her contact at the Chicago PD and have them send a police escort to Veronica's apartment. From the apartment to the precinct it would take less than ten minutes. However, because this particular favor for a friend of the commander wasn't a high priority for the department, they were still waiting for confirmation of the car's arrival.

"This is stupid," Veronica grumbled. She sat forward and placed her bowl on the table.

"Nah, this movie is brilliant." Wallace pointed his spoon at the screen where El Guapo was explaining the concept of 'plethora.' "What's stupid is us having to wait so long when there's a police station a mile from our apartment."

"Yeah, yeah," Veronica said. "Next time I'll suggest Erin make us more of a priority."

Still scattered across the table were the assorted listening devices and bugs. That had been another *fantastic* amendment to the plan. Breaking into Devon's house was no longer happening, regardless of the conclusion the police came to.

*Small change my ass.* With Wallace and Logan in agreement, though, it was hard to argue. Veronica figured she could negotiate better terms once they talked to the police. She picked up the USB drive she had intended to use to copy files from Devon's computer and held it in her palm.

The intercom buzzer sounded and Wallace and Logan both reacted in unison, sitting up straight. If they were dogs their ears would be positioned forward and their noses pointed at the buzzer. Veronica laughed at the image.

"Easy boys," she said, standing up to answer the call.

"I got it, Vee."
"Nope." She raced across the apartment to pick up the receiver. Despite the tense situation Veronica grinned when she heard Logan's growl of frustration. At the last second she turned around. "Actually, I'm feeling far too fragile to answer the phone. Could one of you big strong men help me out?"

Wallace stood first, rolling his eyes as he walked towards her. "Anyone ever call you a pest?"

"Logan has," she said.

"Several times in fact."

"Adorable." Wallace picked up the receiver. "Hello?" He held a hand over the receiver. "UPS?"

She nodded. "I ordered some books."

He handed her the receiver and she held it up to her ear, tucking it between her chin and shoulder.

"Give me just one second," she said. Veronica pulled her phone from her pocket, scrolling through her emails. "Can you read the tracking number for me?"

She might not think Devon would be bold enough to disguise himself as a UPS driver and break into her apartment but she understood caution was necessary. The delivery driver rattled off the tracking number. Satisfied it was a match, Veronica buzzed him in.

"I'm gonna go grab 'em," she said, opening the door.

"Wait." The exclamation from Wallace and Logan came in almost perfect unison.

She rolled her eyes and closed the door again. "Yes?" At Logan's raised eyebrow and Wallace's furious scowl she huffed out a sigh. "Fine. Mark it in your calendars fellas because I concede."

Logan stood from the couch, picking up his trilby and sunglasses from the end table as he crossed the room. He placed a placating kiss on Veronica's cheek. She barely resisted the urge to push his face away, feeling his lips pull into a grin at her huff of indignation. "How about I go get us some food. I'll grab the package on my way back in."

She frowned at Logan, shaking her head slightly. He kissed her again, this time softly on the lips. He lingered only a second before pulling away. Now that Logan was the person who wanted to leave the apartment it seemed like a very bad idea.

*Is that irony or romantic hypocrisy?*

"I don't need food."

"You've barely eaten anything."

"So?"

"If the car gets here while I'm out text me and I'll bring the food to the station."

"Use the back exit," she said. She kissed him again. "Oh!" She pulled away and rushed to the coffee table, grabbing a canister of pepper spray. "And bring this with you."

Logan nodded, placed the hat on his head and tipped the brim towards her. "Milady." He looked over to where Wallace still sat on the couch. "Her jester." She closed the door behind him as he left, smiling at the little skip in his step as he walked to the back entrance.
"I demand onion rings!" she called down the hall. "And a pie of some sort."

"I thought you weren't hungry?"

A second later her phone vibrated.

10:45 AM – Logan to Veronica

Message received my fair maiden.

Halfway back to Veronica's apartment, a bag of diner takeout in one hand, Logan knew someone was following him. It was a long forgotten sensation from days of being hounded by the paparazzi. The competent paps could trail him for five blocks before Logan realized they were nearby. As he walked by a storefront window he attempted to use the reflection to see who the person was but he didn't catch sight of him or her.

He looked over his shoulder and then waited against the side of the building, peering around a corner to identify who it might be. While he suspected it was Devon he needed a clear view to give a description to the police. A group of college girls passed by, each with a phone in hand. When they didn't look his way he let go of the foolish hope they were the ones following him.

He was paralyzed at the side of the building – unsure if he should continue on his path back to the apartment or call Veronica instead. He took a deep breath and remembered the laugh in Veronica's voice when she demanded onion rings. The look on her face when he told her everything would be fine.

He reached for the canister of pepper spray, clenching it in his fist. He hoped he hadn't lied to her.

Run. He commanded his legs to move faster as he turned down the alley. He'd hoped a passerby would step in and intervene but no one seemed concerned by two white guys in their twenties running down the sidewalk. The bag of takeout was long abandoned near the back entrance to the apartment.

And in his haste to get away Logan had dropped the pepper spray. Devon had reached for something in his pocket once he spotted him and Logan knew he couldn't face the guy defenseless. His only hope was to duck behind a corner. When Devon followed he might be able to get the jump on him.

A shove from behind sent Logan careening into brick a wall. He reeled around, throwing a punch that would have sent Devon flying backwards if it had connected. Devon rammed his shoulder into Logan's chest and sent him crashing into the wall for a second time.

Before he could push off, using the wall to gain momentum, Devon yanked back Logan's head and covered his mouth with a cloth. Logan gagged at the smell. He tried to breathe through his nose but his vision blurred as he inhaled whatever substance soaked the towel. Logan shook his head against the hand to throw Devon off balance and kicked out his feet, trying to make contact.

"Get your hands off me." Logan thought the words but wasn't sure if he'd spoken them out loud. He clawed at the hand covering his mouth but Devon just pressed harder. His eyes gleamed with delighted menace. "Get off me you fucking –"

"You destroy everything," Devon whispered, his voice ragged. Logan blinked his eyes to keep awake. Devon's voice, the street traffic, the scrape of his shoes against gravel – everything was muffled like his head was under water.

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"Fight – you have to –Veronica. His body wasn't receiving the messages his brain was trying to communicate.

"Just go away. Leave her alone."

"No –" He saw Veronica's face behind his eyelids. The resigned amusement in her eye whenever he made an innuendo. The softness of her gaze when he trailed his fingers over the curves of her face. It was encouragement enough to bat Devon's away one more time but his hand went limp, falling to the side. "Ver—"

"Leave her alone. She doesn't want you."

The need for Devon to know the truth was overwhelming but Logan was helpless, unable to think clearly enough to form the argument. What was going to happen to him? To her? "Ver –?"

Logan came awake slowly. His stomach roiled with nausea and an acute ache was present at the base of his skull. An unpleasant taste coated the inside of his mouth and Logan suspected he'd thrown up. Devon had pulled the gag tight and it painfully stretched the corners of his mouth.

He squeezed his eyes shut and attempted to replay the series of events from the moment Devon ambushed him. There were only glimpses of memory and he feared the sizeable gaps in his recollection.

The chemical Devon used had knocked him out but he didn't know for how long or where he even was.

*How long have I been gone?*

He sat in a windowless room with his hands and feet bound to a chair. The only light came from the gap at the bottom of the door. The fact he was still alive was an unsettling miracle.

*Why am I alive?*

A dark smile twisted Logan's mouth as he thought about how right Veronica had been. He truly was a sore subject for Devon. An obstacle Devon needed to overcome to get his happy and romantic ending with Veronica. After all, wasn't it a proof of love for the protagonist to eliminate the villain?

He pulled at the bindings around his hands. The plastic zip ties dug into his skin but he ignored it. He had to get to her. Because if he didn't get out soon Veronica would come looking for him.

The door to the room opened and he sucked in a breath. While heavy fear settled over him so did a renewed sense of determination. He'd find a way to get to her.

All three of her texts and four phone calls to Logan were met with silence. He'd been gone for almost two hours. Veronica didn't care if he went to Orland Park for takeout, there was zero reason for him to be unresponsive for close to one-hundred and twenty minutes.

Wallace wasn't pacing as much as turning tight circles in the living room. She sat on the couch surveying the contents of the coffee table once more. What had they been thinking? The past weeks (months even) had proven investigation was no longer her strong suit. Despite encouragement from her dad, Wallace, and Mac, this wasn't something she should have handled. She wasn't equipped to do this. Not anymore. And now Logan was missing.
Maybe there was something to the 'go into hiding' plan.

She looked up to where Wallace was clearly losing an argument over the phone. "Yeah, fantastic," he said. "Thanks for everything."

Wallace had decided to call the precinct they'd intended to visit. He explained the circumstances of Logan's disappearance as well as the fact that someone was stalking Veronica, even going so far to suggest to the police the two situations were related. She loved him for trying but there wouldn't be an investigation into Logan's disappearance. Not when Logan had only been gone for two hours. 'He's not returning my phone calls' wasn't sufficient evidence the man was in a dire situation; boyfriends ignored their girlfriend's phone calls daily.

He tossed his cell phone on the couch and then followed, holding his head in his hands. "They won't do anything for twenty-four hours."

"Sometimes TV gets it right."

"Can Erin call?" he asked.

"Maybe." Veronica resumed her staring contest with the devices on the table. What if she slipped the larger and more obtrusive GPS tracker into her bag? The side zipper pocket would be large enough.

"What did your dad say?"

"Nothing because I didn't call him."

"Veronica –"

"What?" she asked, turning her head to glare at him. "What is he going to do? Three hours later we're still waiting for our police escort and, I'm sorry, but I am not waiting twenty-four hours to start looking for Logan."

"What are we gonna do?"

"We're going to him."

"You really plan to run around Chicago looking for Logan."

Veronica shook her head. Definitely the large GPS tracker. I can slip the mini pepper spray into my boot. Keep the large one in my bag. "Not Logan. Devon. Consider this Plan C."

Wallace shook his head in vehement denial. "You don't even know where Devon is."

"No, but I know where he lives. And that he had something to do with Logan going missing."

"This is a terrible idea."

She stood up, standing close enough to Wallace that he had to tilt his head back to look up at her. "Might be my stupidest one yet. But being smart hasn't done us any good. Logan came here because I asked him to and now he's missing."

"What do you think happened?"

Veronica shuddered as her brain conjured up a dozen different scenarios. Each one was more horrifying than the next. She bit down hard on her lip. My fault. God, if anything happened to him –
"I think we got cocky. I think Devon was watching us and I think Devon knows where Logan is. I can't think about anything beyond that right now."

"We'll find him."

She shook her head in disbelief. "What if –"

The apartment buzzer sounded and Wallace jumped. Veronica was ready, wiping the moisture from her eyes. "It's him."

"You don't know that," Wallace said, moving towards the door.

"It's him." She grabbed her messenger bag, slid the mini pepper spray cartridge into one boot and the GPS tracker, large pepper spray, and taser into her bag. The GPS tracking program was ready to go and she handed her laptop off to Wallace. She turned the plan over in her mind once more and surveyed the contents of the table. As an afterthought she grabbed the wireless voice transmitter. The device was no larger than a SIM card and fit easily in her front jeans pocket.

She handed Wallace the burner phone linked to the voice transmitter. "Wait five minutes and go to the police station."

Wallace sighed. "The same precinct?"

She nodded. "Foster. The one on Lincoln Avenue. If you speed dial number three from the burner you'll be able to hear everything I hear. You can track where I am using the laptop. As soon as you hear Devon admit something or he mentions where Logan is you call Erin and my dad. Don't leave the station until one of them convinces an officer to check it out." She pulled her own phone out of her bag and started the recorder app then slid it into same pocket in her bag as the large GPS.

"What are you doing now?"

"Starting Plan C."

"Veronica, he won't let you keep that stuff."

She ignored Wallace and picked up the receiver as it buzzed for a third time. "Hello?" The sound of passing cars was what she heard first.

"Veronica?"

The voice on the other line crackled, like he was standing a few feet from the intercom, but it was Devon.

"You got her." She paused. Should she wait for him or push back a little? *Never been much of a wait-and-see girl. "Who's this?"

"It's – uh – it's me Devon. Can we go somewhere and talk?"

"Sorry Devon, but I'm kind of slammed today. Can we get that coffee later?"

She waited, wondering what angle he would use to get her out the door. If this was his big romantic gesture it was imperative he ignore her first refusal. "Yeah, okay, so this is kind of awkward but I think I ran into that guy you used to date. I came here because I thought you should know."

"Skyler? He lives in the city." When she and Skyler first started dating he was her date to a med school reception for a visiting lecturer. It would make sense for Devon to use her former relationship
with Skyler as a point of connection.

"No actually. That other guy. The one you dated in high school. Logan something?"

So apparently we are passed the point of caring what makes actual sense for him to know about me.

"Logan's not in Chicago."

"I'm telling you, I saw him."

"But why –"

"I think, man Veronica, this is so weird to say, but I think he's stalking you."

Veronica sucked in a breath at the unexpected comment. This was as close to an admission of guilt as she was likely to get from Devon over the phone. He was forcing a role reversal by casting Logan as the imminent threat to Veronica's happiness.

Which makes Devon my hero.

"Why would –"

"It might be hard to believe but it's true. I saw him a few blocks away from your apartment and followed him. He was trying to break into the back entrance of your building. When I called out to him he took off running."

Veronica's hands were shaking and she gripped the receiver even tighter, pressing it to her cheek.

"I'll be out in a second." She had to work to keep her voice steady. She hung up the phone and looked to Wallace who stood clutching the laptop to his chest, his eyes blown wide.

"Where are you going?"

"He knows where Logan is and now he wants to go somewhere and talk." She pressed the heels of her hands against her eyelids, taking another deep breath. "You got me on this, Fennel?"

"I'm dialing the number now."

She gave a brisk nod. She was still fearful for Logan but knowing she had Wallace's support was intensely comforting. "Go to the police station. Call my dad. Call Erin."

There was a second when Veronica thought Wallace would protest her leaving but instead he pulled her into a hug. "Be safe."

"I will." She let go first, shaking her head as she opened the door. "My dad's going to kill me."

"And then my mom will, too."

She groaned at the reminder, trying to smile. "I'll see you soon."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Devon stood on the sidewalk in front of her apartment building, hands deep in his pockets. He didn't look dangerous or guilty and she wondered if there was still some way this could be a
misunderstanding. Perhaps Logan ran into an author he knew and they opted to grab some food.

And then what, Veronica? His phone died?

But when Devon looked up and smiled at her through the glass of her front door she reminded herself that wasn't possible. Logan was still missing. And there had to be a reason for it. A person responsible for it.

"Hey," he greeted, waving at her as she walked outside. He scratched the back of his head and tucked his hand back in his pocket.

The gesture was familiar and she tilted her head, offering him a tight lipped smile in return.

"Hey, Devon."

He flinched at her use of the name but recovered quickly. Sore spot for you, Devon? Just what would you want me to call you instead?

"Good break?" he asked.

She frowned and shook her head. "Not great, actually. What with my ex apparently turning up outside my apartment."

"I'm sorry Veronica. You – you deserve better than that." He reached out and took a step closer, squeezing her arm.

There was a delicate balance for her to strike here. She had to be friendly enough to get Devon to think she was on his side without having him conclude she wanted to start a relationship. She squeezed the hand resting on her bicep and smiled.

"Here's hoping New Year's sucks less."

"For the both of us."

"Can you tell me what happened with Logan?"

"Yeah but let's go somewhere else. I know I said coffee but want to grab lunch instead?"

"We're not going to talk?"

He shrugged, his lips turned up into an easy grin. "I talk better over food. There's an Italian spot I like a lot. It's not far. I can drive." He gestured to a silver sedan parked in front of her building.

As desperate as she was to find Logan she wasn't about to get in the car with Devon. Not unless she received verification he knew where Logan was.

"Devon, are you sure it was Logan you saw?"

"I'm sure."

"How sure were you? And where did you see him?"

"I told you. He was behind your apartment building, trying to get in. He took off and ducked around a corner."

"Did you follow him?"
He nodded. "I had to make sure he really left."

"Show me? I'm trying to get my head around what's going on."

"I had a feeling you might want to." They walked around the block to the back of the building, Devon leading. Veronica was conscious both of how close she let herself stand next to him as well as every detail of their path as they walked.

"That was where he ran." He gestured to a building about thirty feet from her apartment. "I saw him there."

She looked around, walking up and down the sidewalk. Was Logan really here when Devon found him? A few crows were hopping around nearby, pecking at discarded food on the sidewalk. As she approached the crows they barely acknowledged her presence. One pecked at a burger, tearing apart the bun inside the Styrofoam container. Crows eating garbage was a common enough sight to not be cause for concern. She watched one take flight, a large onion ring in its beak. A crow eating an onion ring was hardly what one could call admissible evidence but it was confirmation enough for Veronica. Logan had been there and he'd had to flee.

"Was he carrying food when you saw him?"

"Maybe. He dropped a couple bags."

_He was here. Fifteen feet from my apartment. He was almost safe._

_He could still be close by, hiding somewhere and just waiting to get back to me. Maybe Devon wants me out of the apartment before he can get back._

Or had Devon knocked him out and left him alone and hurt?

"Are you ready to go?" he asked.

She sighed. "Look, Devon, I really don't know what's happening here and you said we were going to talk and —"

"We will. We will talk."

"Okay, it's just that you told me my ex was stalking me and then nothing – "

"I didn't say he was stalking you only that I thought I saw him near your apartment."

Except he did say 'stalking.' I heard it.

"How did you recognize him, anyway?"

He scratched at his ear and shrugged. "I kind of googled all our classmates when we started last year. An article popped up about the two of you. I have a good memory for faces."

_That's one way to put a positive spin on a creepy pastime. "Are you sure it was him?"

Devon huffed out a breath of frustration. "Absolutely."

"But you never met him. How can – "

"Look he dropped these, okay?" He pulled a set of sunglasses from his pocket and thrust them at her.
She didn't need to fake the trembling of her hands as she took the glasses from him. It was as much from fear as bone rattling anger. "What how – ?"

"Do you recognize them?" he asked.

Veronica nodded. "Yeah. They're his." She clutched the stupid red frames in her fist and pressed the glasses to her chest, taking a deep steadying breath. She let the tears fall from her cheeks unhindered.

"He dropped a grey hat too. It's in my car. I thought you might want them."

"So he was really here?"

He nodded. "He was really here."

"Is there anything else you need to tell me?" She slid the sunglasses into her bag.

"Yeah," he said. He spoke the words on a sigh, sounding almost relieved by her question. "A lot more. We can talk at the restaurant and I'll tell you everything."

Maybe that would actually be better. Crowds. People. A public setting.

"Tell me one thing." He nodded for her to continue. "Logan, did he tell you – where is he now? Do you know?"

Devon hesitated. "I know where he is."

"Did you follow him to his hotel or something?"

He looked down at his hands as he decided how to best answer her question. "Not exactly."

"And if I wanted to know where he was?"

"Then I can tell you later. If you still want to know."

"Okay."

When they got back to the car Devon gave her Logan's hat. She held it in her hands as they drove, focusing on the weave of the fabric as they engaged in stilted small talk.

"Where are we going?" she finally asked.

"It's a surprise."

Because everything up to this point has been so predictable.

He drove several blocks east, then north, went east again, then south. By no stretch of the imagination could it have been considered the quickest route to their destination. Devon was trying to disorient her. Make it difficult for her to remember where they'd gone.

He pulled the car into an alley way. They had only driven for about twenty minutes and they were definitely still in Chicago but she wasn't familiar with the neighborhood. She clutched her bag to her chest as they got out of the car and left the grey trilby on the seat.

Devon led her to the middle of the alley and Veronica reached into her bag for the pepper spray. They stopped in front of a door mostly obstructed from the sidewalk view by a large dumpster.
He could have easily moved the dumpster himself. She looked down the alley and saw a rectangular patch of cleaner asphalt. That must have been where the dumpster was before. Which means he's been here before today. She gripped the canister tight in her fist.

"This is slightly suspect," she joked.

Devon chuckled as he unlocked the back door but didn't offer an explanation. He held it open for her and she stepped inside. He was right behind her, leading her into the room with a hand on the small of her back. The intimate gesture wasn't something she expected and she tensed up.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

She nodded. "I'm kind of worried we'll get arrested. But other than that I'm fine."

He laughed again and there was something about the sound that made her grit her teeth. Light flooded the room and Veronica found herself standing in an industrial restaurant kitchen. A fine layer of dust covered almost every surface. The hum of the refrigerators told her they were still functional but everything else communicated it had been a long time since someone cooked a meal in the space. A bright red takeout bag, like a delivery driver might use, sat on one of the stainless steel counters.

But there's electricity which means we're not running completely off the grid. How long has he been planning this?

"Okay," Veronica said, raising an eyebrow in question. "So we're not going to a restaurant?"

"This is a restaurant."

She sighed, looking around the room. "I'm not sure this is a good idea, Devon. I'm a little shaken up and I told Wallace I wouldn't be long."

She saw the precise moment he realized his plan was in danger of falling apart. He clenched a fist at his side before ultimately relaxing it and then nodded, seemingly to himself. It occurred to her maybe she'd just switched up his cast of characters. How long until he began to see Wallace as an obstacle to his happiness?

"Don't you want answers?"

"I do. But more than that I want closure. I think I need to call Logan. Find out what's really going on."

"I told you I'd tell you."

"Yeah, but I think I need to hear it from him."

"What if I could give that to you?"

"You can give me closure?"

"I told you I knew where Logan was. What if I could bring him to you? Give you a chance to say everything you need to him in person?"

"You'd do that?"

"I'd do anything for you, Veronica. But first can you do something to me?"

He's alive. He's close by and he's alive. That assurance energized her enough to continue the
"Charade."

"Depends on what it is."

"Talk to me. Why don't you tell me what happened. Why would Logan come to Chicago?"

She took another breath, clenching the strap of her bag in her hands. "We got back together over break. I thought this could be our chance. But he was the same person as before. Angry. Selfish. So I broke up with him and he was furious. Said I'd regret it but I didn't think he'd follow me half across the country." She looked up at him. Her eyes were wide and pleading. "Who would do something like that?"

Veronica dug through her bag.

"What do you need?" His voice was so soft and gentle she wanted to laugh in his face.

"I thought I had tissues in here."

As she pulled out the packet of tissues, she heard her phone vibrate. Devon narrowed his eyes making it clear he'd heard it too and didn't care for the interruption. She dabbled at her eyes with the tissue and grabbed her phone.

"It's my dad."

"Don't answer it."

"Why not?"

"I mean, you can do what you want, but maybe you shouldn't talk to him right now." He shrugged. "You just seem kind of upset. Give yourself time to –"

"I can't ignore him."

"You don't have to." Devon reached for her phone and she allowed him to take it from her grasp.

"What are you -?"

"You can call him back later." The phone stopped vibrating. He moved as if to hand the phone back to her but then hesitated, turning the phone over in his hand so he could view the screen. "It might be better if you turned the thing off."

The words were careful and considered. As hard as he tried to make it sound like a casual suggestion, Veronica knew it wasn't.

"You shouldn't have to talk to anyone you don't want to," he continued. "Not now." Devon didn't meet her gaze as he continued to fiddle with her phone. He handed it back to her. "There. It's off."

"Thanks," she said. Thanks for making it so my dad and the police station can't track us using my cell phone signal. She dropped the phone back into her purse and dabbled at her eyes again with the tissue.

He picked a place to isolate me and is now trying to cut off all my ties to the outside world. Logan was right. This guy is all about control.

Thinking Logan's name caused a new surge of urgency to well up. She knew from the hat and the glasses that Devon had encountered Logan. Now she just needed to know where Logan currently
was. She hiked her bag up on her shoulder and rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand.

"You okay?" he asked.

She started to nod but then stopped, shaking her head a little. She settled for a slight shrug of her shoulders. "Not really."

"You hungry yet?"

"I could eat."

"Let me take your bag."

She hesitated, clutching the strap of the bag tighter. Hope wasn't lost if he took her bag from her. In fact she'd known it was a real possibility he'd want to.

"I can keep it," she said. Might as well try. "But thanks."

"Come on. It's not a problem."

"It's also not a problem for me to keep it."

"Give me the damn bag, Veronica." His tone left little room for argument and while the harshness he spoke was cause for concern, she also delighted in it the slightest bit. Devon wasn't as puppy personified as he was trying to make her believe.

She handed it to him, being careful not to step too close. He reached for it and her intuition told her what was going to happen a second before it did. The bag slipped from Devon's grasp and the contents scattered across the tile floor. The way he held onto the bottom of the bag for an extra second, turning it upside down, was too purposeful to be an accident.

She looked at the mess and sniffled. "Shit."

"Oh god. I am so sorry."

"It's okay." She knelt on the ground, reaching behind her for a stray lip gloss and tossed it back into her bag.

"Let me help you."

Devon crouched down under the guise of helping her pick up the items but he wasn't cleaning up as much as sorting through the contents. He handed Veronica another tissue.

"Thanks." She pulled one out and wiped at her eyes.

It was fairly obvious he was looking for something. He tossed in her keys, chapstick, and sunglass case back into her purse. All that remained on the ground were a couple of pens, her pepper spray and taser, GPS tracker, and wallet. She picked up the wallet and tossed it in the bag at the same time Devon reached for the large GPS tracker.

"Thanks." She pulled one out and wiped at her eyes.

There was a reason she'd placed the tracker and defensive weapons in the side pocket of her bag. A pocket she didn't actually zip shut. If Devon concluded he ridded her of any weapons he'd be less likely to assume she had any on her person.

"What's this for?"
And Devon was his name-o.

"Oh shit," she whispered, pressing a hand to her mouth. "That's my dad's." She punctuated the moment with a pathetic sounding sniff.

"What's it for."

"It's a tracker. My dad's a PI and I helped him out a little over break. I didn't realize it was still in there."

Devon nodded as he turned the tracker over in his hand. Even if he believed her explanation, there was no way he'd permit her to keep the GPS tracker in her possession.

"It's kind of cool." He held it up closer to his eye, looking at it from every angle as he stood. "Are they expensive?"

"Very." With his focus on the tracker, she patted her front jeans pocket, reassuring herself the audio transmitter was still there.

He stood up, holding the GPS tracker up to the light to inspect it further. Veronica knew where this was going but it was easy to feign surprise when the GPS tracker slipped from Devon's fingers and fell to the kitchen floor. She lurched forward to reach for the tracker but missed by a few inches. A large chip of plastic and the back of the piece broke off. One battery rolled under a cupboard, rendering the entire device useless.

"Oh hell." Devon dropped to his knees and picked up the back of the device. "Is it broken? God, what's wrong with me?"

A number of things but we don't have time to discuss that right now.

She sighed and rubbed a hand over her face. "Maybe. I'll test it when I get home."

"No. That was just – wow. This is the last thing you need right now."

"It was an accident."

"I'm a walking disaster aren't I?"

"Well I'd hate to see what you could do in a china shop."

"I really am sorry."

"Hey. It's okay," she waved a hand in the air, brushing off his apology. "I'm an only child. He can't kill me. And his birthday isn't until October so I have plenty of time to save up for a new one."

Devon stood first, offering Veronica a hand to pull her up. As she stood, Veronica noticed the large pepper spray canister and taser was nowhere in sight. Odds were neither item had made it back into her purse. She had to commend the guy's methodical attempts to leave her defenseless: turn off her phone so the voice recorder was off and their location couldn't be tracked, break a rogue GPS tracker, and hide anything defensive.

If he could do so casually, no doubt the guy would frisk me.

He either didn't trust her, was paranoid, or some fantastic combination of the two.

"Here, let me," he said, reaching for Veronica's purse again.
This time she didn't protest. There was nothing in the bag she could use anymore. She mostly lamented the loss of her cell phone recorder. While Wallace was listening off-site, an additional recorded transcript would be valuable in the event of a trial.

Devon tucked her bag into a corner of the counter and she followed him through one of the doors leading into the dining room.

The large room where they now stood obviously hadn't been used to host customers for some time. Dust mites floated in the stale air. She looked around the room and noticed there was a fine layer of grime and dust over every surface – most notably covering the expanse of the dark wood bar.

All the windows and the front door were boarded up so the only natural light in the room came through the cracks. There was no overhead light, but Devon had placed a tall standing lamp in each corner. A few square tables remained in the space, chairs turned upside down or stacked on top of them.

In the center of the room was a table Devon obviously prepared for the occasion. He'd set the table with china, silverware and glasses for two. An uncorked bottle of red wine waited for them. Flowers, two roses in a bud vase, and a bread basket also adorned the table. The tablecloth was a bright red vinyl with a smaller white linen cloth over it.

*There's something disturbingly familiar about this whole setup. And it's more than déjà vu.*

He waved an arm wide, gesturing to the room. "This is pretty much it."

Veronica looked around, taking a few cautious steps through the space. A narrow hallway split off from the dining room. She took a single step towards it before Devon's hand tightened around her wrist.

*Careful. "What's through there?" she asked.*

"Just the bathrooms but they're not operational." He pulled her back over to the table and slid out the chair for her. "Sit. I don't want the food to get cold."

"Devon, what is this?"

He appeared conflicted, unsure how to respond. Finally, he nodded. "A date, I guess. If you want it to be."

She took a few steps away from him, feigning interest in the tiles of the ceiling as she looked up. "I just ended things with Logan a few days ago –"

He rushed forward and grabbed her hand, pressing her palm flat against his chest. The strength of his grip took her by surprise. "But we can be friends, right? You said."

"Friends?"

He nodded. "Absolutely. I want you to be happy. That's all. Maybe once –" He looked down at his chest where her hand still rested. "You hungry?"

She nodded. Her throat was tight and she didn't trust herself to speak. More of what he thought the future held for them was becoming clear and it was frightening.

*This can't end well.*
Veronica had an urgent need to get Devon to reveal where Logan was and find a way to escape the dinner of horrors.

"I picked something up I think you'll like. Give me ten to get it all ready?"

She nodded again, feeling less like an actual person and more like a bobblehead.

As he left the dining room she spared a second to wonder why he felt comfortable enough to leave her alone. Maybe, like Skyler, he didn't consider her much of a threat. Or perhaps he thought the role he'd played over the past years she'd known him successfully fooled her. She adjusted the underwire of her bra, shifting the GPS tracker she'd jokingly stuffed there hours before, and looked around the room.

*Foreplay. Good for more than just getting you hot and bothered it seems.*

Devon had said he could bring Logan to her for closure. She doubted he'd leave her alone for long which meant he had to be close by. Maybe even somewhere in the restaurant. It'd make sense for Devon to keep his traffic pattern small and contained – stashing Logan somewhere at the restaurant would minimize the number of potential witnesses.

And if Logan was here she *had* to find him. She kept her footfalls light. If Devon caught her she'd pass off her disappearance as a desperate need for the bathroom. Down the hallway from the bathroom were two locked storage doors. The metallic edges of the red 'employees only' signs were rusted.

*Which way do you want to go, Veronica?*

She pressed her ear to the first door and then the second, straining to hear any sound from within. Her inquiry returned only silence and she took a deep breath, pulling the two slightly modified paperclips out of her back pocket. It had been a risk to bring them but less so than if she'd brought her entire lock pick kit. If Devon caught her, the paperclips looked innocuous enough that she could explain away her possession of them.

The lock of the first door unhitched with a thrilling snick sound. She slowly twisted the knob and pushed the door open a crack, fearing any noises that could give her away. There was even less light down the hallway and at first glance she thought the room was empty. Aside from a few dusty shelves and some cleaning equipment nothing appeared to be significant. She swung the door open a little wider and winced when she hit something behind the door. Peering around the corner and behind the door she recognized Logan's silhouette. The force of the discovery made it difficult to breathe, but Veronica rushed forward.

His head was slack and hanging forward while his hands and feet were tied to the chair with zip ties. A cloth bound his mouth. The cloth was the first thing to go and she slid it down so it hung loose around his neck.

"Shit." She brushed the hair back from his face and saw a large gash on his forehead. There was a smear of blood and she ran her fingers gently over the mark. "Wallace, send help. Logan's here," she whispered. "Devon tied him to a chair and is keeping him in a locked storage closet. He's bleeding and it looks like he's been drugged."
Veronica couldn't smell any chemicals on the cloth gag but there had to be a reason why, even hours after he'd gone missing, Logan was knocked out. If Devon had gagged him with a cloth dipped in inhalants it could have killed him.

"Logan?" At his lack of response she pressed her fingers to his pulse and calmed slightly at the feel of the steady rhythm. She tilted his head back, ghosting her fingers across his temple. "Logan? Wake up."

He groaned slightly, jerking back so his chin fell out of her grasp.

"Come on." She lightly smacked his cheek. "Come on." He stirred again, his head lolling forward.

"Vrronica?"

"Shhh. I'm here." On impulse, she pressed a kiss to his temple, fighting back angry tears.

*What a fucking mess.*

He was okay, though injured, and she'd figure out a way to keep him safe. Right now she didn't have more than a minute left before Devon came back into the dining room and discovered her missing. He couldn't find her and Logan together.

"Logan. Look at me."

He shook his head against her words, trying to wake himself up. She spoke them again more fervently and a little louder, looking to the cracked door for the sign of telltale shadows.

"Huh? Vrronica?"

"I'll be back. Soon. But I need you to fight and wake up, okay? Fight to wake up but be quiet."

"Quiet," he whispered back. She didn't know if he understood what she needed him to do or if he was parroting her words back. A sob threatened to bubble its way up and out of her chest at the sight of his helpless body slumped in the chair.

"That's right. Wake up and be quiet. Don't try to move. I'll be back as soon as I can. Okay?"

He nodded and blinked. She saw him narrow his eyes, trying to focus on her face. "Okay."

She pressed her lips to his quickly and he groaned again. *Good boy. Wake up.*

"I'll be back," she whispered. "Remember, be quiet." He opened his eyes wider and made direct eye contact, nodding his head slightly.

It was physically painful to leave him sitting there but they had to be smart about this. She needed at least another minute to free Logan from his restraints and he wasn't awake enough yet to quietly sneak out of the space. Given Devon's ever changing mental state she didn't want to risk them being found. While she didn't think Devon would hurt her he obviously had no such concerns about hurting Logan.

She opened the door to one of the restrooms and closed it again right away, letting it shut loudly behind her.

"Veronica?"

For half a second she thought Logan was calling for her but the voice wasn't the right timbre and the
storage closet door was securely shut. Thank god. She pressed a hand to her mouth and took a few deep breaths. She was close to screaming in frustration but wouldn't give into the urge.

"The bathroom needs some work," she called back.

As she rounded the corner Devon met her with a steely glare. He stood by the table in the center of the room, his arms crossed. "I told you it wasn't ready."

She wiggled her fingers in the air and shrugged. "I wanted to wash my hands." Looking at the front and then the back of her hands she grimaced. "I may have made it worse."

There was a wary edge to Devon's gaze but she ignored it, side-stepping past him to where a plate of food sat waiting for each of them. Devon was wearing an apron and Veronica idly wondered when in the day he'd gone for takeout. The thought of him ordering takeout on her behalf like this was a date – and going shopping for groceries -

The transmitter in her front pocket was extremely comforting – just knowing Wallace was with her in some way and listening to what was going on. All she had to do was be smart and she'd get Logan out of there before Devon could hurt either one of them. If she was lucky what she'd just told Wallace about Logan would be enough to get the police to investigate.

"What'd you make?" she asked.

"Are you okay?"

She stopped her inspection of the table and looked up at him, offering him a pitifully weak smile. "Why wouldn't I be?"

He sighed. "Well, you're kind of acting weird. Like this Logan thing isn't a big deal."

"It isn't."

"Veronica –"

"Look, I can't think about this right now. That's something you need to understand about me if we're going to be friends. I might act tough but – "

" – you still need someone to take care of you?"

What I was going to say was 'but it's actually not an act and I could probably kick your ass' but sure. We can go with your answer.

She scrunched up her nose. "Is that pathetic?"

He shook his head in vehement denial. "Not at all. I always knew – " Rather than finish his thought, he pulled out Veronica's chair for her again. "We should eat before the food gets cold."

"Okay."

Once she sat down Devon pushed in her chair. He lingered behind her, placing a hand on each of her shoulders. His thumb caressed the side of her neck and she craned her head to look up at him.

"I'm not like him. I'll take care of you." He gave her shoulders a quick squeeze to punctuate the fervency of his words. "It's all I've ever wanted to do."

There was something about hearing whispered promises of devotion spoken by someone so twisted
that made her nauseated. Specifically the way he was deliberately manipulating her under the guise of love. She'd dated some prize assholes in the past but this was different. This was a dark and warped form of control disguised as affection.

Veronica breathed against the tightness in her chest and forced a smile. "We should eat," she said, returning her focus to the plate in front of her.

Before stepping away, Devon kissed the crown of her head. She exhaled another deep breath to control the urge to jerk away from him. Or elbow him in a particularly sensitive area.

As he sat down he untied his apron and draped it over the back of his chair. From the pocket of the apron he pulled out a taser and placed it beside his wine glass. He was casual as he did so, treating the taser not as a weapon but as a neutral item. Like it was simply a part of the table setting or he intended to light the candlesticks with it. It was a different model from the one she'd brought, which meant he could still have hers on his person. Or he'd trashed it somewhere.

Some people remove their wallet and phone from their pocket before sitting down. Devon removes his taser. What a modern guy.

She read the action as overt but unspoken warning. Before she could even imagine how he would explain the presence of the weapon he chuckled, noticing her stare.

"Call me paranoid," he said.

"Paranoid."

He smiled as he picked it up. When he pressed a button the electricity jumped between the tines. "This is a rough neighborhood and I don't have a security system installed yet." He shrugged. "Plus I'm a little scared of the dark."

"We could have eaten at a restaurant in a better part of the city."

"This is better," he said. "More intimate."

Did he even believe what he was saying? Was this compelling to him? Or was he like Skyler – well aware he was weaving a web of bullshit but hoping Veronica was stupid enough to fall into it?

She leaned her elbows on the table and laced her fingers together, resting her chin there. "What's going on here, Devon?"

He flinched, the corners of his mouth ticking down in a frown. "Let's eat first."

"Okay." He didn't need to answer her questions for her plan to work. All she needed was for him to think she was buying what he was selling and give Wallace and her dad some time. She looked at the table before her and frowned. Again, the feeling of familiarity at the setting made her uneasy.

"Did you make all this?"

"I wish. Picked it up from Cantinetta."

Cantinetta was a mid-range Italian restaurant about a ten minute walk from Abbot Hall; the place where first and second year med students spent about ninety-percent of their time. It wasn't as popular as The Hudson, the pub three blocks down with cheap pints of PBR, but Veronica had eaten at Cantinetta enough times to be familiar with their menu. "How'd you know I liked rigatoni with sausage?"
More importantly – when did they add it to the menu?

Devon ducked his head in embarrassment and fiddled with his napkin.

"I pay attention, I guess."

A less creepy way of saying 'I've been watching you for years.' She sat up in her chair and looked at Devon's plate – spaghetti and meatballs.

Fuck you, guy.

The precise game Devon was playing became clear. She worked to keep her expression neutral and the epiphany from reaching her eyes.

The food. The flowers. The cozy table for two.

She slid her silverware off her napkin and laid it across her lap. "When have you seen me eat Italian food?"

Devon's fork was poised above his spaghetti. He looked torn between answering and ignoring her question. "Now that you mention it, I haven't." He shrugged. "Must have confused you with someone else."

She picked at the noodles on her plate, spreading them out across the white ceramic surface. "It's such a stupid thing to remember but this is almost exactly what Logan and I ate on our first date."

"Is it now?" He twirled the noodles around his fork. "What a coincidence."

"Yeah."

"I guess we're meant to be together, huh?" He took a bite and grinned at her.

It was all she could do then to not reach for the taser, jam it into his chest, and run back to break out Logan. Devon wanted to take everything from her and claim it as his own. Even the memory of her first date with Logan. It was further evidence of how detached he was from reality. How did he think reclaiming memories as his own was going to work?

She stabbed a few noodles on her fork and shook her head.

Control, she reminded herself. This was all about control. It was why he couldn't let her see him on the plane. Why he showed up to her apartment to surprise her. Why he needed their 'first date' to be somewhere he could manipulate the environment.

This will go better if he thinks he has the control. Play along.

She'd spent more than a few nights at La Bottega with Logan, the true location of their first official date, sharing plates of pasta and drinking wine without being carded. That summer after junior year may have been rife with difficult moments but there were plenty of good ones as well. La Bottega witnessed a number of them and now Devon was stealing it. Pretending it was theirs to share.

The restaurant had closed their freshmen year at Hearst and Veronica had mourned the loss. It was like having a friend move away in the middle of the school year, forcing you to say goodbye before you were ready.

"The meatballs, Logan. What am I going to do without their meatballs?"
"Sweetie, you want meatballs, I've got meatballs at the ready."

She frowned at her lasagna. Logan had suggested they try a new place that delivered to the Grand and she was regretting she'd let him. "That was beneath you."

He nodded sagely. "Sometimes a half-decent joke about balls is all I'm capable of."

"Could I get some water?" She coughed, wiggling her fingers at her throat. "Thirsty."

He stood up instantly and nodded, grabbing the taser. "I'll be right back."

Within seconds he returned with a bottle of water and uncapped it, pouring them each a glass. He placed the taser back in its place, directly beside his right hand.

"You don't want any wine?" he asked.

"I'm not much of a red drinker."

The bottle he gestured to had already been uncorked. Drinking wine without knowing if he slipped something into it was not something she was prepared to do. Besides that, she wanted to keep all her faculties. She couldn't afford to have a fuzzy head. He'd poured them water out of the same bottle, though. If he took a sip then she could too.

He frowned at the wine glasses. "But I –" He looked up at her, evidently confused and then shrugged, raising his glass of water to hers. "This is fine." They clinked them together. "To new beginnings."

She watched as he raised the glass to his lips and didn't drink anything until she saw him swallow. She refilled her water glass. Alison, her roommate from UCLA, was Sicilian. She fervently believed toasting with a glass of water was bad luck and would refuse to let anyone holding one participate in a toast.

"With any luck, all of the bad luck will be aimed directly at Devon."

"You're right," she said. "This is nice."

"You deserve to be taken care of, Veronica."

The food before her looked halfway decent and there was only so long she could refuse to eat. He probably won't like it if I say, 'I can't eat this because I'm concerned you may intend to drug me.'

He took a large bite of his spaghetti and the corners of his mouth ticked when he noticed she was merely pushing her pasta around her plate. "Something wrong with the food?" The concern in his voice made her want to break the wine bottle over his head.

"I really like rigatoni."

"I know. That's why I ordered it for you." He caught his blunder – the panic evident in the almost imperceptible widening of his eyes. "I mean, I hoped you would."

"Right," she said, perking up and nodding along. "That was very thoughtful. It's just that I also like spaghetti and meatballs. A lot."

"You want my spaghetti?"
She batted her eyelashes at him in a manner she intended to be more comical than flirtatious. "I mean, if you're offering."

He laughed, shaking his head as he picked up his plate of spaghetti. "I can't say no to you."

"It's the head tilt. Gets 'em every time."

They exchanged plates and Veronica took a few bites, making a large production of how much she enjoyed the meal. Aside from a few appreciative noises there was no conversation. She was consciously aware of how much Devon watched her as they ate.

After those few minutes of relative silence, Devon sat his fork down and folded his arms on the table. He pushed his plate away, narrowing his focus so it was all on Veronica. "So tell me. What is it about Logan?"

"Hmm?"

"You heard me."

She took a few sips of her water. *The best lies are the ones that most resemble the truth.*

"Why do you want to talk about my ex?"

Devon sighed again and filled her glass for her. "You're just so great. I wanted to try and understand why Logan would give all this up." He tucked his chin to his chest, almost mumbling his words. "Why he'd give you up."

"That's a nice thing for you to say." He looked back up and when they made eye contact she smiled. "But I broke up with him, remember?"

"Yeah."

"Where did you say you saw him again?"

Devon shifted in his seat. "He was poking around outside your apartment. Looked like he was trying to sneak through the back."

"What were you doing back there? It's kind of an odd place to hang out is all."

This appeased him enough to smile. "It was a coincidence."

"Right place right time kind of thing?"

"Yeah. When I called out to him he looked startled then took off running. I followed, he got aggressive —"

"Did he hurt you?"

"No, but he wanted to. He took a swing at me and I shoved him into a wall. I needed to buy some time. I had to get to you."

She shuddered at the scene he described.

*His story continues to evolve. Last time he told it he didn't mention Logan taking a swing at him.*

She rubbed her hand up and down her opposite arm, fending off the goosebumps. Devon must have
"Hey, I'm okay. Don't worry about me."

"What did you do with him?"

"Nothing. He ran off, I followed him, and then came to find you."

She couldn't press much more without making him suspicious. A specific admission of guilt would be a nice bow she could wrap around the rest of Devon's behavior but wasn't strictly necessary. All she needed was to either buy some time for the police to show up or wait until she could find a way to break Logan out. It didn't matter to her either way as long as Logan was safe.

"Well, I'm glad you're okay," she said.

"Thanks. And you too." He poured himself a glass of wine. "I've got a bad feeling about Logan. I mean – you're done with him. Right?"

The part of her that was still eighteen wanted to rush to Logan's defense but thankfully that was an urge easily ignored. The part of her that was actually twenty-four and understood the delicate nature of this conversation nodded.

"Definitely."

He poured Veronica a glass of wine as well and at her look he smiled. "In case you change your mind."

I won't.

He picked up his glass, staring at the liquid as he swirled it around. "Do you think people have a type? Like a certain kind of person they date?" While his tone was conversational, Veronica understood he was leading her through a conversational labyrinth of some sort. The only question was where the first trap was laid and what would trigger it.

She stalled by taking another bite of her spaghetti, twirling the noodles around so they snaked all the way up the tines. "I don't know."

What's the right answer here? What does he want me to say?

"Logan and I have known each other since we were kids. It was nice, I guess, to share that kind of history with someone. Made things a lot simpler."

God it'd be so satisfying to hear him say it. Just admit to something.

All she could do was keep Devon occupied and hope the police were on the way. She couldn't do this for hours.

For one, her dad was likely going out of his mind with worry. Her money was on him ringing the lines of every police commander in Chicago demanding they find her. Two, Devon was scary. He was the same kind of villain as Cassidy Casablancas; unassuming and invisible. That is until ignoring his presence became a deadly oversight. Three, Wallace's hero streak might not be as wide as her or Logan's but he had one. If the police didn't come for her soon Wallace would and this was not a situation he needed to stumble into blindly.
"Doesn't leave much room for new people to come into your life," he said. He took a sip of his wine and raised an eyebrow. There it was again. That awareness she had earlier that Devon was imitating Logan. It was either purposeful or he had spent so many years assuming different personas he didn't even realize he was mirroring Logan's gestures and quirks.

There was no Jason anymore, it seemed. Devon was simply a composite made up of all his aliases.

"Perhaps," she shrugged. "But that's what makes my fan club so secret exclusive."

"Who do I have to talk to about membership?"

"That'd be Wallace. He is both the president and the secretary."

"Busy guy."

"A little bit." She pushed her spaghetti around her plate and looked up at Devon from under her lashes. "Funny how life works sometimes."

"What do you mean?"

"Well Logan and I almost got back together in undergrad. But then something – " She sighed, offering Devon a little self-deprecating shrug. "Something stupid happened and we didn't talk for the next few years."

"Never?"

"The occasional email but nothing more than that. Our wires got crossed – or rather the postal service's wires did and I am so thankful for that."

Devon reached for his water glass. His Adam's apple bobbed as he took large gulps. She could practically hear his heart beating faster from where he sat. Here was tangible evidence he had been some sort of hero to Veronica all those years ago. "Really?" he asked, setting his glass down.

She nodded. "Yeah. Logan wrote me this letter asking me to move in with him and I never got it. If I had read his letter who knows what I would have done. Given up medical school, maybe? Picked up my life and moved back to Neptune." She refilled her water glass until the liquid almost spilled over the edge. "And we both know how that would have ended."

"Wow."

"Yeah. Whatever mail carrier let it fall from his bag? Kind of my hero."

Devon had only sipped his wine but she filled his glass as well. As soon as she sat the bottle down he reached for her hand. "Veronica, about that letter."

"Yeah?"

"I need to tell you something."

She mirrored his positon and also leaned forward, their faces only inches from one another. "You can tell me anything. We're friends, right?" She repositioned their hands in order to sandwich one of his between both of hers. As she reached forward, she knocked over his wine glass. The red wine saturated the table cloth, spreading out and running over the edges of the table.

"Shit." She pulled her hand back and stood up quickly, trying to blot some of the liquid with her napkin. "I'm so sorry."
Devon righted the upended glass. "It's okay."

"Here, use mine." She flicked out the napkin as she handed it to him and in the process knocked over her water glass. The majority of its contents spilled off the edge and directly onto Devon's lap.

"Damn it," Devon yelled. He stood up, agitated, and threw the napkin on the table. A part of her feared that she'd pushed him too far. Would he get physical with her? Try and forcibly drug her like he'd drugged Logan? She steeled her spine when he swiped the taser from the table, preparing herself for the shock and metal tines. "Stay here. I'll be right back." He headed into the kitchen, mumbling under his breath as he left the dining room.

There wasn't time to feel relief. The moment he rounded the corner Veronica retrieved the paper clips from her back pocket. Using zip ties on Logan had been a huge error on Devon's part. She'd have him out of there in a minute. Less time if Logan was alert.

She looked behind her one last time, took a deep breath, and slipped into the storage closet. Logan's head snapped up when she walked into the room. His whole posture relaxed when he saw it was her.

"What are you doing?" he whispered.

"Getting you out of here." She kneeled down behind the chair, ignoring the way Logan craned his neck to see what she was doing. She inserted the modified paperclip between the primary tooth of the tie and the ridges and slid the plastic through the widened gap and off of Logan's wrists. His wrists were raw and there were bright striations of blood telling her he'd been doing his best to break free. Stupid, stupid Logan. She repeated the process with his ankles.

"Did he drug you?" she asked.

He nodded. " Twice. Once to get me here and then I must have woken up at some point. Where are we?"

"I'll explain that later." Jumping to her feet, she helped him stand, throwing his arm around her shoulder. While he seemed alert the drugs were likely still working through his system and she feared he may fall. "You okay?"

"I'm fine. Let's go," he said, grabbing her hand.

She shook her head and pulled him back to the center of the room. "You stay here. Count to one-hundred then sneak out and get help."

"You've got to be kidding me."

"If we both leave Devon will run. He could have a whole identity waiting for him. There's an exit through the kitchen. Wallace is at the police station now waiting to hear from us."

"How am I supposed to get to him?"

She pulled the quarter sized GPS out of her bra and showed it to him. "Wallace is tracking us. Find a phone and call him."

"Veronica – "

She grabbed him by the lapels of his shirt, shaking him a little. "Do not argue with me. When it's clear, sneak out."
He nodded and leaned forward, pressing their foreheads together for a brief second before she exited the room. "When it's clear," he said.

"Be safe."

"You too."

She hastened down the hallway, rounding the corner just as Devon walked out of the kitchen. There wasn't time to slide back into her seat so she made like she was further inspecting the restaurant. He walked out with a new wine glass in one hand and a pastry box in the other. She ignored him as he removed the soiled tablecloth and replaced the glassware.

"Do you own this place?" she asked.

"Not technically. But I like to think of it as mine."

Due to the state of the restaurant there wasn't much for her to see or take in, but she continued her perusal. When she turned around he was watching her, a ghost of a smile on his lips.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing. You're just really beautiful."

She smiled back and took a tentative step towards him. Best case scenario would be Logan sneaking out undetected and Veronica finding a way to persuade Devon to let her go.

*Unlikely now that I'm here. Very unlikely considering how long he's been planning this.*

A part of her knew that the chances Logan would leave her behind to call for help were slim. If she wanted Logan to stay safe, she needed to find a way to get away from Devon too.

"Hey, do you think I could get my phone back?"

His smile faltered. "Why?"

"I need to call Wallace. He's probably worried about me."

"I can call him for you."

"You don't have his number."

Devon straightened the silverware so the bottoms of the flatware were evenly lined up. "I will if you give it to me."

"But that doesn't make any sense."

"You talking to Wallace right now is not a good idea."

"How is that your call to make?"

Devon raised an eyebrow. He appeared amused by her indignation. "You and I were in the middle of a conversation. It'd be rude for you to call someone else. Besides, I know what's good for you, Veronica." He gestured to the table in invitation and Veronica reluctantly returned to her seat.

She continued to pick at her pasta, taking only small bites to stretch the process out. She needed Devon's attention to stay on her. Though Devon's back was to the hallway, she couldn't risk him
rushing back into the kitchen for any reason and bumping into Logan.

Devon caught Veronica's eye as she looked around the room again. She was doing her best to stay casual while also keeping her eye on the space over Devon's shoulder for any glimpses of Logan. He smiled and looked around the room fondly.

"This place is beautiful, isn't it? When I saw it I knew it was perfect for us."

_Which only confirms this is something he's been planning for a while. A sort of unilateral wooing._

"So you don't own it but come here and visit sometimes?"

He nodded, a pleased smirk teasing the corner of his mouth.

"Aren't you afraid someone will catch you? I mean, you weren't very discrete. And it's got lights and —"

"This spot has been vacant for about a year and they're tearing it down in a couple months to build some condos." He winked at her and smiled. It was as if he saw them as conspirators — in on some inside joke she wasn't aware of. "I learned everything from you."

"I get that a lot." Her thoughts turned to what was next. Obviously Devon thought of this as a romantic first date. In his mind he saved her from Logan and now they were getting their chance to be together. But what happened once their date was over?

"You okay?" he asked

"It's just been a long day. I'd like to go home soon."

The smile vanished from his face and he shook his head. "But we just got here." He grabbed her hand across the table. The force of his grip made her wince. If he noticed he didn't care.

"I can't leave?"

"Why would you want to? Everything we need is right here." He filled her water glass again. "I had this idea. It might sound a little sudden. But we're friends, right?"

"Yeah." She tried to pull her hand back but he held tight. "Friends."

"Well what if we took a road trip?"

"A road trip?"

"Yeah. Somewhere quiet maybe? My parents have a great place we could drive out to."

_His dead parents have a great place._

"You want me to meet your parents?" she asked.

He nodded, turning her hand over in his grip.

"Where do they live?"

"Nampa. It's about twenty miles outside of Boise. I haven't seen them in a few years but I'm sure they'd love to meet you."
It seemed the longer Veronica spent in his company the more desperate for her validation and reassurance Devon became. While an hour prior he had said he was content to simply spend time in her presence now he wanted to take a road trip so she could meet his parents. It also wasn’t possible to make it to Idaho and back in three days.

_Holy shit. Is he going to kidnap me? Drug me when I refuse to go? Was he planning to leave Logan here?_

The pace of her heart picked up and she took a deep breath, sipping her water. Logan was two-hundred feet away from her. There was no way she was going to Idaho. Everything was going to be fine. But whereas before this night she may have described Devon as cunning with an unhealthy Veronica Mars fixation, she was coming to understand his fixation was dangerous and made him volatile. Not just towards Logan but potentially to herself as well.

Life had handed Devon a shit deal when he was an adolescent and he decided years ago Veronica would be his way of coping. Whether she wanted to be or not.

"Did your parents grow up there? In Nampa?"

"No, actually. They both moved to Idaho for college and then never left."

"So where did they grow up, then?"

He was silent as he dropped her hand. He fiddled with the vase on the table, turning it around in circles, and straightened his silverware.

She tried again. "Devon did you hear me? Where did your parents grow up?"

"I don't want to talk about my parents."

"You're the one who brought them up."

"That was a mistake. I don't want to talk about them anymore."

She dropped her fork, leaning forward onto her elbows and smiled. If she kept things light maybe she could convince him this was all a game. "Now come on there, buddy. You know that won't work with me. Okay. Let's start with your mom. Where did she grow up?"

"I said I didn't want to talk about this, Veronica."

"Well where did you live, then? You were born in Idaho. Did you stay there for undergrad?"

Ignoring her, he opened the pink pastry box on the table. "Hope you like chocolate."

Devon's discomfort was palpable as his perfect plan unraveled. Each question forced him into a situation where he had to either reveal a truth about himself or lie. Had he not planned for her incessant questions?

"Why won't you talk to me?"

_Did he think I would accept whatever truth he offered at whatever pace he wanted?_

He sighed. "My Mom grew up outside of San Diego and she met my dad one spring when he was down there for spring break. The started dating and she transferred from UC San Diego to University of Idaho to be closer to him."
"I grew up near San Diego."

"Really?"

He wasn't making eye contact anymore. For someone who needed control desperately he was now in a situation where it was being wrested from him. "Yeah. What was the name of the town where your mom grew up?"

"Look, can we not do this right now?" He slid an éclair over to her. "I just – there's a lot to tell you and I'm a little afraid it's going to freak you out or something."

Over Devon's shoulder she saw a flash of brown hair as Logan ducked behind the bar. Inside she gave a shout of triumph. Logan was okay, he was breaking out, and the police would be there soon.

While from her position she wouldn't be able to see when Logan slipped into the kitchen, it couldn't take him longer than a minute to make it out of the restaurant. She began to count.

"Oh, consider my interest piqued," she teased. She inspected the éclair. The dessert was something he definitely could have laced.

_Fourteen seconds._

"Look you might not believe me, Veronica, but we're the same, you and me. We've both lost so much. I knew it the first time I saw you."

"Last year during orientation?"

_Twenty-eight seconds._

He stilled for a moment and she waited. There was only so long he could keep the lies in. "No. It was before that."

"When?"

Her money was sometime in October 2004 – the date Devon used as inspiration for the PO boxes he rented in her name in Neptune and Chicago.

"Not like this."

"Devon -"

"Idaho. We're going to Idaho and I'll explain everything."

"Did you go to UCLA or something?"

"Veronica –"

"Or did we meet during my internship and I don't remember?"

"Stop it."

"Why won't you tell me where your mom–"

Devon grabbed his plate of spaghetti and threw it against the bar. The glass shattered at impact and she watched the remaining noodles and red sauce slide down the wood of the bar. She'd purposefully pressed him so his reaction shouldn't have been a surprise. She flattened her palms on the edge of the
table and took a calming breath.

_Fifty seconds._

"I'd like to leave now, Devon."

He sighed. "I need to clean that up and then we can plan our road trip." As he stood up he looked from the broken plate to her. "The front door is boarded shut and the only entrance is through the kitchen. I'll explain everything in Idaho."

He leaned across the table and kissed the top of her head. She bit her lip to keep herself from headbutting him or pushing him away. Logan was potentially feet from them now and there was no accounting for what Devon would do if further provoked. His behavior was already escalating. He picked up the taser from the table and slid it into his pocket.

She held her breath as he walked past the bar, kicking the shattered plate out of his path. She kept counting.

_Sixty-eight. Sixty-nine. Please be gone._

The second Devon was out of sight she ran to the bar and picked up the largest piece of glass from the shattered plate. She unzipped her boot, retrieving the can of pepper spray. When she peeked around the corner of the bar towards the kitchen entrance, Logan was there staring back at her. He pressed a finger to his lips, and she glared at him.

_I fucking knew it._

"That guy is crazy, Veronica." He whispered the words with his lips pressed against her ear. "And you're stupid if you actually thought I'd leave you alone with him."

Her smile felt wobbly and she hated that Logan would see the quiver in her chin. She needed to ride the wave of adrenaline coursing through her. She could fall to pieces later.

Logan also picked up a piece of the broken plate and grabbed her hand. They ran to the end of the bar opposite from where he'd been hiding. The side furthest away from the entrance into the kitchen. They crouched down, hiding behind a stack of empty, dusty wine crates. They were about twenty feet from where Devon would enter. If they acted quickly they could get around him and out the back door before he searched the restaurant and found them. It wasn't an excellent plan, but it was all they had.

"Back door," she mouthed, pointing to the kitchen.

He nodded.

She heard footsteps and on instinct clamped a hand over Logan's mouth, preventing him from speaking.

Devon's discovery that Veronica was gone was followed immediately by the sound of more glass shattering and silverware clanging across the floor.

"Veronica," he yelled. He knocked a chair over and then more broken dishes as he either wiped the table clean or flipped it over entirely. "Damn it, Veronica."

Veronica and Logan pressed themselves up against the bar. "What now?" Logan mouthed.
She held up a finger, indicating for him to give her a minute. Or even a second. The temptation to peer around the corner was strong but Veronica resisted, pressing herself up against the wall. Devon's footsteps were heavy and punctuated by his shouts. Even if he found them hiding she could disarm him long enough to give Logan time to escape. She knew he wouldn't though.

"Where are you hiding?" Devon asked. He wasn't trying very hard to find her and she expected it was because he knew there wasn't any place to escape. Of course she was still in the room. With the front door blockaded and the backdoor through the kitchen, Veronica would have had to pass by Devon in order to leave the restaurant.

Rather than return to the kitchen Devon headed down the hallway to where the storage closets and restrooms were. It would only be seconds until he discovered Logan was missing.

She expected to hear him yelling. She didn't expect the laughter. A twisted sound that sent fissures of panic zinging up Veronica's spine.

"You always have to be the big fucking hero, don't you?" It was up for debate as to whom that comment referred – Logan or Veronica.

They were mere seconds away from Devon finding them. She had a jagged piece of glass and pepper spray. Logan sat up on his knees and moved into a squat position, ready to run. But then he looked at her, silently pleading, and gestured with his head towards the kitchen. With sudden and horrifying clarity Veronica knew what he intended to do.

She shook her head emphatically. *Don't be a hero, Logan.* In response he nodded once. *You can do this,* his eyes seemed to say.

She nodded. She could do this. And she would because Devon might not hurt her but she was certain he would hurt Logan. Before Logan could stand up and do whatever he intended, whether he meant to confront Devon in the hallway or just use himself as bait, she pushed him over. He lost his balance and fell crashing into the wine crates, toppling one over. She slid the pepper spray canister up one sleeve and the piece of glass in the other. Veronica stood up, coming around the bar with her hands raised.

"I'm sorry, Devon." Devon rushed towards her. "I'm sorry." As he moved closer, Veronica countered so Devon's back was to the bar, allowing Logan time to escape. "This has all been a little much and you're freaking me out."

She walked towards him slowly, her arms still raised. Once she was in arm's reach he spun her around so her back was to his front. She crossed her arms over her chest, feeling the reassuring weight of the pepper spray canister up her sleeve. He jabbed the taser in the space between her shoulder blades.

"Don't hurt me," she whispered.

"I'd never hurt you, Veronica," he said, brushing his lips against her cheek. "Now tell me where Logan is."

"Logan's here?" There was a tremble to her voice even as she worked to keep it steady. She uncrossed her arms, letting them drop to her sides. The pepper spray slipped from her sleeve and she pressed her thumb to the trigger. She inched the shard of plate forward until she had a firm hold on the jagged edge. There was still the possibility he would discharge a taser cartridge or shock her but that wouldn't happen if she acted first.
"Don't lie to me." His voice was cold and he emphasized the force of the words by pressing the taser sharply into her back. "I have loved you for years. Years. And you do this?" He jammed the taser into her back again and forced her to walk forward. He was leading her into the kitchen. "You treat me like this? Rescuing Logan Echolls when my back is turned?"

She tensed her entire body and stopped abruptly so Devon bumped into her. "Yup," she replied. She brought her left elbow back to hit him in the stomach. Mostly she needed to put some distance between them. In one move, she swung back with the plate shard until it made contact with Devon. She spun around to face him then discharged the pepper spray in circles, moving backwards away from the stream as she did so.

His shout of pain bled into Logan's "Veronica!"

Devon dropped the taser and it clattered to the ground. She picked it up as she ran to Logan's side, grabbing his hand. They sprinted from the dining room, stepping over the broken plate and spaghetti sauce.

The pounding of her pulse magnified each sound: their footfalls as they ran, their heavy breaths, Devon's voice as he yelled. She willed her legs to keep moving.

She led them through the backdoor, crashing through in an ungracefully coordinated movement into the alley. They were instantaneously awash in blue and red lights as police cars pulled into the alley, their lights circling. As the cars screeched to a halt, Veronica and Logan kept running, taking solace behind one of the cruisers at the same moment Devon ran into the alley. He was clutching a kitchen knife and froze at the sight of the police cars.

Car doors opened in unison as the officers raised and pointed their guns at Devon. "Drop your weapon and put your hands in the air." There was a moment of hesitation but Devon did as the officers instructed. The knife fell from Devon's hand, clattering to the pavement of the alleyway, and Veronica's breath stuttered as she watched.

It was as if she was floating above the scene watching the rest of the evening's events unfold. An officer cuffed Devon before placing him in the backseat of the police car. She talked to her dad on the phone and reassured him she was okay. She heard Logan asking about Wallace. As all this happened Devon kept his eyes locked on her face. He looked hurt. Or, more accurately, betrayed.

"Miss, we need you to come to the station and give your statement."

It took several seconds for the officer's instructions to register and her second 'miss' was what got her attention. Veronica stared at the tail lights of the vehicle taking Devon from the alley. While a good part of this ordeal was over another part was about to begin. Trials and statements and reporters.

"What?" she asked.

"She needs to go to the hospital," Logan said, nodding at Veronica. "She's bleeding."

I am?

She held up her hand and saw the drips of blood running down her palm. A side effect from grasping the broken plate. "He needs a doctor, too. His forehead needs stitches and Devon drugged him."

The officer forced a tight lipped smile. "We can take both of your statements at the hospital."

Veronica stared toward the direction of where she'd last seen the cop car. Her thoughts were unclear and muddled. "Where are you taking him?"
"To the hospital first and then the station. He has a few wounds to be treated," the office said.

She looked back over to her shoulder to the ambulance and EMTs. "I want to give my statement here."

The officer nodded and opened an arm in invitation towards where the EMTs stood.

As she walked towards the ambulance, Logan at her side, Veronica looked over her shoulder down the alleyway one last time. "I want to go home," she sighed, knowing it wasn't possible. There were hours to go before that could happen.

An EMT helped Veronica up onto the edge of the truck.

"They're going to check you both out," the officer said, "then I'll be back to collect your statements." Veronica nodded. Her head felt heavy. The burst of adrenaline helped her escape but in its absence she felt fragile. Almost like a single gust of wind could shatter her. She rested her injured hand on top of her knee.

"How you feeling?" she asked, bumping her other knee into Logan's.

"Tired."

"I'm glad you're okay."

"I knew you'd find me."

"Did you?" Veronica asked.

Logan sounded as certain as he had been throughout this whole ordeal. So certain they'd find the stalker and be free. So confident in her abilities. Devon had claimed he and Veronica were the same. That their stories were equally tragic and therefore linked. And somehow that similarity gave him permission to manipulate her for years.

Logan brushed his fingers along her cheek and smiled. "It's what you do."

She nodded as the tears in her eyes welled. She blinked several times to keep them from falling.

"Hey, I know that face," Logan said.

*It's my 'how the fuck did we survive this one?' face. My 'I need a month long tropical vacation' face. My 'thank God it's over' face.*

She looked at him as he wiped the moisture from her bottom eyelashes.

"Yeah," she said, pressing his hand firmly against her cheek. "You do."

Chapter End Notes

Well, friends and readers, that's all she wrote! There will be a fluff-pilogue posted in the next week or two to give you a flash into what is in store for Logan and Veronica in the future, but if epilogues aren't your thing you can mark the story as complete in your brain. Thanks to everyone who read and reviewed and favorited and followed over the
Thanks be to my beta reader, scandalpants, who read FOUR DIFFERENT versions of this chapter as it was a WIP.

Fun fact the first draft of this chapter was 6,200 words and now it's coming in at 20,500. Wowzers.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

For all of those who love a good fluff-pilogue, this one is for you. Consider this my final love note to this version of Veronica and Logan and to all of those who have read, favorited, and followed this story. Much love, fandom friends.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 25: Epilogue

Residency proved to Veronica that she held a large number of misconceptions about the life of a doctor. The biggest shock came in her third-year of medical school when she discovered that instead of scrubs she would be expected to wear sensible shoes, button down shirts, and slacks. Sensible or not, after fourteen hours on her feet even shoes with the highest degree of orthopedic function were uncomfortable.

As a pathology resident Veronica understood she had it easier than most (emergency medicine or surgery? Lord help them) but being on-call was just as demanding for her specialty as the rest of her cohort. After six straight night shifts she was blissfully, finally, and thank the good-Lord done for the week.

Her first year as a resident required she be on call for eight weeks out of the year. Now in her third year that number was reduced to only five weeks and it surprised her how that slight adjustment greatly improved her quality of life.

As she walked up the short driveway she frowned up at the window of the second floor. The light to the kitchen was still on.

Logan had what she called a frustrating (and yet damn endearing) habit of trying to wait up for her the nights she was on call. He couldn't be talked out of it; even though many nights she'd walk into their townhouse and find him passed out on the couch with a stack of manuscripts on his chest. Often a highlighter was still in hand. No matter how hard she fought to get him to go to bed, she never won that particular battle.

Much like the battle that ensued over renting a townhouse in Palo Alto (her suggestion) rather than buying (his suggestion). Logan had poo-pooed the idea of renting before it was even fully articulated. His argument consisted of phrases like "investment" and "buyer's market" but what it came down to was a long-time dream deferred to share a house with her. She didn't have it in her to kill that dream. And since he was the one leaving his job and his support system to move north with her, she figured suffering though living in a beautiful townhome was the least she could do. She was just that good-hearted.

While she had missed him this past week, she still crossed her fingers he'd be asleep when she walked upstairs to the main floor. There was no reason for the both of them to be awake at four o'clock on a Sunday morning. The sound of two pots clanging together and something sizzling on
the stove told her even before she walked into the kitchen that Logan was awake. And apparently cooking.

"Logan?" she asked, smiling at the sight of his sleep rumpled self, standing over the stovetop. "What are you doing?"

"Making breakfast."

"This early?"

"It's nine o'clock somewhere."

She dropped her messenger back and keys on the kitchen counter and walked up behind him, hugging his middle as he finished mixing what looked like blueberry pancake batter. "Have you been up this whole time?" she asked.

He shook his head and she squeezed tighter, lacing their fingers together across his stomach. She'd really good and missed him. "I set an alarm."

"Do me a solid and throw some chocolate chips in there."

He turned around and held up a bag of chocolate chips, clearly poised to do just that.

*Blueberries and chocolate chips? Jackpot.*

"Seriously?" he asked, his tone affronted. "It's like you don't know me at all."

That statement warranted a snort. In their early months of living together, finding the perfect balance between openness and privacy was a struggle. Logan, she felt, wanted to know too much. He in turn thought Veronica wanted to conceal too much. After three years, though, Veronica could confidently say that while she didn't know everything about him she did in fact know him. And he her.

"I know you like it when I put a little swish in my step," she said, turning around with a flourish. Logan smacked her ass as she walked away. It shouldn't have but it surprised her and she fixed him with a glare that was half-serious.

"Ooh. Scary face." He tilted the spatula at her. "Pajamas and pancakes?"

"Duh."

On-call weeks were unpredictable but they always erred on the side of awful. This week was worse than most in part because it preceded Veronica using five of her guaranteed fifteen vacation days per year.

She'd already informed Logan the first day of vacation would be limited to intervals of sleeping and eating. He agreed but then deemed the other four to be part of Sex-a-Palooza. It was a title she couldn't get him to stop using. Nor could she convince him it wasn't funny. The twitch of her lips every time he said it surely didn't help.

Veronica changed into a pair of yoga pants and an old Northwestern sweatshirt. As she grabbed a pair of socks from their dresser, she knocked over a picture that set atop it. She righted it, taking a moment to trace the edge of the picture frame with a fingertip.

Getting her picture taken was a delicate matter in the two years after Devon's arrest. Whenever one of her classmates would pull out a camera she'd flinch. Having spent several years stalked via camera
lens, it had taken a considerable amount of time to work through. The aversion made her feel weak. What kind of a trigger was having your picture taken?

And while Logan never explicitly mentioned her discomfort, he noticed everything. As she started her third year of medical school he'd flown out to Chicago to attend the school's white coat ceremony. There wasn't a way to avoid cameras there. At least five photographers were positioned throughout the ceremony site. She'd worked hard for that moment and some – guy – (Logan had taken to calling him 'the fuckwad') wasn't going to take that away from her. So she had let her faculty mentor help slip on her white coat and smiled, locking eyes with Logan in the audience as she did.

The photo on top of her dresser was from the following year. It was of her and Logan on residency Match Day and it captured Veronica holding up her placement letter from Stanford.

Both her dad and Logan had flown out to Chicago in anticipation of Match Day. Northwestern thought it a grand tradition to gather at Gino's East, stuff their students with pasta, and take pictures as everyone in her residency class read their results.

While it was not how she wanted to find out where she'd be spending the next four years of her life, she ended the day thrilled that Logan and her dad had insisted on coming out for the event. Logan stood by her as opened the envelope and it was her dad who snapped the photo the moment she realized just what the letter said. The picture showed Logan tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, his face alight with wonder while Veronica appeared stunned. It took seven years longer than originally planned, but she was going to Stanford.

This same photo currently hung in her work locker and was the source of much confusion among her med students and co-workers that day.

*This will be a fun one to explain to Logan.*

She didn't think he would mind. In fact, she was almost certain he'd approve of the story and its implications for their future.

The slowly wafting scent of pancakes interrupted Veronica's revelry.

*Pancakes. Sleep. Sex. Let the vacation begin.*

She peeled out of the room, turning off the bedroom light as she rounded the corner. By the time Veronica returned to the kitchen Logan was pouring the batter onto the griddle. The hot butter on the surface created a satisfying sizzle sound and made Veronica realize just how long it had been since she'd eaten. From where she stood she counted at least six pancakes on the grill and the container of batter was still more than half-full.

"Are you sure you want me to eat all of that? It's gonna make my tummy puffy."

"We'll work it off." He managed to restrain himself from waggling his eyebrows, but she was certain the quick lick of his lips was purposeful.

*Message received, processed, and accepted.*

"So you're okay with me being all bloated for Sex-a-Palooza?" She clamped a hand over her mouth and squeezed her eyes shut, but not before she saw Logan's delighted expression.

"I knew you liked it. I was waffling between that and Sex-Stock. Thoughts?"

"I plead the fifth," she said.
"Pretty sure I could get you to talk. And then scream. And then -"

She cut him off with a groan and sliced her hand through the air. "Enough."

He shrugged in response, but his grin was too self-satisfied for her liking. She didn't know if she'd ever break him of his desire to get a rise out of her.

She poured each of them a glass of orange juice and watched as Logan purposefully flipped the pancakes and added a smatter of butter to the top of each one. The lines between his brows were knit with concentration and she thought she saw the tip of his tongue poking out between his lips. It was the same look she'd catch on his face as he played video games.

She took a deep breath and prepared herself for the potential awkward conversation before her. Maybe it'd be easier with his back towards her.

"Funny story," she said. She purposefully kept her tone light and conversational. "Well, at least I thought it was funny."

Logan snorted and threw a quick glance her way before looking back down at the griddle, stacking the finished pancakes on top of one another. "Is this really a funny story? Or are you trying to make sure my defenses are down?"

"Why would I want to make sure your defenses are down?" she asked. "You can't see me right now but I'm batting my eyelashes."

"Proceed." She waited until he finished pouring the batter onto the griddle and then turned around to face her, his expression expectant.

"You know that picture I have of the two of us in my locker?"

He nodded. His forehead creased the slightest amount as attempted to work out exactly where this story was going.

"Well one of my students saw it and asked who you were."

The way he smashed his lips together to hide his smile told Veronica he suspected where this was going. He turned around to flip the pancakes and then divided the six that were ready onto two separate plates. The aroma of melted chocolate chips was intoxicating and she looked forward to getting her twelve hour sleep off to a rousing start by weighing herself down with carbohydrates.

Likely he assumed this was about to turn into a hilarious 'Veronica, that girl be crazy jealous story.' He found those to be hysterical; stories of that variety weren't as rare as she would have liked.

You're wrong buddy. Just you wait.

Logan set a plate in each of their respective places but before he sat down Veronica clucked her tongue. At her look she cleared her throat and gestured towards the refrigerator with her chin. It took him a moment longer than usual to figure out what she wanted and when he did, he good-naturedly rolled his eyes. He pulled out a can of whipped cream from the fridge and wiggled it at her to see if he garnered her approval. She nodded enthusiastically and drizzled her pancakes with syrup.

Rather than sit beside her, he sat the can of whipped cream in front of her and leaned over the breakfast bar so they were eye level. "So this med student made an observation about what a pack of man candy I was?"
"Hardly. Anyone with eyes can tell you're a handful."

He pushed away from the counter and then held his hands up in a claw gesture, as if reaching for something with each hand. He squinted his eyes and she frowned, uncertain as to what he was doing. It wasn't an unfamiliar feeling.

"And you're about a handful and a half," he concluded.

"Hardy-har." Veronica fished a blueberry out of her pancake and threw it at him. Unfortunately she didn't get the satisfaction of catching him unawares. His damn reflexes were still sharp enough that he leaned a few inches to the right and caught the blueberry in his mouth.

Despite her obvious ire, that same dumb smug smirk was on his face and she couldn't help the laugh that bubbled out of her.

"So what did you say?" Logan asked. He took the long way around the island so he passed behind her. His hand trailed across her lower back as he pulled his seat out. It made her smile, these small reminders of how much he missed her when she was gone.

She waited until he took a drink of orange juice, his mouth full with the beverage, before she answered his question.

"I said you were my fiancé."

The effort of keeping the orange juice from spewing across the counter was evident. Though Logan managed to swallow it down, his eyes were comically large with surprise. "Did you now?" he managed to choke out. "And why did you say that?"

"It just slipped out. You know I can't be held responsible for the things I say."

"Mmm yes. You're definitely the sort to say things without thinking."

"That's right. Not a calculating bone in my body."

He grinned. "So why didn't you, I don't know, correct her?"

"That's where the story gets even funnier. You ready?"

He rotated in his seat so he faced her. She did the same, bumping their knees together. "I am."

"Well another student came into the locker room to deliver some test results I ordered and student number one left before I could explain. I guess she told a few people at the hospital who told a few other people —"

"Who told a few other people," Logan said. "I get the idea."

Veronica shrugged. "As you can see it was completely out of my control."

"Obviously."

He was doing his best to sound indifferent, but as he swiveled back around and reached for the syrup Veronica saw the gleeful expression in his eye.

"So when is the blessed event?" Logan asked.

She smiled and cut off a bite of her short stack, spearing all three of the pieces onto her fork. "I'll
send you an invitation." She doffed her fork to him in acknowledgment. The size of her smile rivaled his as she ate her pancakes.

For the better part of breakfast Logan and Veronica updated each other on the small details of their weeks. Whenever Veronica found herself on-call at the hospital those parts of their lives often had to be skipped.

Logan had signed a new YA author with a lot of promise. He was currently working on the pitch for the publishing house he thought was the best fit but his author was getting antsy. It happened a lot and, to Veronica, Logan's patience for the neuroses of his clients was unending.

"I was thinking," Veronica said, helping herself to the final piece of bacon on Logan's plate. "Check-in at the hotel is four but we should grab dinner first."

Logan wiped the corners of his mouth with his napkin. "Actually, I was thinking we could grab dinner here. We'd miss traffic into Santa Cruz if we left later."

"That doesn't make any sense. If anything we should leave here earlier then bum around for a bit before check-in."

"Or, option three, we get dinner with my friend Nathan and leave after?"

"Nathan? Who's Nathan? And you really want to start Sex-Giving by having dinner with your friend Nathan?"

Some combination of her indignation and the new name for their vacation made Logan almost choke on his breakfast. "Sex-Giving?"

The eyebrow waggle wasn't something she could pull off, but a faux-innocent shoulder shrug was firmly in her wheelhouse. "I just thought of it."

"It's good to be social, Veronica."

"Since when?"

"Come on. He's a good guy. You'll like him." Logan's abrupt movement to push back from the counter surprised her. He cleared away both of their plates and scraped the remnants into the compost bin. "I think he's going through a hard-time though."

What's your angle, Logan?

"Is that so?" she asked, not caring to keep the suspicion out of her voice. He would tell her what was going on even if she had to tip him over.

"Yeah. Real good guy." His tone was light and breezy. Either he hadn't noticed she was glaring at him or he just wanted to take his buddy Nathan out for a night on the town.

Instead of spending alone time sexing his girlfriend? Nope. Doesn't compute. He's up to something.

"He and his ex are going through a messy divorce. She's threatening to sue for full custody. He's pretty sure the ex is being neglectful but he can't prove it."

Veronica stared at Logan's back as he cleaned the griddle.

She balled up her paper towel, wetted the edge with water to add some weight, and tossed it at Logan. It landed square in the middle of his back and he turned around. His affronted face was rather believable but she wasn't buying his innocence schtick.

"Absolutely not, Logan. I don't have time to drive all across town following his ex."

"I know that," he said, rushing forward and taking hold of her hand across the breakfast island. "If you do all the grunt work, run the background checks and put a list together of places I should go, I can get the dollar-pic."

She smiled and then cursed herself for finding him so charming. "Money shot, and you know that so stop trying to be cute." As she mulled the idea over, both her schedule and Logan's suggestion for division of the labor, she weighed how much of a burden this would actually be. If Logan was willing to do the after-hours stuff, she could probably take care of everything else in just a few hours. "And you trust him?"

"Yes. I trust him."

"Dammit," she muttered under her breath. "Give me the damn file. I mean, I assume you have a file?"

"A few notes. It's paltry when compared to what someone with your intellectual prowess –."

"God. Spare me the ass kissing."

The bobble of his eyebrows was his way of asking if she truly meant that. Before she could respond with an emphatic 'yes' (and a less-emphatic internal 'maybe?') he walked out of the kitchen. When he returned he held a 6"x9" envelope. She assumed it would be filled with photos of the wife and kid but it was empty. Instead Logan had written a few relevant details on the back of the envelope.

The wife's home address. The name of her boyfriend. A list of places she liked to visit.

"You're a terrible private eye," she said, flipping the envelope around and squinting at Logan's scrawl.

"Well I'm your apprentice, so what does that say about you?"

"That I'm a sucker for a charity case."

A few minutes later Veronica was up in their room, wiggling out of her yoga pants and ready to tuck herself into bed.

She snuggled under the covers, listening to the sound of Logan in the bathroom brushing his teeth.

The year she'd spent in Chicago without Wallace was significantly harder than Veronica had anticipated. Somewhere along the way she'd become a person who relied on others. While she sometimes felt guilty that Logan had moved his life several hours north to follow her to her dream hospital, the companionship was nice. Even if they barely saw each other, having someone to share a cup of coffee and toast with was comforting.

Medical school began as a means to an end. It was something to get her out of Neptune. Then it became a matter of pure stubbornness as she refused to admit she'd made the wrong career choice. It was during her third year of medical school, during her hospital rotations, that it became something different.
Her patients were her cases. In place of background checks she had medical histories. With medicine her ability to compartmentalize was an asset. And whenever that ate away at her, she had her cadre of people that would listen to her frustration and at times her grief.

Now, though, she wasn't sure what was keeping her in the field. She had sixteen months left in her residency and then it'd be time to apply for medical examiner assistant jobs. Once that was over, there was studying for the ME certification exams. Thousands upon thousands of dollars in debt and she was already doubting she'd want to be in field for more than five years.

"Uh oh." Logan turned off the bathroom light and fan. The small change allowed stillness to settle over the whole of the room. She was that much closer to sleep. "Thinking deep thoughts?"

"Always." She took a deep breath and burrowed further into the blankets. The weight of the decisions she'd need to make in the coming years was making her even more tired.

"I could walk away from this." She mumbled the words into her pillow as Logan got into bed beside her. "All of it."

"Excuse me?"

Even in her sleepy state she heard the panic that tinged the edges of Logan's question. If she wasn't so exhausted she might indulge him and talk him through his feelings. As it was she wasn't awake enough to have patience for it. Veronica rolled over and met Logan's stare. She pushed his face away and rolled her eyes.

"Not you, dumb ass. Even if I tried to pull a runner you'd track me down, pee on my porch, and claim it as your own."

Logan's face cleared of all anxiety. They were both works in progress. Veronica continued to work at being more open with her reassurance and Logan at not relying on her quite as much.

"Actually I'd use one of your moves and put a tracker on your car." He trailed a finger down her back and snapped the band of her underwear.

Veronica pressed her face back into her pillow but scooted her body to be a few inches closer to Logan.

"So?" He asked. "What could you walk away from?"

Veronica took a deep breath and sat up, kneading her pillow into the right position. She lay back down and turned her face towards Logan. "The doctor thing. I'm pretty sure."

She expected him to be surprised or at least taken aback, but he didn't have any visible reaction. He offered a slight nod of acknowledgment as he processed her words. "What would you do instead?"

*That's the question, isn't it?*

She shook her head into the pillow. "Not sure. Something with forensics? I hear the FBI is looking for a few good women."

Logan reached behind him to turn off the bed-side lamp but not before she caught his small smile. "I know an agent who would be delighted by that idea."

"Yeah." She yawned as she spoke, making her voice sound deeper than normal. "Don't know though." She groaned, squeezing her eyes shut.
"What?"

"Student loans. Oh god. The loans."

"Overwhelming, especially when added to the cost of our upcoming nuptials." It was only half a joke. A carefully orchestrated way for him to gauge how serious she was about the whole fiancé business. He was showing her the door to the escape hatch, but she didn't want to go through.

She cupped his cheek, brushing her fingers across the stubble along his jawline. "Around Christmas could work. We'll already be in Neptune. Pop on down to City Hall?"

Logan swallowed and turned his face more fully into Veronica's palm. "Yeah," he said, his voice just the slightest bit raw. "That sounds perfect."

She smiled as he pulled her closer. It wouldn't surprise her if he already had a ring hidden somewhere.

"As for your student loans," he whispered. "Maybe there's someone willing to put you on a very generous payment plan."

She was tired, but not so tired she'd agree to something dumb like that. It was an ongoing conversation and she didn't presently have the mental acuity to even contemplate what it would mean if she accepted Logan's help. "I can't have this conversation right now."

"I think this is a perfect time to have this conversation. I could probably get you to agree to anything with a few whispered suggestions." She tried to hold in her smile as he kissed the shell of her ear. "While I have you here might I interest you in a suspended congress?"

"Go away," she laughed, pushing his face away again.

He chuckled and kissed her cheek quickly before putting a few inches of space between them. She loved Logan like this – happy, content, and not waiting for the moment to be pulled away. She liked both of them like this.

"Well, you've got time to figure it out," he said. Logan turned on his side, facing her. She moved closer so he could wrap his arms around her.

She nodded against his chest, her eyelids drooping. The pancakes were doing their job, sitting heavy and warm in her stomach. She hadn't slept in close to twenty hours and the smell of Logan's soap was a familiar comfort.

And, holy shit, I sort of proposed.

Life would never afford them perfect moments, but this was one of the good ones.

"Yeah," she agreed. "We've got time."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to every single person who has read even one word of this story. Thank you to all those who were a part of this fic from the time the first chapter was posted and those readers I found along the way. You all made my introduction into writing for
Veronica Mars all joy. I've grown as a writer, grown as a storyteller, and have absolutely grown in my confidence as a person. So, again, thank you all!

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