A Quartz Contentment

by BryroseA

Summary

Veronica Mars, the nine years, and a new normal.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

After great pain, a formal feeling comes – 
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs – 
The stiff Heart questions ‘was it He, that bore,’ 
And ‘Yesterday, or Centuries before’?

The Feet, mechanical, go round – 
A Wooden way 
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought – 
Regardless grown, 
A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead – 
Remembered, if outlived, 
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –

- “After great pain, a formal feeling comes,” Emily Dickinson
Veronica has a hard time identifying the emotion that fills her—swells within her until she is practically panting with it—right there in the Hearst cafeteria in front of God, a Russian mobster, her bewildered boyfriend, and an avid ring of student spectators. Whatever the emotion is, it stays with her the rest of that day. Buzzing along her skin and prickling her nerve endings throughout an extremely belated and awkward lunch with Piz. Electrifying her during her criminology class where, eyes bright, she answers every question the substitute lecturer poses. Buoying her up as she walks to the door of the Kane estate, casually blackmails the most powerful man in Neptune, and then goes, her steps bouncing, from mansion to car, and car to apartment.

It is not until she is finally alone in the shower early that evening, reliving the fight—*the beat down, the punishment, the vengeance*—Logan’s face flashing in front of her eyes, that Veronica consciously identifies the emotion she’s been reveling in all day. Pure, unalloyed glee.

She *is* happy; so goddamn happy that Logan beat up Gorya Sorokin. That asshole did something so wrong it still chills her—public and unending violation—and she was so angry. Her body was consumed by the rage. Watching Logan make Gorya pay had set off firework-bursts of gladness in her, lighting her up. How could she not have seen it? She can still feel them. As Veronica finally pictures Logan, bloody faced, ("Yeah, some day") the sparkling glee seems to roil in her gut, transmuting into something else entirely, something—Veronica bends over, right there in the shower, and throws up, gut clenching and heaving. The acid burning erupts out of her. Scouring her and clearing away her happy delusions. Her body empties itself out as she thinks of the reckless wild light in Logan's eyes and feels the memory of its echo still humming through her veins.

She sinks down to a crouch, arms braced against the tiled floor of the cramped shower stall, as water beats down on her back and bile fills her throat. ("Yeah, some day") Her heaves turn into dry sobs. *I'm going to get him killed. One of these days I'm going to piss off the wrong guy and he'll come charging to the rescue and it will be over.*

*My fault.*

How could she have been so happy, so uncaring, so gleeful all day? *What is your problem Veronica? What kind of person have you become?* *My fault.*

A light buzzing fills her head as she squats there, toes gripping in the grout, staring into space, seeing nothing and thinking about nothing for she doesn’t know how long. *My fault.* Eventually, the water pressure bottoms out and the shower nozzle begins spitting icy water at her back, neck, and head in intermittent fits and starts. She is freezing, cold all the way through, and has been for some time, Veronica notices dully. She hauls her body out of the shower and bile fills her throat. ("Yeah, some day") Her heaves turn into dry sobs.

Reaching the counter, Veronica grabs her messenger bag and rummages for her cell phone—she’s had it off all day. Six missed calls, all from her father, the last one hours ago. One message. She hits
the voicemail button and Keith Mars’ voice comes out of the speaker, a perfect blend of fatherly worry and hope. “Honey. Things have really hit the fan down here. I’m pretty desperate to talk to you. I’m waiting on your call.” Over his voice, her mind replays Jake Kane’s parting shot. (“I’m afraid it’s a little too late for that, Veronica.”) It seems much more menacing now that her euphoric high is abruptly gone.

“Dad,” she whispers to the empty apartment, “what did you do?” What did you do Veronica?

Too late. Too late try to and fix anything. I’ll just make it worse. My fault.

She closes her eyes and walks mechanically toward the door. She doesn’t know where she’s going; doesn’t take Backup although he glares at her accusingly when she ignores his expectant nudges at his leash. She winds up walking around the neighborhood in aimless circles, her stomach churning. She blanks her mind, aggressively thinking about nothing—your thinking only hurts everyone you love.

It feels like it’s going to rain.

When Veronica finally gets back to the apartment, hours later, her dad is there. He hugs her, forgives her without a word, and serves her up a gumbo that sits in her gut like a ball of lead.

Veronica spends the next few days clinging desperately to her detachment and avoiding people. Logan calls once. She doesn’t answer and he doesn’t leave a message. She scuttles away from Mac and Wallace and Piz whenever she sees them; every friendly face she sees is a reminder of how much wrong she’s done.

Mac—dragged into hacking a secret society full of sociopaths. Could be arrested or killed by vengeful Castle members.

Wallace—stripped and shocked with an electric collar for god’s sake. Also probably on the Castle’s black list

Her father—Election done, his dream job lost forever. He’s lucky not to be facing criminal charges.

(Logan.)

The bad guys? Going merrily on, as far as she knows.

What are you going to do about it Veronica? Someone always has to pay. Who pays this time?

Three days after the fight, Veronica shows up without warning at Wallace and Piz’s dorm room. When Piz opens the door and registers her presence, a resigned look spreads across his face.

“Hi, Veronica.” He waves a hand into the room. “Want to come in?”

Veronica hunches down into her jacket, “Can we take a walk?”

Piz nods and they head out into the quad. They wander aimlessly for a few minutes, Piz chattering brightly, almost desperately.

“So this guy, Lenny, in my composition class the other day—remember, I told you about him; or did I?—anyway, he thinks he might be able to get Black Licorice a gig before I start my internship. That
would be totally cool, right—I mean, ‘cool’ in like a manly, suave way, not ‘cool’ in, like, an unironic teen girl way.”

They stop at a bench. Piz fidgets with the hem of his shirt as Veronica stares off into the middle distance somewhere.

Piz takes a deep breath. “So.”

“Piz, I think we should break up.” Veronica can hear her voice. It sounds detached, too detached for this conversation, but she can’t seem to infuse herself with any more feeling.

Piz shuffles his feet. “Yeah, I kind of figured.” He sighs. “Veronica, I can’t say I didn’t see this coming the last few days, but I don’t really get it. I thought things were going so well. And then…”

Veronica cuts in, still not looking him in the eye. “I messed a lot of things up really badly and I’m not really…in a good place right now.”

Piz nods at her with an odd sort of dignity. He turns to go, but stops a foot away.

“No one of this is your fault, Veronica,” he says softly. She just looks at him, he drops his gaze, “or, not only your fault,” he mumbles, his words picking up speed, “I mean it’s not like you could have predicted any of the, you know, I-I mean, the tape…you didn’t do anything wrong, not that you think you did, but if you do, you know, you didn’t, I just wanted—”

“Thanks Piz.”

A week and a half after the cafeteria fight, once finals are over and done with, Veronica is all the way across the country, settling into an empty and echoing summer sublet on the outskirts of Washington D.C. Alone.

Guilt and relief are emotions that don’t really go together, right?

The internship, once the pinnacle of all her desires, now feels more like a sad necessity than the promise of a brighter future. In the end, she shipped off to Quantico because her father wanted her to, expected her to, and because there was nothing else.

What could she do in Neptune except hurt everyone more? Who pays this time?

Veronica has been assigned to shadow agents in the Criminal Investigative Division’s Violent Crimes unit, a plum assignment. Most of her time will be spent with the agents—the FBI prides itself on having its interns do actual work, not just filing and coffee-toting—but the first few days contain several whole group sessions for interns across the various departments.

On the very first day, there is an Orientation Session with the entire Quantico-based intern class. Among the crowd of bright-eyed, eager go-getters Veronica feels like a ghost; an echo of herself. They go over policies and procedures, sign reams and reams of paperwork, and then do a round of the usual “getting to know you” activities. Finally, one of the handlers asks the interns to go around the room and talk about their future goals. What do you hope to get out of this internship? Where do you see yourself in five years? Ten? Fifteen?

Veronica has a sudden flash of herself, age thirteen, sprawled out on Lilly’s bed.

“Okay, Veronica Mars,” Lilly brandished her pen and the lavish purple pom-pom on its cap
fluttered in the resulting breeze. She pressed the nib firmly into the magazine page; Lilly always left a mark. “Next question: ‘Look fifteen years into the future. Where do you see yourself?’”

“Weelll…” Veronica bit her lower lip in thought and flopped over on her stomach, her legs waving and crossing in the air behind her. “I’ll be tremendously successful, of course. A degree from Stanford, no, **two** degrees from Stanford,”

Lilly nodded, “because you’re brilliant.”

“Because I’m brilliant,” Veronica allowed, teasingly, “I’ll live in a gorgeous penthouse apartment in New York and have a fabulous career and an equally brilliant, handsome husband who I met at Stanford.”

Lilly tapped the pen to her chin in pretend thought, “Do they have handsome men at Stanford? I thought it was all five foot tall social misfits.”

Veronica lobbed a pillow in Lilly’s direction—missing completely—and continued, unfazed, “We’ll love each other madly and have a perfectly normal life.”

“In your penthouse in New York?”

“Yes,” Veronica leapt to her feet and bounced on Lilly’s bed, “a normal life in my penthouse in New York.”

“With your imaginary handsome Stanford husband?”

“Yep, with him.” She grinned mischievously, still bouncing, “And I’ll take regular trips to see my rapidly aging best friend, who is, ohmygod, almost **thirty** and getting wrin—“

Lilly shrieked and lunged forward to tackle Veronica around the knees. They fell together in a heap on the bed, rolling and kicking at each other in teenaged glee.

“Right, who’s first?” The handler—Agent Sorenson—gives a loud clap, startling Veronica out of her thoughts.

The interns go around the room. Anna from the University of Chicago wants to be a profiler. Serge from Kent State wants to work in Counterterrorism. Carlee from UConn admits to State Department aspirations. Anil from ASU wants nothing more than to be an FBI Field Agent; it’s all he’s worked for his whole life. You don’t know. You don’t see how many people you’re going to have to break to get there. How many relationships you’ll ruin. And Veronica from Hearst College? What does Veronica want?

She shows up to work every day in sensible pantsuits and jackets, low heels and scarves, all clothes she bought for herself in a fit of excitement at landing the internship. Her black pumps were earned oh-so-briefly reuniting Max and Wendy the call girl. The light blue satiny blouse was paid for by the discovery that Bonnie’s own roommate deliberately caused her miscarriage. On days when she thinks about it, Veronica feels like she’s walking around coated in mud.

Ever since Lilly was killed, Veronica has explained her chosen profession to herself as a search for justice. Sure, the bread and butter were cheating spouse money-shots, but she’d basically seen herself as the last refuge of the downtrodden. Veronica Mars, girl detective, snarker extraordinaire, goddess
of justice.

But then a jury of twelve thinking, breathing human beings found Aaron Echolls not guilty on all charges, and it turned out that her much vaunted ability to read people instinctively had a gaping rapist-sized hole in it, and the world seemed to blacken around the edges.

Ever since then, everywhere she looks all she sees is ugliness; rape, deceit, adultery, murder, horrible people doing horrible things to each other. It has become impossible not to see herself as just one more slimy thing, crawling around with all of the other slimy things. She’d tried hard to hold onto her equilibrium for this last year, to cling to her view of the world, casting around for proof that everything wasn’t so base. Now it feels like she was just treading quicksand. She spent a year angry—vengeful—Lady Justice with a meat cleaver instead of scales. And now she’s hurt every person she’s ever loved. Irrevocably. Veronica doesn’t do good. She isn’t good. There is no good. Who pays this time?

So she works on her reports, compiles evidence for field agents, looks into the backgrounds of more awful human beings doing ugly things, and thinks. Deep inside of her, Veronica knows that her perspective of the world is seriously skewed, knows that her thoughts are a reflection of an inner warpedness that she needs to hide, needs to cover up. It’s easier here in Virginia, at least. No one knows her well enough to ask questions.

Those who do are safely away on the other side of the world. Even though it is simpler, Veronica misses Wallace and Mac with a dull ache. And then there’s Logan. How is it possible to simultaneously long for someone with your entire throbbing being and also to want never to have to face them again?

The only person she can’t get away with shutting out is her father; she’s never been away from him for this long before and they are both struggling with it, although neither will admit it. They talk every day, conversations full of nothing, she aiming for bright and cheerful, he with worry seeping through every crack in the conversation.

In addition to their other duties, the interns are encouraged to attend in-service training sessions with actual agents. Veronica hangs back; doesn't answer the questions right off the bat even when she knows the answer. The agents she shadows rotate her through sessions on blood spatter and ballistics. On her original application, she had indicated an interest in profiling, so they make sure that she spends a few days at the BAU. Everyone is helpful, encouraging. The interns go on tours—Veronica meets the Attorney General of the United States—and it all just slides right off of her. They go to the firing range where the other interns just about come out of their skin at the excitement of being at the real FBI firing range with real FBI agents. The acrid tang of cordite in the air comes as close to cracking Veronica’s shell as anything has all summer. As she grips the gun, its bulk coiled in her hands like a snake, she doesn’t think about bringing down the bad guys, she thinks about how easily she could have become the bad guy. I’ve been so angry. She would have shot. She really would have. Who pays this time?

One day, the entire intern class is invited to an interview panel with FBI Agents. They sit in a darkened auditorium peppering the agents—representing different branches of the FBI—with questions. “What is the hardest part of your job?” “How difficult is the application process?” “Is there anything you wish you’d known before you became an agent?”

At the last question, the agent on the far end of the panel sits forward and leans into his microphone. SSA Roberts. He works in the Violent Crimes unit where Veronica has been interning; she’s seen him around but never spoken to him. He’s been relatively quiet thus far, letting the other agents answer the questions.
“I wish I’d known what a difficult road the FBI would be.”

From her spot on the edge of the auditorium, Veronica’s trained eyes spot him gently rubbing the spot on his bare finger where a wedding ring would rest.

“I knew it would be difficult in the same way that most of you in the audience know it will be; I’d heard about it—I thought I was prepared. Don’t make that assumption. Don’t think like I did, that when people say its “hard” they’re talking about the same kind of hard you’re used to, the kind you can push through with a lot of work and grit and gallons of coffee.” His lips twist. “This is a different kind of hard. Soul hard.” He stops abruptly, leaning back as though he is finished answering, then brings his mouth back to the mic.

"Don't become an FBI Field Agent if you want a normal life."

A nervous silence settles over the auditorium for a beat. The woman next to SSA Roberts turns a slight glare in his direction, but several other agents nod faintly.

Then an intern breaks the silence with a new question, “So, what kind of ongoing training do you receive in a given year?”

After the panel, Veronica escapes to the bathroom, when she bumps into a slightly familiar looking brunette as they wash their hands at the sink.

“Hi! Veronica, right? I’m Deanna. I’m working with Financial Crimes. Aren’t you with Violent Crime? We’re right down the hall.”

Veronica nods and Deanna continues. “Wasn’t that a great session?” She is glowing, lit from within by an inner fervor. “I love this internship so much. I just feel so useful. It feels like I’m helping to get the bad guys.” She grins at Veronica’s reflection in the mirror and Veronica forces herself to smile back. Deanna seems to think it looks genuine.

Four weeks into her internship, Veronica is still thinking—about the future, about herself—when her father calls, his voice somewhere between apprehensive and excited. “Veronica, you got a letter from Stanford.”

Veronica blinks. “Qué?”

“A spot on their waitlist has opened up and…you’re in, baby!” She can practically see his jazz hands through the phone.

“Is this some sort of weird year-long time warp I’ve been sucked into? I knew the Rockies didn’t really make the World Series.” Her tone becomes flat. “That’s not possible. I declined my admission. Last year.”

There is a long pause on the other end of the line. “Yeah, about that.”

“Dad.”

Keith heaves a big sigh. “Last year, after…everything happened, I agreed to let you go to Hearst because I was selfish, Veronica. I wanted you home with me. But I didn’t decline your Stanford admission like I told you; I applied for deferred admission for you based on ‘exigent personal
circumstances.’ I thought the events of last May applied and so did Stanford. Technically you’ve been deferred all year.”

The possibility floors Veronica. Her mouth gaping slightly, she stutters out several nonsense syllables before finally getting out, “were you going to tell me?”

“I don’t know. You seemed happy, so I wasn’t going to, but now…you should know.” Keith’s voice softens. “I’ll miss you, kid, but you should have the chance.”

“But we can’t aff—“

“Stop it, Veronica! Don’t use that as an excuse. There are loans and there is work study. Thousands and thousands of people poorer than me manage to send their kids to college, even without the Kane Scholarship. I’m so proud of you, honey. Please do this.”

A sense of inevitability begins to descend on her. Weakly, Veronica tosses out one last objection. “Dad. I…don’t want to leave you.”

“Veronica, it’s a big world out there. You should go.”

Veronica hangs up the phone quietly and sits in her darkening D.C. summer sublet. It is all pressing down on her. Who she is in Neptune. Who she could be at Stanford.

It’s Stanford. Stanford. Everything she’s ever wanted; a place where no one will need her help; a normal life within her grasp. But she’d be leaving everything and everyone she loves. Mac and Wallace. Mars Investigations. Lady Justice, for whatever good she does.

(Logan.)

Her Dad.

The hero is the one who stays.

Who pays this time?

You do.

Once Veronica’s decision is made, the rest of the FBI internship fades into insignificance. Her innate work ethic won’t let her slack off—she shows up everyday and puts in a solid effort—but she has now accepted that this can’t be her dream anymore. Her first, earliest, dream has come true and somehow, in her mind, she is sure that she can’t have them both.

Leaving Neptune doesn’t have to mean leaving it all behind—she could still detect at Stanford, still aspire to the FBI—but she won’t let that be her any more. No more anger. It’s too dangerous. Stanford Veronica Mars is going to be a normal college student with a normal major and normal aspirations to get a job that will help her pay off the truly dizzying loans she’s signed off on. Stanford Veronica Mars is going to live a normal life, and hopefully that will be enough to let all of the people she loves live happy, normal lives too. Please let it be enough. Please let this price I’m paying be enough.

She stays in D.C. for a few weeks after the internship is finally over; her Dad flies out and they do
the father-daughter tourist thing. The Lincoln Monument, The Smithsonian Air and Space Museum, the truly ridiculous yet ultimately amazing D.C. Ducks “amphibious vehicle” tour. It feels lighthearted. It feels like old times. It feels like distance is the right thing when it means she can have this relationship with her dad instead of the one where she ruins his every career aspiration just by being who she is.

She delays and delays her return to Neptune. Mac has been told. Wallace, recently back from Africa, has been told. Both are appropriately sorrowful but supportive. They must be glad. No more getting dragged into various shady enterprises. No more favors. They can live normal lives too.

Veronica finally comes back about a week before her scheduled departure date. Most of her time is spent packing up her old life. What of Neptune can the new Veronica take with her to Stanford? Her Private Eye gear—the GPS tracker, her fake IDs, her collection of wigs—they all get boxed up and put on a high shelf in her closet. Her taser is left behind as well. She fingers Lilly’s necklace for a long time before leaving it hanging on her jewelry tree, but stuffs pictures of the Fab Four into a side pocket of her laptop carrying case.

On the last day before leaving Neptune, Veronica finds herself in her bedroom, suitcases packed and ready to go, pacing—and contemplating the one goodbye she’s been putting off for weeks. Logan.

According to information volunteered by Mac, he’s been absent all summer. Mac doesn’t know where’s he’s gone. Dick probably does, but that’s not a conversation Veronica is eager to have any time soon. She’s actually grateful Logan hasn’t been around. She’d been half afraid he’d be waiting outside the apartment for her when she got back from D.C. But he wasn’t and now she’s the one who has to make the decision. It would be so much easier to just…leave. To let it drift. Talking to Logan at this point is pretty much terrifyingly fraught with landmines. You don’t really owe him a goodbye. You’re not dating. You told him he was out of your life.

Veronica shakes her head. That won’t wash. I should call. He deserves to hear it from me.

She picks up her cell phone and scrolls down to Logan’s name. Contemplating. The last missed call from him was a few days after the cafeteria fight. Radio silence since then. Maybe he’s trying to move on. Maybe he wouldn’t want to hear from you. She puts down the cell phone. That’s bullshit Veronica, and you know it.

She picks up her cell phone again. Puts it down again.

Takes another turn around the room, frustratedly kicking at the edge of a suitcase. It doesn’t help.

In the end, oddly, it is Dick’s voice that flits through her mind when she finally decides to send an email rather than try to call Logan. (“Rich dude kryptonite.”)

Stanford, like Hearst, starts later than a lot of other colleges, so it is mid-September before Veronica piles all of her stuff into the Saturn and makes the seven hour drive up to Palo Alto for dorm move in day.

Neptune Veronica Mars would never have contemplated living in the dorms, but Normal Stanford edition figures she’d better give it a try. Isn’t that part of the college experience, after all? Anyway,
Stanford has policy of guaranteeing housing for students and real estate prices in Palo Alto aren’t cheap. Her late entry into the housing lottery gave her low priority, so Veronica has wound up in a house in Florence Moore Hall, one of the bigger residence halls communities on campus.

Following the colorfully printed signs through a throng of confusion, Veronica pulls her Saturn up to the designated unloading area. There are easily as many people trying to move in to this one dorm as there were students total in her class at Neptune High. Students and parents flock everywhere while staff members in brightly colored Hawaiian print shirts—I don’t even want to know—attempt to bring order to the process, shepherding a flotilla of carts and directing traffic. Veronica dives into the swarm, checking in, getting her room key, and securing a large cart on wheels into which she begins dumping all of her stuff. Next to her, another girl’s father and younger brother are carefully loading her belongings into a cart while the girl bitchily supervises from the curb. Veronica feels a momentary pang at the lack of her own father, but he’s off tracking down a bail jumper in Utah and she’s determined to cut ties with the past. Be independent. Once everything is loaded up, she carefully locks the Saturn (score one for her Neptune upbringing) and heads toward Loro House. Veronica struggles to move the slightly overloaded cart toward her room—thankfully on the first floor—just one small blonde in a heaving sea of humanity. Her obscurity feels…nice.

Veronica heaves the large rolling canvas cart down the hall, alternately pulling at it and getting behind it to give it a good, running-start enabled, push. By the time she reaches the door of her room, she is red-faced, sweaty, and breathing hard. In response to Veronica’s grunts, a tall, slightly pudgy girl with long dark red hair pops her head out of the room.

“Hi! Need a hand?”

Veronica sets her shoulder at the high side of the cart and shoves. “Nope…I’m…” the cart inches forward, “good!”

The redhead’s eyes widen, but she steps back and holds the door open as Veronica shoves the cart into the room.

Finally at her destination, Veronica straightens up and blows her sweaty hair out of her eyes. The redhead smiles a wide, genuine smile, “So, you’re Veronica, right?” Off of Veronica’s confused look, she nods at the still ajar door. On the hall side there is a cut out paper pineapple with shades, proudly proclaiming “Veronica, Neptune” and, below it, “Megan, Cupertino.” Right. Dorms.

“Yes.” Veronica points a thumb at herself. “Veronica Mars.”

Outside of her head, her voice still sounds the same, sprightly with a hint of sass. An odd contrast to the numbness that inhabits her. Normal.

Megan’s grin widens even further, if possible and she bounces a bit on the balls of her feet. “I’m Megan, of course, Megan Colson.”

“Nice to meet you, Megan.”

“You too!”

“So…a pineapple?”

“Apparently our house is going to be luau themed this year.”

Veronica blinks. “Of course it is.”

She and Megan stare at each other for a long moment as Megan’s wide smile begins to fade just a
little. Veronica shakes herself a little, and flashes her teeth in return. “So, where are the bathrooms in this joint?”

The classes at Stanford are harder than anything Veronica has encountered in her academic career. Part of her promised fresh start is a new major—what, she doesn’t know right off the bat—but not criminal justice. Add that to the fact that Hearst operates on the semester system while Stanford has quarters, and the vast majority of her Hearst credits don’t transfer. She does carry a few over, and her AP credits still give her something, but for all intents and purposes Veronica is starting almost completely over.

*It won’t be the first time.*

For her first quarter at Stanford, her Pre-Major Adviser suggests she take it easy, class-wise. Instead, Veronica dives in with a full schedule of credits in widely diverging classes. How else will she know what she wants her major to be? *How else will you keep busy?*

The requisite Intro to Humanities. Human Biology 2A—*maybe I’ll be a doctor,* Stats 60 —*accountants make a lot of money, right?*; English 102: Chaucer—*got to knock out those general education requirements;* and Public Policy 103—*recommended for those considering a pre-law track, which you are.* When she lays the list out, her adviser leans back in her chair, raises her eyebrows, and gently suggests that Veronica consider taking something fun, something that will allow her to explore areas she’s never thought about before—*maybe a drama class?* Or there’s a really great seminar scheduled this quarter on 1960s music! Just take the classes you feel like taking, she says.

Veronica can actually feel the disconnect between the two of them. Stanford isn’t a time to “explore;” Stanford is a mission. Get in, learn to live a normal life, get a degree that will make her father proud and allow her to pay off bills, get out. *No time for underwater basket weaving.*

Her classes don’t exactly light her up, but at least they are *challenging.* They allow her to stretch her mind and tackle problems. Stanford class discussions are definitely a cut above those at Hearst and, compared to her classes at Neptune High, Veronica practically feels like she is among the members of MENSA.

In truth, despite the difficulty of the classes, Veronica finds herself with a lot of free time on her hands. Her work study job at the campus bookstore takes up some of her time, but she’s never really realized before how much of her daily ration of energy was expended on her cases.

During her first few months not detecting, Veronica is convinced that she doesn’t really miss working cases all that much. Her cases have almost always come to her, rather than her seeking them out, and now that they no longer do that—*now that she no longer hears “I need your help, Veronica” on a regular basis—it feels a little like a vacation.* Her eyes are still in detective mode, though. She notices things. Tran, the girl in the dorm room next door, is on the verge of breaking up with her boyfriend although she doesn’t know it yet; his body language reads loud and clear to Veronica. Ravinder, one of the hall’s RAs, was lying when he said he was going to San Francisco to party two weeks ago. Something a little fishy is going on with the tills at the campus bookstore. A few of them seem to need drops far more often than the others. There’s a pattern, she’s sure of it. There’s a pattern but she doesn’t figure out what it is.

She doesn’t want to know what it is. She doesn’t care what it is.
It’s not her job to care.

Unlike Hearst (and Neptune High, for that matter), which seemed to be an ode to white bread Americana in student body form, Stanford is bristling with people of all ages and cultures, if not quite all backgrounds. The sizeable population—seven thousand undergrad and twenty thousand students total—allows Veronica to blend in a way she can never remember experiencing before. No one knows her father. No one has seen her sex tape. No one needs her help, or even recognizes her name. Those who have heard of Lilly Kane certainly don’t connect her to the new transfer student who keeps her head down and doesn’t make any waves.

The anonymity embraces Veronica, comforting her and soothing her. She avoids pulling any “Veronica Mars is smarter than me” type stunts in her classes. She answers questions when posed. She does every last bit of her reading (marveling internally at the rare luxury of doing it at home in her dorm room instead of in her car on a stake out). She goes to dinner in the dining commons and out to one act theater shows with a group of people from her hall (she doesn’t ask them for favors; they don’t expect her to). She goes to parties on the row with her roommate (and if she always insists on pouring her own drinks there is no one who would think to read anything into that).

She tries not to think of what she has given up—of the life she killed—and mostly she succeeds.

It is early October and Veronica walks stiffly through the center of campus, her feet nailing the ground, hands jammed into her pockets and shoulders scrunched up somewhere around her ears.

Hearst College had been a small jewel box of a campus. With just under four thousand students and lecture halls with ocean views, the atmosphere dripped money and exclusivity. Stanford, on the other hand, Stanford exudes power. Vast swaths of landscape make up the Farm, but Veronica spends most of her time in the buildings surrounding the sun drenched Main Quad, where individually carved sandstone pillars decorate each of the architecturally stunning buildings and embedded time capsules attest to over a hundred years of graduating classes.

Today, as she leaves her Chaucer class, Veronica lines her feet up precisely so that her heels hit each of the brass plaques of the times capsules with a satisfying thwack as she passes; making her presence known, tattooing her anger on the earth.

The guy behind her in lecture had spent the last ten minutes of class whispering to one of his douche-buddies about how he planned to get the midterm for the class from his frat’s files and ace it, and then not bother ever coming to class again.

Veronica’s mind was wrenched wholly away from the class discussion of “Troilus and Criseyde” and down along a familiar path.

You could tell the professor—but there’s no proof—you don’t even know his name, or which frat.

That would be easy. All you’d have to do is tail him; maybe bug his phone.

It sounds like there’s a whole ring. This guy could lead you to them.

She is furious. It bubbles through her veins irrationally. Why is this making you so mad? You didn’t have that much of a problem with Max.

“Hey, Veronica! Wait up!” It’s Charlotte, a girl from her hall who Veronica is friendly with, jogging to catch up with her. “You busted out of lecture so quickly. I wanted to see if you wanted to get together to study for the midterm tomorrow?”
“Why bother, apparently some of the frat boys have access to the test and are just going to blow the curve anyway.”

Charlotte’s eyebrows lift, “Ooh, I’ve heard that the frats do that.” She shrugs her shoulders. “Sucks.”

Veronica looks at her incredulously, “Aren’t you mad?”

“Nah. I know I’m going to do well regardless. Plus, if you heard him bragging about it in the open like that he was probably lying.”

“Someone should do something.”

“You mean like tell the professor? I’m not sure what good that would do.”

“No, like expose them.”

Charlotte laughs, “What, are you planning some Liam Neeson style epic take-down?” She laughs again, clearly gleeful at the thought, “Oh I can just see it; little tiny you scaling the side of a frat building, dressed in all black, a knife clenched in your teeth.”

Veronica stays silent for a minute and then mutters, “I just hate it when guys like him get away with stuff.”

Charlotte slings a cheerful arm around her shoulders, “I know, but don’t worry; karma’ll get him in the end.”

Back at her dorm, Veronica separates from Charlotte, grabs her shower caddy and stalks quietly to the bathroom. Inside the shower stall, under the weak flow of water, she presses the heels of her hands to her eyes. Why won’t people stop being assholes? Why won’t Vengeful Veronica go away? She’s not needed any more; not wanted any more.

Why won’t everything just stop?

Veronica has bad dreams. She’s had them semi-regularly for the last few years, but they really start to ramp up during her first October away from home. They’re not nightmares, really. Nightmares aren’t real. These are more like incredibly vivid technicolor memories that play out across her sleeping consciousness. Lilly, Aaron, Cassidy, Meg, Duncan, and baby Lilly are all regular features. Even Amelia DeLongpre shows up on occasion, ice cold hands clawing frantically. And then there’s Logan. Of course there’s Logan.

One would think she’d have sex dreams about Logan, but no. Her fantasies in that direction are all waking. When she’s alone in the shower and so lonely she feels hollow, she summons up his hands—just his hands, never his face—that would be…too much. But Logan’s hands, they are a reliable tool, shaping themselves across the landscape of her desire.

That would be bad enough, too much of a reminder as it is, but in her night time dreams, Logan frequently takes his place in the rotation of horrors, dead and ruined in a multitude of ways. Bloody and broken on the bridge; shot at on the roof; shot by his own foolish self pulling a gun out of the glovebox; gunned down by the Fitzpatricks, the Sorokins. My fault. Whatever the scenario, in her dreams, Logan’s voice always sounds the way it did during their last phone conversation, somehow both gutted and void at the same time.
A few days after their arrival at Stanford, Veronica and Megan had been getting ready to head out to a film festival put on by Cardenal House. Happy. Normal. Just as Veronica was tossing her cell phone into her messenger bag in preparation to leave, it rang. One foot out the door, she raised phone to answer it, expecting her father, who owed her a call. Just before hitting the “answer” button, though, the hairs on the back of Veronica’s neck rose in premonition—Logan couldn’t possibly make even her ring tone sound different, could he?—and she lowered the phone to check the caller ID.

Yep. Logan.

Her fight and flight instincts warring with each other, she had hesitated a bare moment—an eon—before depressing the answer button with her thumb.

That had been a mistake.

Logan was…god, just even thinking about that phone call is too much. He was Logan. Upset and not listening and just never damn willing to see things her way.

_Doesn’t he understand how hard this was for me? How much we both need this?_

The conversation itself was short, if explosive. His anger burst out of the phone and then collapsed into nothing; hers took an opposite arc. Just like the two of them always, meeting in the middle only briefly before curving away from each other off into infinity. He seemed to have almost given her up before the conversation began. And then there was Megan interrupting and Logan’s voice in her ear and it was all just so much.

His sign off line, a numb, “I’m really happy for you. Goodbye, Veronica,” hit her like an ice pick to the chest.

The gaping pit she could hear in his voice—the one that echoes in her dreams—was so deeply, deeply familiar. It is the same abyss she looks into every day, every minute, but never lets anyone see

The flash of anger she’d felt at that thought surprised her. _How dare he let that out when I can’t?_ But still, she tried one last time.

“Logan, listen to me!” But the other end of the line had taken on that particular quality of silence that said he’d already hung up. She tried once again, just in case. “Logan?”

With an aggravated growl, Veronica smacked the palm of her free hand against the doorframe. _Stupid jackass!_

Almost immediately she scrolled through her contacts to call him back. Explain. Make him listen.

“Veronica?” Veronica blinked, her roommate’s soft voice drawing her out of the Logan-induced haze. As the world came into focus once again, Veronica realized that she was still standing half in and half out of her dorm room doorway, face red with frustration, gripping her phone with all of her strength. Megan had walked back and was looking at her, forehead wrinkled in concern. “Veronica, is everything okay?”

Veronica looked down at her phone and then back up at Megan. Taking a deep breath in, she shoved her phone back into her bag and smiled brightly at Megan. “Yeah. Yes. Everything is fine. Sorry. Let’s go!”

In the darkened dorm lounge, she sat, uncomprehendingly, through several artsy black and white movie shorts. Only one was in French, but they might as well all have been in foreign languages for
all Veronica got out of them.


Megan nudged her and Veronica surfaced long enough to pass the popcorn bowl down the row to Ann Li.

*This is exactly what you came to Stanford to avoid, for both of you. Being so…consumed never did either of you any favors.*

*He’s safer this way.*

On the screen, a woman wearing a large and stupendously ugly hat fell to her knees and wailed uncontrollably. The sheer grief of the sound penetrated Veronica’s consciousness and caused the hairs on her arms to rise.

*He’ll call back if he really wants to.*

It’s better this way. Everything with Logan is still too overwhelming right now. Her reasons are good reasons. *It’s better if you don’t call him, not right now anyway.* Surely he’ll call back once he’s calmed down and, if he doesn’t, then she’ll call him. Later. Once they both have some distance.

Megan leaned over and whispered into Veronica’s ear, tears clogging her voice, “God, it’s so beautifully sad. Don’t you just love it?”

So she didn’t call Logan and life at Stanford went on. Settled. Her roommate Megan turns out to be a really sweet girl. Innocent in an endearing way, but wickedly smart in all things biological, Megan is on the pre-Med track and spends large chunks of her time studying, which suits Veronica just fine.

During the free time they do have, the two of them pal around together—art shows, movie nights, parties on the row—mostly in the company of a clutch of other girls from their hall.

But there’s a wall between the two of them and it frustrates Veronica because she wants it down. Doesn’t know how to take it down.

There is a certain degree of forced socializing involved in dorm life that Veronica hadn’t anticipated. Dorm meetings; hall trips San Francisco or Big Sur (which Veronica can’t afford and doesn’t attend); massive dorm-wide games of Killer; a "Secret Snowflake" dare contest of truly ridiculous proportions, a talent competition; by the end of the first semester it’s all getting to be a bit too involved. Veronica would much rather just stay in her room and study. Or work.

She misses Mac and Wallace; Mac’s dry wit and Wallace’s unquestioning support. Mac’s understanding silences and Wallace’s brief, but always amusing, forays into being a Gilmore girl.

These days, Veronica mostly feels like she’s hanging with a pack of Parkers. Not that that’s bad. She likes Parker. Liked. But it’s definitely a different vibe.

Calls from her Neptune friends are piling up on her voice mail. She returns them on occasion. The conversations always seem short and a bit stilted, though. Waves of guilt knot her gut whenever she ignores a call, but waves of guilt knot her when they talk, too. “Why don’t you come down for a
visit?” “Aren’t you coming home for Christmas? Spring Break?”

Veronica loves them, but she doesn’t want to see them, face them, and have to think about the colossal mess she’s made of everything all the time.

It’s easier to just be at Stanford, talking to Stanford people about Stanford things. Working. Studying.

________

Early February, in the middle of Winter Quarter, Veronica makes the decision that she needs to date again. She’s been throwing herself into school and her work at the bookstore, but she’s gotten increasingly antsy with just that. These last few weeks, in the foggy chill of late January, she’s felt like her skin doesn’t fit quite right. She catches herself constantly fidgeting. Checking her phone dozens of times a day for no good reason. Starting her old favorite movies and then turning them off immediately.

I need to date.

It takes her about three days to settle on a candidate. Ethan. He’s in her American History class and draws her notice by making an equal mixture of insightful and amusing comments.

He’s good looking; tall, with green eyes, and sandy blond hair. To seal the deal, Veronica has noticed him eyeing her appreciatively in a subtle way a few times.

They go out for coffee. Then lunch. Then dinner. Ethan is patient in inching his way up the dating ladder and she likes that. He makes her laugh; she likes that too.

A month in, their relationship has advanced to long diners, movies, and some heavy groping outside her dorm room door.

Ethan is checking all of the right boxes; he laughs at her pop culture references; he does a wickedly accurate impersonation of their Professor smoking a joint; his eyes light up the first time her refers to her as his girlfriend.

So she lets him in—to her life, her dorm room, her body.

He is a good choice, she thinks, not too much of a Nice Guy, but not too much…well, he’s not not a nice guy either.

What more could a girl want?

(His hands don't feel quite right, though.)

________

Stanford has a “Student Alert” system that sends out mass text messages and emails whenever there is a campus-wide safety alert. Mostly they are generic warnings, “gas leak” or “local wildfires.” Sometimes, though they feel more pointed.

“Interrupted burglary.”

“Armed person seen.”

“Attempted sexual assault.”
(“I need your help, Veronica.”)

By March, Veronica has gone through the somewhat convoluted process of opting out of the alerts.

The year ticks along, Winter Quarter blending into Spring. Classes and work and dates with Ethan and hanging out with Megan all soften into a comforting rhythm.

Veronica is racking up As, and finally settling into the Stanford social scene a bit. Ethan’s friends are a fun group; she adds poker nights at his house to her general rotation. She, of course, kicks ass and takes names. Ethan tells her he loves it, extravagantly kissing her on the top of her head and declaring that she’ll make them a fortune before they’re twenty-one. *(Them?)*

Successful personal life; successful academic and work life; friendly, hot supportive boyfriend.

Normal life.

———

By Spring quarter, Veronica has decided that her best bet for her future is the pre-law track. It means more schooling and more debt, but law is a normal, respectable profession. Arguing, research, mustering evidence; it all sounds very doable to her. It will play to her strengths. Her father is ecstatic over the phone when she mentions it to him. He tells her again that he’s proud of her.

She meets with the Pre-Law Adviser who tells her that most law schools don’t care what her degree is as long as she has an impressive GPA, does well on the LSATs, and has good recommendations from her professors.

*I wonder if Landry would write me a recommendation from prison?*

Still contemplating the advising session, Veronica heads to her two o’clock Social Psychology class.

Psych 70 had been another practical choice, fulfilling one of the university’s requirements as well as being another stop on Veronica’s tour of possible majors. She’s surprised at how much she is enjoying the class.

A lot of that enjoyment comes from the idiosyncratic, whip-smart professor who is teaching it—Dr. Hague. Dr. Hague is one of the big guns in the department, specializing in deviant behavior and psychopathology. It is regarded by his colleagues as sort of a benign quirk that he deigns to teach several introductory level classes each year.

Dr. Hague never treats his students with lofty disdain, though, instead explaining basic psychological concepts in a calm and engaging way; his twinkling eyes inviting questions.

He is a giant daddy-long-legs of a man, all angles and edges when he folds himself onto the scarred table at the front of the room that he likes to lecture from.

The class topics themselves are catching her attention as well, they’ve just moved out of perception—factors affecting how people view themselves and others—and into discussing persuasion; how it happens and what causes people to like, love, help, or hurt each other. Veronica feels like she’s taking a master class in how her life went wrong.

*I could do more of this. It could be good for me.*
Five weeks into the quarter, Dr. Hague holds her back after class to discuss several points in her paper on Violence and Aggression, praising several parts of her argument and gently poking holes in others. He urges her to re-write it, answers her questions and pesters her until the paper is polished to a high sheen and, eventually, urges her to submit the result to the undergraduate research publication.

By the end of the quarter, Veronica is a Psychology major and Dr. Hague is her adviser.

Summer comes all in a rush, the ten week quarters flying along at a far greater clip than Hearst’s semesters ever had.

Veronica decides to stay in Palo Alto for the summer. Her boss likes her, so she’s able to keep picking up shifts at the campus bookstore and she gets a waitressing gig at a local restaurant to fill in the gaps.

Her father had spent a week or so campaigning via phone for her to come back to Neptune, but acquiesced quickly enough to her plans. He says she’s an adult now and he respects her choices. She hears, ‘it’s better if you don’t come back.’

Ethan goes home to New Mexico. They talk on the phone most nights. He pouts when she won’t drive out to see him, pleading her busy work schedule and high gas prices.

Veronica does, however, manage to see her father on occasion. He trails a bail jumper up to the Bay Area in May and they squeeze in lunch together. They meet half way between Neptune and Palo Alto a few times for what they dub “No Stay Father-Daughter Days.” They visit an elephant seal rookery in Piedras Blancas and Hearst Castle at San Simeon. They eat hamburgers and ice cream and let the past fade into the past.

Veronica is normal and Keith is happy and proud.

As the summer drags on, missed calls from Mac and Wallace continue to pile up on her phone. The messages have changed from “please visit” to thinly disguised irritation at her vanishing act.

One day, after a particularly grueling shift at the bookstore—full of demanding prospective parents and students—and another pleasant, yet mostly silent, dinner with Megan, who is taking summer classes toward her Biology and Biophysics double major, Veronica sits on her dorm bed in the gathering darkness, listening to the voicemails. When she pushes the “play” button, their voices spill out into the quiet room.

“V, girl. Where you at? I’ve got some time off from basketball camp next week. Think you could maybe drive down for a few days?”

“Veronica, just calling to say “hi.” I was talking hacking with some guys down the hall today and thought of you. Call me back when you get a chance.”

“Veronica! What’s up with you? You dead? Don’t make me drive up there and hunt you down; call me back.”

“Bond, this is getting ridiculous. Call me when you get this.”

“V, I sure am getting tired of listening to your voicemail message.”
The newest one in queue is Wallace. It starts with just her name, “Veronica,” then a sigh she feels all the way down to her bones, then the simply voiced hope. “Call me.”

She tosses and turns all night, her dreams starring Mac and Wallace trapped together inside a burning room, unable to get out. *My fault.*

The next day at the coffee shop, Veronica is in the break room, dark circles under her eyes, telling a lighthearted story to one of the other waitresses featuring “my friend Wallace.” She stops mid sentence, the words echoing in her mind.

*’My friend Wallace.’ My friend. Your friend who you haven’t talked to in months?*

*You need to get it together, Mars, or you won’t have any actual friends left, just the memory of them.*

She calls both Wallace and Mac that evening.

She doesn’t think at all about who hasn’t called. Not once.

V

Veronica’s second year at Stanford feels like a faster replay of the first. She is still rooming with Megan—they put in to the housing lottery together—but now in the more luxurious Oak Creek campus apartment complex.

Oak Creek is farther off campus, increasing her commute to her classes to a comfortable fifteen minute bike ride, but the isolation and more apartment-style living actually suits Veronica better than the dorms ever did.

Ever since the summer, things have been rocky with Ethan. He has been increasingly demanding of her time and pettish about little annoyances. By October, the tension has reached a breaking point and Veronica is ready to snap.

They’re at a poker game with some of Ethan’s friends, Veronica winning as usual. Ethan, already out for the round, is skulking around behind her back. Veronica can feel his eyes boring into the base of her skull.

She turns around to shoot him a glare and he grabs a hold of her wrist. “Can we talk?” he grits out through his teeth. “Let someone else win for once?”

Veronica wrenches her wrist out of his grasp, slams her cards down on the table, and follows him wordlessly out of the room.

“What is going on with you lately, Veronica?”

“With *me*, what about with you?”

“I don’t know it’s like…you’re just being such a bitch.”

She only feels a twinge of anger at his comments and it is easily pushed away. *Progress.*

“I am NOT a bitch. Just because you don’t like losing at some game, doesn’t make me a bitch.”

“It’s not that.”
“What is it then?’”

“God, Veronica. I’m not looking for, like, forever and babies or anything, but lately it’s like...even when you’re with me you’re not with me, you know.” He looks at her helplessly for a response, any response. “I’m fucking sick of it.”

“Me too.”

“So, I guess we’re done.”

“We are.”

Fall. Winter.

Normal life, normal classes.

Calls to Mac, calls to Wallace, calls to Dad.

No anger, no vengeance.

Just Veronica.

The bad dreams have faded, at least a little, and lost their frequency. Veronica takes it as a hopeful sign. Now her nighttime rambles are mostly normal. Sometimes she finds out she’s been forgetting to attend class all along, but still has to take the final. Sometimes she’s lost and searching for something that forever retreats into the distance. Sometimes she is flying, soaring above the clouds, or buffeted by winds.

And then there is her favorite dream. She can never quite remember it when she wakes up, but, whenever she has it, it carries her through the day with a sense of calm and peace. She comes to look forward to the Good Dream days, as she deems them mentally. A welcome oasis in the midst of her increasingly hectic life.

It’s January and she’s thinking about him again. (Logan.) They’re at a party on the row, but it’s the kind of party where people sprawl around a too small living room trying to out-intellectual each other over White Russians, not a big frat bash.

Ensnconced with four other people on a ratty plaid couch that is clearly on at least it’s fifth home, and slightly buzzed from sipping off the bottle of wine she brought for herself, Veronica tips her head back against the cushions and lets the noise of the room wash over her.

Smallpools is playing out of someone’s iPod; it’s a catchy song, softly sung, and a girl making drinks in the kitchen is quietly bopping along to the “yeah, yeah, yeahs” of the chorus. At the other end of the couch, Megan is flirting shyly with Greg, a guy from Idaho who has been a non-stop feature of her conversations since the start of the school year. In the corner of the room, slightly behind Veronica’s couch, a group of hipsters she has been avoiding all night are having a quote competition.

She’s not sure exactly what the rules are—the quotes seem to flow from one to another with little
rhyme or reason—but the few people crowded around the circle respond every so often with scoffs or “mhm”s of approval.

Veronica finds herself pulling her cell phone out of her pocket and playing with it. I wonder what his is right now. Her elbow nudges Greg, sitting next to her, and she grimaces at him in apology as she slides more deeply into the hollow in between two of the worn couch cushions.

Someone in the group is laying down a Nietzsche quote (and grossly mispronouncing Nietzsche), but Veronica’s attention is now firmly fixed on her phone. The alcohol running through her system is causing her brain to travel down dangerous paths. You could call. Not to talk to him—the mere thought causes her pulse to race—just to listen to his voicemail quote. She smirks a little to herself. Whatever it is will blow those clowns out of the water.

Logan’s voicemail quote is historically a reliable barometer of whatever issues are on his mind. He may play it off as sarcastically earnest, but it is a clear window for those who know how to interpret. You know how to interpret. You could just…check.

She looks down at her phone. But what if he picks up? To actually talk to him… Somehow the thought is even more scary now than it was a year ago and even the wine won’t carry her that far. Later. It’s still too soon. I don’t want to upend his life, I just want to check.

Veronica eyes Greg’s phone, peeking out of the back pocket of his jeans. Casually she drops her phone on the cushion between them, bracing her hands against the flaccid cushion on either side of her body. As she struggles to extract herself from the greedy embrace of the couch, she jostles Greg lightly, knocking his phone out of his pocket and scooping it up in one smooth motion.

She plays up her drunkenness as she apologizes to Greg, who returns immediately to talking with Megan, and then speeds across the room, looking for her next mark.

Needs to be a guy to make sure Logan won’t call back. There—Patrick, who hangs around their group because of his massive crush on the currently absent Tran—is relatively by himself in the corner, but looks drunk enough to be easy to convince. Target acquired.

As she drunk-stumbles across the room toward Patrick, Veronica pulls out Greg’s phone. Luckily it doesn’t have a lock screen. Moron.

“PATRICK!” She squeals, adding some drunk-astonishment to her drunk-stumbling as though he’s just dropped out of the heavens.

He blinks at her in apparent confusion. “…Hi, Veronica.” What? We talk.

“OhmygodPatrick, I was just talking with Tran about you!”

“Really?”

“Yeah…” Veronica pauses suggestively, letting him fill in the blanks, and then adds lightening quick, “I can’t believe she isn’t here tonight.”

“She said she had to study.”

Veronica pouts briefly and then gasps, holding up Greg’s phone and wiggling it, “we should call her! Tell her what she’s missing!”

Patrick nods eagerly. “Yeah!” Yahtzee. I knew he would be a malleable drunk.
She knows Logan; he won’t pick up if it’s a number he doesn’t know, but he might decide to reverse look up a random hang up. Even with Greg’s out of state area code, that feels dangerous. A drunken wrong number message, though? There’s no way he’ll think anything of it.

Veronica chirps, “I’ll dial, okay. If she doesn’t pick up we’ll just leave her a message.” Patrick nods in an eager rhythm. Veronica inhales softly and dials the number from memory. With hands that are definitely not shaking slightly, she holds the phone to her ear.

It rings once. Twice. Veronica can picture Logan reaching for the phone, his strong hands curving around it, lifting it up, checking the number. Three times. She manages a frown of faux displeasure in Patrick’s direction. He slumps a bit. Four times.

Then the soft electronic click of the machine kicking in, followed by a robotic default voice reciting Logan’s phone number and inviting the caller to “leave a message at the tone.”

Disappointment punches Veronica in the gut, blitzing her in an almost physical fashion.

*No quote. Not Logan’s voice. I can’t even have that.*

As the beep sounds, she holds the phone out in Patrick’s direction and he babbles into it (“Traaaaan! Where you at girl? You should be at Scott and JP’s, this party is…”).

When he finishes, Veronica pulls the phone away and walks back to the couch, her steps straight and sober. The floor underneath her has taken on a particular sliding quality that reminds her of the first minutes after you get off of a treadmill or moving sidewalk.

Did he change his number? Is he not doing quotes any more? What does it mean if he’s not doing quotes anymore? Should she call? Check up?

*If he wanted to call, he would. Leave him alone.*

Psychology had started out as a practical major choice. A well respected department with world renowned Professors, one of whom had taken a liking to her. It seemed like a no brainer. As Veronica gets deeper into the major, though, she finds it exciting her in ways she didn’t think were possible any more.

Research psychology presents big knotty puzzles and Veronica, much as she hates to admit it to herself, misses puzzles. She can lose herself in the process of gathering information, teasing out clues, slowly unraveling truths from a seeming tangle of contradictions. The puzzles themselves are fascinating, if somewhat clinical. It's like solving mysteries in a computer game; all of the brain work, none of the emotional investment…or fall out.

She racks up Psychology credits—always with an eye on the pre-law track. Intro to Perception with Woofter; Language and Thought with Zhang; Abnormal Psych with Dr. Hague again.

By Spring quarter, Veronica has dropped her hours at the restaurant in favor of doing some administrative work for Dr. Hague. It starts out as mostly filing, but advances by the end of the year into her helping him with some low level research.

Abnormal behavior.
Deviant psychopathology.

Horrible people doing horrible things, but at a distance, hidden behind numbers and anonymity.

She can still feel the anger, burning in her like a banked ember (Someone should stop them. Someone should make them pay) but it is starting to feel more and more detached from her. Like the fury and the need for vengeance (justice) exist outside of her, a clouded miasma, following her around like Pigpen, that she can outrun most days.

Spring passes. Summer. Fall.

There is a week long trip to Neptune, her heart pounding out of her chest every time she ventures into public, where she visits with Mac and Wallace and runs into Cora Briggs at Java the Hut. She doesn’t see anyone else from high school. And it’s not like she would—wanted to—Neptune isn’t that small of a town.

Back at Stanford for her third year; work, endless work. A new apartment with Megan. Dates with Anil. Dates with Cary. Dates with no one.

October is hard, but that is nothing new. The bad dreams ramp up for a little while, but her good dream—the mysterious calming dream she can never remember—sticks around too, balancing them out somewhat.

Veronica has fun, occasionally—I do—a fun, normal life that is everything she used to dream of.

And she is busy. So busy.

Toward the end of Fall Quarter, Dr. Hague calls Veronica into his office.

“Miss Mars,” he says, peering at her over the top of his glasses, “Hands, if you please.”

It is a familiar command and Veronica automatically sticks her hands out in response, vertically flat, palms facing inward, with about eight inches of space between them. Dr. Hague takes the lumpy, messy pile of brown wool in his lap and begins to wind it around her hands in a loose figure-eight pattern, creating a skein.

“Veronica, what classes are you taking in our department next quarter?”

“I’d thought about Professor Hobbs’ seminar on Personal and Social Change, and maybe Applications of Social Psychology. You’re teaching that, right?”

“Correct.” He winds for a few more minutes. “Why not take my seminar on Adolescent Trauma?”

I lived it. I don’t need a seminar on it. “I’d really like to, but I’m not sure it will fit into my schedule.”

“Well, see if you can move some things around.” The rhythmic shushing of the yarn as it wraps around her hands is almost hypnotic. “I have some upcoming research on risk aversion in anti-social personalities. I’ll be working on it all next year and I’d like you to play a major part. I could use your
mind. You’d need the background my seminar provides, though.”

This is exactly what Veronica has been hoping for; a chance to work on some big, meaningful, publish-able research with a world renowned psychologist. A complex problem to solve. A real law school resume standout. But, Adolescent Trauma?

Suck it up, Mars.

“Dr. Hague. That is so…thank you. I’ll make sure to move my schedule around.”

“Good, Miss Mars.” He gently pulls the now completed skein of yarn off of her hands. “I’ll look forward to it.” He looks at Veronica, still standing there, slightly dazed. “That’s all I needed.”

How bad could it be?

Sitting in class on the first day of the Adolescent Trauma seminar and scanning over the topics on the syllabus, Veronica’s heart starts to pound—death of a loved one, violence, bullying, suicidal ideation, physical and sexual abuse, intrapersonal implications—just as she feared, this is going to be like a seminar on her high school years. I should ask Dr. Hague if I can do a project on myself, maybe turn in an old diary for extra credit. The slightly hysterical edge to her thoughts actually angers Veronica when it registers. Stanford has been so…wonderful. She is finding a normal here without old ghosts to haunt her and trip her up at every turn. But apparently she’s not over it, not past it like she was beginning to hope, if even the mere thought of some of these topics can make pulse race and her palms clammy. I gave up everything good in my life to get away from this. Everything. Why won’t it go away?

Her hand trembles slightly as, with the rest of the class, she pulls out her laptop to begin taking notes. Maybe, though; maybe this could be good. Maybe this class will allow her to lock that anger up and look at her past in a more detached way. Clinical. Like she is a case study. That would be nice. It would be nice if she could take a damn seminar in her major without being swamped by overwhelming memories of past trauma.

Four weeks later, it is after eleven at night when Veronica slams shut her seminar reading and, breathing harshly, strips out of her pajamas and throws on her running clothes. She jams earbuds into her ears, thumbs the volume all the way up on what she has privately dubbed her “angry girl” playlist, and dashes out the door for a run.

Her sneakers slap on the concrete and harsh puffs of breath escape her as she rounds the corner past the Med Center and heads into campus. Stanford’s campus is pretty safe, of course, but she normally wouldn’t take a nighttime run outside by herself, she would head to the gym and hop on a treadmill. Tonight, though…this run isn’t about fitness or safety, it’s about exorcising old demons. This is reckless. Stupid. Adrenaline junkie. This isn’t you anymore. Except apparently it is, because she takes savage joy in the night, in the danger, in the can of mace clutched in her hand and the challenge in her eyes. I dare you. I fucking dare you.

As soon as she’d looked at the syllabus, she’d expected the Adolescent Trauma class to open up uncomfortable insight into her past. What she hadn’t expected—stupidly, stupidly—what she hadn’t expected was Logan. (”Need me to autograph your textbook?”)
But now there he is, for an hour every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday and every damn time she opens up her textbooks. Every. Damn. Time. Veronica grits her teeth as she tears through the main quad, struggling to regulate her breathing. In the distance, Hoover Tower chimes the hour. Midnight.

This week, Dr. Hague had started lecturing on the “physical abuse” part of the syllabus. Today’s lecture had detailed the effects of physical abuse from adolescence into adulthood. Every word he spoke was like a blow. Veronica had stopped even pretending to take notes about ten minutes in and had barely made it through the rest of the lecture, dashing out before the rest of the students had even finished gathering their belongings.

She’s sure Dr. Hague noticed—of course he did, he is a sharp old bird—virtually guaranteeing an uncomfortable one-on-one “Veronica, is everything okay” chat in her near future. What the hell was she going to say to that? Oh, sorry, sir. It’s just that your talk about physical abuse reminded me of how the biggest monster I ever met spent years torturing one of best people I’ve ever met. You may have heard of him, Aaron Echolls? Oh yes, I liked Hair Trigger, too.

Dr. Hague’s words have been plaguing her all day, running through her mind, pounding along to the beat of her feet on the pavement. “Adult survivors often sabotage their relationships with others; they push to find out where the boundaries are and, if those boundaries don’t exist, they’ll keep pushing until they do.” Logan.

“Physical abuse survivors often have a tendency to withhold information, having been taught that to volunteer information is to be punished for it.” Logan. Logan.

She runs on, reaching the edge of the campus and transitioning onto the dirt track that runs a one mile loop around Lake Lag. The night is quiet as the glowing lights of dorm windows and the distant sounds of music pumping out of Roble Hall fade into the distance. Veronica’s feet kick up puffs of dull brown dust, her harsh breathing is the only sound as she dodges around low-hanging branches, her chest tight from exercise and emotion.

To conclude the lecture, Dr. Hague had gone through a list of environmental variables—“protective factors”—which could help increase the likelihood that a child would be able to move beyond abuse and function normally as an adult. She couldn’t help seeing every cold bullet on the PowerPoint slide as some sort of morbid Logan checklist. Some of the protective factors, Veronica consoled herself, Logan had in spades—a good sense of humor, a strong intellect, an active imagination—but others… high self-esteem—Logan had that, or did he? How much of the arrogance was real and how much was a cover? A sensitive, caring, and safe home environment—Ha! Lynn and Trina just seemed to ignore what was happening. Trina flat out joked about him lying! Supportive relationships and the availability of emotional support. God, that one hurt the most. He should have had us—Duncan knew and did nothing, Lilly had to know, I was so unbelievably clueless. He swam in his shirt all the damn time! We should have done something. I should have done something. My dad was the sheriff! And then, when I did know…god we should have talked more!

Mind churning, Veronica ramps up her pace to an even more punishing level. Her shins are aching and her side is a giant wall of pain, but she keeps pushing. Keeps pushing.

It’s all she knows how to do.

Over forty-five minutes later, Veronica returns to her dorm, exhausted, but not really any more emotionally stable. A quick shower to rinse off the sweat and she is back in her pajamas. Back to her
reading. *You could just go to bed.* The problem is, she has to do the reading. It’s not like she can just stick her fingers in her ears and go “lalalalala,” as much as she wants to. They have a reaction paper due in a week and she’s already at least a chapter behind where she’d like to be because of her procrastination.

Gathering herself internally, Veronica tries to do everything she can to distance herself from the material. Depersonalize it. She snatches the textbook off of her bed, walks over to her desk, and pushes her laptop back, clearing some space. She turns on all of the lights in her room and grabs a highlighter—even though Veronica never uses a highlighter to do her reading—because it feels more official that way. On a last thought, she flips over the framed picture of her father that sits on the ledge above her desk so that he is no longer smiling down at her, takes a deep breath, and opens the book to the point where she left off.

“Children who are abused internalize profoundly negative messages about themselves, their place in the world and other people. These negative messages often persist into adulthood, and they powerfully influence how the survivor interacts with other people, and how the survivor feels about themselves.” *God, Logan.* No. Just homework. *Detached. Detached.* Veronica carefully highlights, “negative messages often persist into adulthood” and moves on.

“Lack of trust can manifest in different ways. Some people become haunted by insecurity and doubt, which leads them to constantly need to be reassured of a partner’s love.” *Fuck.* “Other people might push their loved ones away, refusing to make deep and lasting connections for fear of getting hurt again. They would rather live a life of isolation and loneliness than become vulnerable and intimate with another person.” *Me.* “Interestingly, both styles result in loneliness.” With a cry, Veronica hurls the text across the room. It strikes the wall with a loud smack and falls in a heap on the floor, spine broken, pages splayed.

Veronica drops her head into her hands. Flashes of Logan are playing through her mind; he is laughing up at her from the Kanes’ pool, grumpily holding her backpack while she does cartwheels, staring grim and mask-like at Lilly’s funeral, acidly smirking as he smashes her headlights, wide open with glee in the middle of a tickle fight, intense and focused, eyes boring into hers as they make love.

With a sudden intake of breath, she scrambles for her cell phone, yanking futilely at the power cord and fumbling, almost dropping it into the trashcan. Hands shaking, she scrolls down her contact list to his name.

Her thumb hovers over the little green phone on the “call” button.

*What am I doing? What will I even say?*

“It’s been three years, but I’m so sorry I never told you I loved you.” *I did. I do.*

“Hey Logan, I’ve been doing reading on child abuse and I thought about you. Surprise!”

She breathes out a shaky chuckle.

“I get it. I get why you didn’t tell me about Madison or the hotel fire in Mexico or your alibi for Lilly. I get it.” Yes, that’s it. That’s what she’d say and then he’d say…what?

“Who is this?” *No. Never that.*

“Why should I care now?” *No, Logan cares. He might not want to, but he cares.*

“Come back to me.”
That would be the worst, because she might. She might jump in her car and drive seven hours to show up at his door—the door she doesn’t even know the location of for sure anymore—and throw herself into his arms. Her heart tells her he’d grab her and kiss her and spin her and…

She might. If he asked.

So she puts the phone down.

But she can’t quite…she just can’t let it go. She’ll never get to sleep. She’ll never get through the reading.

With sharp, jerky movements, Veronica pulls her laptop toward her, opens her email client and starts typing furiously, without even a greeting, for once not pausing to edit herself, not pausing to think.

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I’m taking this Psych seminar right now on Adolescent Trauma, and it is basically like sitting through Logan and Veronica: The Class. I can’t help it, every little thing I read, every thing the professor says makes me think about you, about us. I am so, so sorry Logan. So sorry for everything I did wrong when we were together. Sorry I put you in danger. Sorry for hurting you again by leaving, even though it was the right thing. Sorry for never knowing what was going on—never realizing—even though it was right there in front of me. So obvious.

It pours out of her like lava, a burning and scalding flow, obliterating everything, clearing a path seared fresh and clean behind it.

Logan, nothing has changed. Please don’t think that’s what this is. I just wanted to let you know how sorry I am that my issues kept me from being what you need. I only ever wanted to help you be the amazing man I know you can be, but I could never seem to make it right. Every instinct I had for myself was wrong for you. I get it now. I understand so much that I didn’t before. I don’t even know what I’m doing right now, what I’m writing. I just had to say this. It’s not your fault. Please don’t ever think any of it was your fault.

I miss you so much.

Fingers flying ahead of her brain, Veronica hits “send.” Almost immediately her hand shoots to her mouth. Shit. Shit. Didn’t mean to send that. I wasn’t actually going to send that. A feeling of almost detached fatality comes over her. Well, it is out there now. (Maybe he’ll call)

Emotionally wrung out and unable to even contemplate returning to her reading, Veronica crawls into bed, rolls her comforter around her, burrito-like, and falls off the ledge into sleep.

Veronica wakes up the next morning to weak sunlight streaming through her dorm room window.
She rolls over, groaning a little. Her body feels like it’s been worked over by an expert and her head is pounding. If she didn’t know better, she’d think she had the hangover to end all hangovers, but she didn’t drink last night, sh—

_Oh God._

Logan. The email.

A curious lightness buoy her up as she floats, detached, over to her desk. Her computer is still open and, as soon as she wakes it up, her email client pops up onto the screen. Veronica bites her lip and hits “refresh.”

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From: postmaster@hotmail.com  
To: vmars@stanford.edu  
Subject: This is an automatically generated Delivery Status Notification.

Delivery to the following recipients failed.

leekols@hotmail.com

Requested action not taken: mailbox unavailable

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In June, Mac and Wallace graduate from Hearst. It’s the weekend immediately after Veronica’s finals and she pushes any of her misgivings to the back of her mind and drives down to celebrate with them.

Unfortunately for Veronica, she hits some serious traffic on the way to Neptune and makes it to her seat—bright red from the race from the parking lot—just in time to see Wallace’s row of “F”s called up to the stage. Hearst is a small enough college that the rest of the ceremony goes relatively quickly. After the pomp and circumstance is done, newly minted B.A.s and B.S.s flock all across the soccer field in the too-bright sun. Scanning, Veronica finds Mac. Finds Wallace. Finds…oh dear god, is that Piz?

No one else.

She maneuvers her way toward where Mac and Wallace and Piz are standing. Mac and Wallace she gives fierce hugs to. When she steps back from Wallace, she shoots a grin, eyebrows raised, at Piz.

“Piznarski.”

“Veronica…hi. You look—I-I mean it’s good to see you. How are you? How’s Stanford?”

“Good. Good.” She takes pity on his panicked look. No one expects to be ambushed by their ex at their own college graduation (Right?) “Stanford is great. I could be finished this year, but one of my professors tapped me to work on some research with him, so I’m doing that and picking up a minor.”

“Wow, congratulations.”
“Congratulations to you. Graduate.”

“Uh, yeah. Thanks. Hey,” He waves frantically off into the distance, “I see my parents, so I’m going to…go.” He starts to back away from their group slowly. “Nice to—I—bye!” He practically sprints away.

Wallace stares after Piz’s retreating back. “Damn, that was…” he shakes his head ruefully, “…damn.”

Veronica rolls her eyes and goes back to scanning the crowd. Mac jumps in, “So, we’re on for dinner, right? It’ll be Wallace’s family, my family, you and your dad. My parents got this reservation at…” She trails off, looking at Veronica, who is still cataloging graduates one by one. “Looking for better friends?”

“Oh, you.” Veronica laughs stiffly and smacks Mac on the arm, “Um, I was looking for Parker. I’d like to say ‘hi.’”

“Oh, she’s not here; didn’t want to do the ceremony. She has a job lined up back in Boulder that starts next week and she’s frantically packing.”

“Oh.” Veronica’s attention is fixed on a clump of graduates clustered closely together. She can’t really see all of the guys toward the back of the group.

Mac eyes her judiciously. “You know, I don’t really see your boy much since freshman year, but I’m pretty sure he’s not here. They didn’t call his name.” Her voice softens a bit. “I do know he graduated though.”

Veronica gives a single jerky nod, not meeting Mac’s eyes, before clapping her hands together loudly, “So, what’s on the menu for dinner?”

Senior year at Stanford is a different experience. Veronica’s general requirements are all behind her and she has her Psychology classes all checked off. Aside from a few courses to complete her Communications minor, Veronica spends most of her year haunting Jordan Hall, working with Dr. Hague to research risk aversion in anti-social personalities.

There’s a new guy, Brian, who she started seeing over the summer. He’s shy and quiet, an art history major a year younger than her. He doesn’t demand much of her time, a fact that Veronica appreciates vaguely when it crosses her mind.

She and Megan, old comfortable roommates by now, are living in Mirrielees House, an apartment-style dorm with a full kitchen. Neither spends much time there; Megan caught up in the throes of her final biology classes and applying for med schools, Veronica sucked deep into the endless cycle of interviewing and cross referencing and writing, in addition to her other full time job.

Her work with Dr. Hague swings wildly between fascinating and mind-numbingly boring. They spend a good chunk of the year gathering data, primarily through questionnaires and in person interviews.

Veronica spends most of the winter and early spring driving to and from various halfway houses and minimum security prisons, at first with one of Dr. Hague’s graduate students and then eventually alone, to conduct interviews with inmates.
It takes her a while to hit her stride. The first few times out, the grad student she’s with gently tells her that she’s pushing too hard—leading the interview subjects—like she’s interrogating them. It takes some reigning in, but she manages to find a more neutral tone. She does like asking questions, though. It’s something of a relief to resurrect this little piece of her old life and to try, however briefly, to integrate it into her new whole.

The interviews can often be grueling. The research they’re doing requires Veronica to delve relatively deep with her questions to categorize the degree and type of anti-social personality. The subjects’ words often run through her mind for days afterwards; chilling reminders of the side of humanity she’s been trying to forget exists.

Driving home from a particularly long day of interviewing one day in late January, about two months into the project, Veronica is mentally running over the words of her last two subjects, a young woman who ran over and killed a small child while driving high and an older guy who has been in and out of prison his whole life for everything from tax fraud to bouncing checks to heading up an identity theft ring.

The same themes pop up over and over. *It’s not my fault. The world is against me. It wasn’t that big of a deal. I deserve better. Arrogant. Unable to feel empathy. And angry.*

*I shouldn’t have to play by the normal rules.*

*I’ll get them for what they’ve done.*

The sheer vitriol some of her subjects display toward their victims and toward the world at large shakes Veronica to her core sometimes. She doesn’t want to see echoes of herself (*her old self, of course*) in these people but…it’s there. Exaggerated, twisted and distorted, but its there, picking away at the back of her brain.

*That was the old you. The angry you. You’re not like that any more. Vengeance doesn't drive you.*

She’s learned through four years of psychology classes to self assess. She knows her weaknesses. Adrenaline junkie. Maybe a little post-traumatic stress. Obsessive about things that catch her interest.

*But you’ve changed. No backsliding.*

And it’s true. When she feels her anger or frustration start to well up these days she goes for a long nighttime run—maybe not always the safest decision, but better than taking a taser to anyone who pisses her off.

When she sees crime, wrongdoing, people getting away with things they don’t deserve, she no longer feels the urge to set things right. It’s not her job. She is not a one woman justice task force. She is not.

The law mostly works.

The right people mostly go to jail.

And when they don’t? It’s not her job to fix it.
October: Two of the Psychology grad assistants, both married, are clearly having an affair. They are sloppy about it—ridiculous—like they want to get caught. One afternoon, walking by a small closet in Jordan hall, she catches a glimpse of the two of them. They are perfectly framed. Her mind takes the picture and she stores it away as a reminder of the way the world works. Sometimes she’s tempted to forget.

December: One of Brian’s suitmates, Rob, walks down the hallway behind her with a large clump of his friends, complaining loudly about the theft of his laptop and mp3 player. Veronica can think of at least different three ways off the top of her head that he could try to track down the thief. She keeps walking and doesn’t bring it up to Brian.

January: Drug deals are almost certainly going down two houses from hers. Not exactly unusual in the college community, but then a kid ODs. It takes the local police three months to track down the operation.

February: Megan is alternately moping around and snappish. It comes out a week later that her teenage sister was drugged and raped at a party. The police never catch the rapist. That one hits hard.

In late March, Veronica walks up to the Registrar’s office, steps bouncing—it’s a Good Dream day—to complete her final check before graduation.

Waiting to meet with her is a little dumpling of a woman—both her person and her desk neat almost to the point of obsessiveness—who wields a wide smile and a motherly mien.

“Well, Veronica. It looks like you’re clear to graduate this Spring with a B.A. in Psychology and a minor in Communications, provided your Spring quarter grades pass muster,” she pauses to beam up at Veronica, “and given your record I’m sure they will.”

Veronica smiles back at her; she can’t help it, this woman draws smiles like a reflex.

“I see you’re down for the pre-law track. Have you been applying to law schools, or are you going to take some time off first?”

The eternal debate amongst her pre-law colleagues; go to law school right out of undergrad—why waste time?—or take a gap year and work, gain some real world experience, save up some money, and take a lot of time to really devote yourself to the application process and the LSATs.

“I’m taking a gap year. I have a job lined up as a paralegal at Whitten, Proctor and Dawes in San Francisco.” It is not a decision she would have made four years ago.

“Good choice,” the adviser leans forward confidentially, “my daughter went to law school—Harvard—right out of undergrad and she says it’s pretty consuming. I think she wishes she had taken a little time.”

Veronica smiles softly. Being a paralegal at a top rated firm in a large city isn’t actually a vacation, but then neither is Harvard Law.
“With your grades you should be looking at the top law schools; Harvard, Yale, Columbia,” she waggles her eyebrows, “Stanford.”

Veronica laughs a little, “I know I have a big decision to make.”

“Oh yes, but enjoy it while you can. At your age, with your prospects,” she smiles a singularly sweet smile, “why, the world is your oyster, my dear.”

Dr. Hague’s research is published late in April, and is very well received and much quoted amongst his colleagues. Veronica’s name is attached, partially buried and in teeny tiny type, but attached. The feeling of accomplishment eclipses all of her other academic achievements to date and she can’t help but be proud of herself. It is a long-forgotten feeling, and fleeting, quickly lost amidst the end of the year bustle. Nothing like the heady rush figuring out a case.

For Veronica’s graduation, Keith Mars drives up with Wallace, who is working on his teaching degree at San Diego State. She tours the two of them around campus and around Palo Alto; she introduces her father to Dr. Hague and then stands there, hugely embarrassed, as the professor praises her work on the research project. Her Dad meets Brian for the first time, Brian stammers and blushes (rather unattractively, it must be said) and Keith raises an eyebrow in her direction.

On the day of the ceremony, Mac—who is in Pittsburgh doing her Masters at Carnegie Mellon—texts encouraging messages while Veronica’s father looks like a literal interpretation of the phrase “proud enough to bust his buttons.” He keeps calling her “my Stanford graduate” and the beam won’t fade from his face. Veronica, Wallace, Brian and Keith go out to dinner the night after the graduation, her father paying at his insistence (“Nothing but the best for my Stanford graduate.”)

For Veronica, the night carries a certain melancholy. Everything her father expects is forward, onward. Greatness. All that the dinner reminds her of is how much she’s left behind. Family.

Maybe you could go to UCLA. Still see Dad for dinner every week. See...everyone more often.

She tries to shake herself out of it. You got out Veronica. Don’t get sucked back in.

Her dad and Wallace stay a few days to help her get moved out of the dorms and into her new San Francisco apartment.

A new stage in life. Another new beginning.

Whitten, Proctor and Dawes is a medium-sized firm, extremely well respected and dealing with a little bit of everything; good experience for someone trying to get a taste of what life might be like as a lawyer.

The firm has a group of other young paralegals—many of whom are also in the throes of applying to law school—who are fun to hang around with. Veronica sees Megan, attending med school at UC San Francisco, a few times for coffee.

She and Brian try to keep it together, but things implode very quickly after he asks to move in with
her and commute for his last year at Stanford. “I miss you, Veronica,” he says, and she…doesn’t.

Pretty soon she’s back to the old standby, a glass of wine and Logan’s hands. *(I could call him. Should I call him?)*

All-in-all, Veronica is a happy, if stressed, twenty-something when she steps through the break room of the firm to gather her coat and purse one August evening. As she turns to leave, her eye is caught by an image on one of the new magazines fanned out on the table. By a face.

His face.

Heart pounding wildly, she casually scoops up the offending publication, a month old edition of Life Weekly, says a quick goodbye to the secretaries clustered around the coffee machine, and walks unsteadily out of the building.

Back in her apartment—small and cramped, but thankfully only hers—Veronica sinks down onto her couch and opens the magazine.

The article on Logan is a nice spread; three-quarters of a page of text wrapped around a slightly out of focus picture of what looks like some sort of navy ceremony. *(Navy? The Navy. The Navy!)* He looks…older. Different.

He is a navy pilot.

*You didn’t know.*

Her fingertip hovers a bare inch over the photo. Logan.

*You never called. He didn’t call you. He hasn’t ever called you. He doesn’t want to call you. Let. It. Go.*

She shuts the magazine.

No.

Thats night, Veronica spends a lot of time looking around online. When she finds the event she wants, with the specific feature she wants, she doesn’t hesitate to plunk down money for tickets. Seattle is a thirteen hour drive—it might almost be cheaper to fly—but she plans for the car trip and makes arrangements for cheap motel rooms. She wants the control, being on a plane would be too confining. When she finishes making arrangements, she shuts her laptop with a decisive click and marks a date a month and a half in the future on her wall calendar with a small “x.” She carefully blanks her mind before going to bed, a hard won strategy she’s perfected over the last few years.

The six weeks roll by and Veronica finds herself on the road heading north to Seattle. The drive gives her a lot of time to think. She thinks about her grocery list for next week. She thinks about the depositions she needs to type up on Monday. She thinks about where her next bathroom stop should be. She doesn’t think about where she is going, or why.

Lots of trees and one motel stop later, she is pulling into the parking lot of Seattle’s Genesee Park for their annual Seafair Air Show. Colorful signs announce the presence of the US Navy’s Blue Angels. Tens of thousands of people swarm around her, couples, families, and little kids running excitedly in...
every direction. The waterfront area of Lake Washington is set up like a fair. Following the signs for
the airshow viewing area, Veronica dodges around a little girl clinging to her father’s pantleg
howling for cotton candy and an older couple, their snail-like pace bunching up the human traffic
behind them. Music pumps out from several live bands at grandstands—loud and blaring as she
passes and then fading into the distance as she hurries on, outdistancing some of the slower moving
crowd.

Clusters of people are already set up on the beach along the waterfront, on blankets or chairs,
watching some sort of display going on in the water involving wakeboards and low flying seaplanes.
The day is gorgeous, typically overcast Seattle seemingly putting on a show with bright sun
sparkling off the waters of Lake Washington and a crystalline sky. As the blaring loudspeakers keep
repeating, it is “a perfect day for an airshow!”

At the far end of the waterfront, Veronica claims a square of sand, shaking open the chair she
brought with her. As she looks around, she notices that all of the other groups there have full set ups
—pop up tents and umbrellas, floppy hats and beach toys, boom boxes, footballs and Frisbees to
throw. Her solo chair speaks to a singleness of mind she doesn’t really want to think about.

Finally the show starts, and music is blaring over the speakers set up in the park and along the
waterfront. The nearest speaker is far enough from Veronica that she has to focus for a second to
make out the song. A small smirk lights her face. “Danger Zone.” Of course.

Any hint of levity is gone from her as four planes—no, six…eight? Their alignment is so perfect its
hard to tell at first—whoosh out of nowhere from across the Seattle skyline, their roar seemingly
rattling the air itself as they make a low pass over the water and then shoot up skyward to an
impossible height. The crowd cheers uproariously as the planes dwindle to tiny dots trailing feathery
white plumes. Just as it seems they are gone from view, they execute a loop and come screaming
back down to earth.

The crowd around Veronica whoops, clapping in appreciation as the planes separate to do more
acrobatic passes. Veronica’s heart is in her stomach, then her throat, as the planes dodge nimbly past
each other. Her hand is pressed tightly against her mouth, she couldn’t take it away if she tried.

Four planes fly by in tight diamond formation, their wingtips inches apart, low enough that the
distinctive royal blue and yellow coloration of the planes is clearly visible. They turn together in
effortless unison, barrel rolling, twisting, and flying upside down. It is impossible. Awe inspiring.
Veronica can’t think, can’t speak, for the emotions welling up in her; a confusing soup of fear,
anticipation, dread, pride, guilt. Love. Tears spring to her eyes and she sets her jaw against them.

It’s not even him. Get a grip.

Two planes do a comparatively low swoop over the crowd, the screaming blast almost painful.
Veronica shades her eyes and looks up at them as they pass, her lips set in a tight line.

They’re so high and untouchable. So far away.

The show goes on, feat after feat, the crowd’s noise intensifying to a cacophony, multiplying the
blast of the jet engines until Veronica starts to feel dizzy. She sits down abruptly, her legs jello, as the
show comes to a conclusion. After a final round of applause, the crowd begins to disperse. There are
still many events in the day—the next one Veronica is waiting for won’t start for two hours—but the
Blue Angels show is a highlight and a lot of people are packing up to head home.

Veronica stays puts, her heart rate slowing, the sweat trickling around her bra strap drying to a film.
(Not even him. It wasn’t him.) She sits as the day advances and the shadows shift. People jog by. A
Frisbee is thrown past her and she barely blinks. Finally, nearly an hour and a half after the end of the airshow, she checks her watch, rolls her shoulders, stands up creakily, and starts to walk toward the low slung concrete brick “exhibit hall” at the far end of the park. Outside she joins the small line that has formed, trailing her fingers briefly over a sign that reads “Meet the Pilots!” in excited block caps.

Waiting in line, Veronica scans the crowd. Lots of families with young kids, especially boys in the six to twelve range. A few young couples. Several groups of giggling teen girls and several more clusters of tanned, lean and brittle looking middle-aged cougars. As a single woman on her own, she is an anomaly. The doors open and the crowd streams into the hall. How to play this?

The aviators are set up around the room, the Blue Angels stationed at a long, low table at the far end of the room, ready to sign autographs. The majority of the crowd surges in their direction. Veronica pays them little attention—they’ll be too busy for what she needs—she only has eyes for the other aviators in the room. Members of the VAF-54 Sidewinders, they are stationed at nearby NAS Whidbey Island and have been sent by the Navy to do some PR at the meet and greet event.

This meet and greet is why she is here; why she drove all the way to Seattle, rather than waiting for the Blue Angels show in San Francisco or Los Angeles. A chance to talk to the pilots—aviators, she corrects mentally. Online research will only tell you so much, Veronica knows from experience, and somehow she just needed to do this in person.

The aviators all stand scattered around the edges of the room, wearing lightweight uniforms that Veronica doesn’t have the military knowledge to identify (but which look pretty darn nice) with welcoming smiles on their faces.

Veronica eyes up her first target. Just about six feet tall, his sandy blonde hair buzzed into military submission, he looks friendly and uncomplicated and young. The once over he gives her from across the room suggests that he will be susceptible to her questions, and he is currently alone.

Veronica bounces across the carpeted floor toward her target, adding a little sashay to her walk. As she reaches the aviator, she lets her eyes widen and a smile sparkle on her lips. “Ohmygod, hiieee,” she burbles cheerily to him when she reaches him. “This is such a thrill. I can’t believe I actually get to meet a real live navy pilot.”

The aviator blushes, “Hi there, ma’am.” His accent has Texas written all over it, “I’m Lt. James Peterson.”

“Hi Lieutenant, I’m Amber!” Hello there Amber, I’ve missed you. Veronica reaches out to take the hand he’s offering and gives it a quick, girly shake.

“Nice to meet you, Amber.” He grins cheekily at her.

“So, Lieutenant, how long have you been flying with the Navy?”

“Uhh, well I got winged about two years ago, but it’s been about five years since I joined the Navy.” He shrugs. “Training, you know.”

“Winged? How fascinating! Tell me about your training; did you join the Navy out of college or high school?”

“College.”

“How did that work?”

Lt. Peterson is starting to acquire the pinned look of a man who suddenly finds himself in a corner.
with no idea how he got there.

“Um, the Navy has this program—OCS—for when—”

A small group of the cougars have detached from the Blue Angels’ line and made their way over to Lt. Peterson. He trails off, smiling politely over Veronica’s shoulder at them.

“Excuse me sir. Thank you so much for your service to our country. Could we get a picture?”

Lt. Peterson nods graciously, “of course,” and then turns back to Veronica with a regretful moue, “Sorry Miss, we’re supposed to do photo ops.” Veronica smiles gamely back at him and shifts aside, narrowly avoiding being bum rushed by the other women.

She could stick around and wait for Peterson to be done, but there are other women circling him hopefully and Veronica has a feeling his photo line won’t be getting shorter any time soon.

She scans the room. Most of the crowd is still clustered around the Blue Angels, but more and more are breaking off to talk to the other aviators and get pictures. Her options are dwindling.

In the back corner, somewhat obscured by a potted plant, there is an unoccupied aviator. As Veronica takes a roundabout route in his direction, she mentally catalogs him. Shorter and older than most of the other men here, he has a solid look to him that she doesn’t associate with pilots.

Somehow, she doesn’t think Amber will work with this guy, so she decides to go with Veronica, Amber’s slightly older, slightly less ditzy sister.

She doesn’t have time to do more than introduce herself to the aviator—Lieutenant Commander Marcus Singer—before the crowd starts to close in on them.

Desperately, Veronica throws caution to the wind.

“Look, sir. I’ll level with you. A friend of mine,” he must catch her small wince because his eyebrows rise at the word ‘friend.’ “Okay, the guy I’m seeing is a naval aviator.” She drops her gaze and shrugs a bit. “It’s not very serious right now, but I…want it to be. He doesn’t say much about his job and I just wanted…”

She trails off, unable to find the words somehow. This cover story is rattling her.

Thankfully, Singer seems to fill in the blanks the way she wants him to.

“Miss, I’ll be happy to talk to you, but I have to make the rounds here. After this whole thing is done, a bunch of the guys are going down to Broomsticks. Think you could meet us there? In maybe an hour?”

She nods gratefully.

———

Veronica has been sitting in a small booth near the back of the bar, her coke sweating rings onto the scarred wooden table, for nearly a half an hour when LTCDR Singer finally walks in at the tail end of a group of boisterous young aviators.

The younger guys head directly to the bar, but Singer scans the place and meets Veronica’s eyes, giving her a brief nod of acknowledgment. He takes his leave of the rest of the group—getting a
friendly shove from one of the guys when he nods in her direction as explanation—then finally moves across the room and takes a seat in the booth, ordering a coke from the waitress.

“So, Veronica. What did you want to know?”

“How dangerous is it?” she blurts out without thinking.

He takes it in stride, answering matter-of-factly. “It varies a lot. Is your guy flying tailhook?”

“I’m…not sure what that means.”

“Well, is he in a squad that’s attached to a carrier group?” Veronica’s mind is scrambling. What do I say? I should have done research for this damn cover story before he got here.

Singer continues kindly, “Does he go out on sea tours?”

Veronica drops her gaze to her lap where her fingers are twisted together tightly. “I don’t know,” she admits softly.

A silence settles over them. She can feel Singer’s eyes on her, weighing her for a long moment. Eventually he seems to come to a decision, picking up his coke and continuing without comment, “Well, tailhook is the most dangerous. Carrier landings are tough and they tend to be the guys flying into hostile territory. Combat helos are no joke either.” He cocks his head at Veronica. “It’s not perfectly safe, but it’s a heck of a lot safer than it was twenty, thirty years ago. Heck, even ten years ago when I joined up.” He looks down at the table to where Veronica’s hands are now clenching her glass. “They train us well and we are extremely careful. The Navy takes pride in bringing its guys home safe.”

Veronica nods and turns to the less fraught topic of training. Over the course of a few cokes, Singer proves happy to take her through the long and, apparently, extremely complex path of training naval aviators endure. Veronica’s head is spinning by the time he gets through OCS and he hasn’t even covered flight training yet.

When he finishes, she sits back in her seat with a big breath. “I had no idea it was so involved—so competitive.”

“Yeah, most people don’t. The training is pretty grueling and a lot of guys don’t make it. The ones who do,” he grins and it’s the closest Veronica has seen him come to the traditional image of a cocky fighter pilot. “well, we’re pretty darn good at our job.”

Oh Logan.

“Why did you join the navy?”

“It was a good option for a kid like me. Not much on the stick academically, although I got through college okay, a lot of energy with nowhere to put it and a serious love affair with airplanes.”

“Did it…change you?”

He snorts. “Oh yeah. It’s not some after-school special or anything, but you grow up real fast in the navy. It kind of makes everything that came before seem petty and small. In college I had all of this drama surrounding some family issues with my step-mother and this girl I dated off and on for several years. When I was going through training it was like all of that just sort of faded away, became less important. I grew up and found a new family. Left that stuff behind.” He smiles in a very genuine and sincere way, absently touching his wedding band. “The Navy was good for me. It is for most guys.”
Veronica had reservations to stay at a motel a few hours outside of Seattle that night, but instead she finds herself driving straight through—all thirteen hours—to arrive back at her apartment in San Francisco in the gray time just before dawn.

Exhausted physically and emotionally, she stumbles through the door, kicks off her shoes and pours herself a glass of wine (hey, it’s five a.m. somewhere). Not bothering to turn on the lights, Veronica slumps down onto the couch, curling her feet under her and sitting silently in the ashen light filtering through the gaps in her curtains.

You never called and he’s so far beyond you now. He’s changed his entire life to make it that way. If anyone should understand getting out like that you should. Time and distance have changed “ran away” to “got out” in her mind, but that’s probably not how he would see it, is it? He, who stayed.

You don’t even know him any more.

She takes a long sip of her merlot.

Well, that’s that.

Walking through the gates into Columbia University’s campus feels like leaving crowded bustling New York City behind and stepping directly into Oxford or Cambridge. Veronica spends her first few months continually amazed at how hidden and private the campus—an actual campus, not just a collection of buildings—feels. The law building sits slightly outside the main cluster and has a more modern style than some of the old world buildings on the central quad, but the general aesthetic of community carries over.

Columbia’s 1L students take a proscribed set of courses, introductory work in all branches and types of law—civil, criminal, constitutional, torts, contracts—they are expected to gain a thorough foundation in what seems like pretty much the entirety of the American legal system.

The classes are far more demanding than any full time job Veronica has ever had—more demanding than even her toughest classes at Stanford. One ninety minute seminar takes Veronica at least six hours to prepare for. Each hour long lecture carries a reading load of upwards of one hundred pages.

The mental burn is intense; exhilarating at times, exhausting always, and often isolating.

In early October, Veronica is jogging along the Hudson river near sunset, taking advantage of the newly completed sections of the Greenway to enjoy the sun painting the water a vibrant shade of orange. Of course, as all good law students learn to do, she is also multitasking by getting in her weekly phone call with her father on her phone’s headset. Having finished quizzing her on her classes and cracking several extremely un-funny lawyer jokes, Keith has now moved on to questions about her personal life.

“How is Megan doing?”

Veronica huffs a little as she heads up a small incline. “Oh, good I’m sure. I haven’t really talked to her lately. I bet med school is keeping her busy.”

“What about Ann Li or Charlotte?”

“You know, I haven’t heard from them recently either.”
“Any fellas I should know about?”

She scoffs. “At this point, my only fella is the law. He beats me Paw. I tried to fight him, but he won.”

Veronica has kept her voice as light and breezy as her exercising will allow, but Keith isn’t buying it. “Veronica.”

“What, Dad?”

On the other end of the line, he sighs heavily. “I’m just…worried about you. You’re so far away and it doesn’t really sound like you have any friends there—“

“Dad! I just talked to Mac today. And Wallace texted me!”

“That’s not the same thing and you know it.”

Veronica falls back on their mutual language, teasing and movie quotes. She drops into her ‘movie narrator’ voice. “Yeah, well, ‘I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, does anyone?’”

Keith snorts a little and doesn’t bring up what they both know. It wasn’t Mac and Wallace she was friends with when she was twelve. “Yes, you are correct, all of life’s wisdom is found in Stand By Me.”

“I’ve sure as hell never entered a blueberry pie eating contest.”

Keith shudders. “Let us not speak of that.”

“Still the vomit thing, huh?”

“Always.”

“Look, Dad. I’m happy. I really am. I’m just very, very busy. I promise you I interact with other human beings. We’re already forming up reading groups for Spring semester. It’ll be like insta-buddies for me! Practically play dates.”

“Oh, kid, if you say so.”

“I’ve got to go, pops, I’m hitting the stairs portion of this workout.”

“You know I love you and I’m proud of you Veronica. Keep being great.”

“I know Dad. I will.”

Spring Semester for Columbia 1Ls means the alternately feared and anticipated Moot Court experience. Veronica and her classmates spend countless hours designing an appellate brief to present to a panel in an attempt to mimic a courtroom environment.

The fake appeal Veronica is assigned—evidentiary issues arising from a wire fraud case—is complex and interesting to dig into. 3L Student editors work with them, tearing Veronica’s first few briefs into pieces. Some of the other first years wither or turn bitter under the criticism, Veronica, however, can
feel herself turning harder, shining more brightly. Draft after draft, researching long into the night, detailed analysis of the record and she’s starting to really feel like law school was the right decision for her. This lights her up like her psychological research did. Problems at a safe distance. Using her analytical skills in a way that makes sense to the world. There is nothing to be angry about (no vengeance, no justice). Appeals don’t hinge on the moral rightness or wrongness of actions, just on the cold, clear rules of the law.

After spring break, she finds herself standing in front of a panel of local alumni lawyers—among them a partner from the firm where she’ll do her upcoming summer internship—sweating lightly into her pantyhose and preparing to argue her brief.

She is prepared, confident, head held high, but it is still an overwhelming relief to feel any hint of nervous flutters abandon her as soon as she starts her argument. Moot Court mimics an appellate situation, no juries, no witnesses, just a panel of “judges” who get to decide how well she has attacked the legal issues at hand.

Her arguments flow out of her—logical and smooth—laying down a clear path of constitutional law like clues. It feels amazing, exhilarating.

*It feels a little like detecting again.*

She resists the suddenly overwhelming urge to finish with a “Yahtzee!” and some jazz hands.

All in all, the Moot Court experience is a triumph for Veronica. At uber-competitive Columbia Law she is rising to the top of her class. Pieces of herself that she’d locked away years before, when she fled Neptune, are starting to come back. But safer this time, not as dangerous for her or those around her.

What harm could she do anyone as a lawyer?

In March, Veronica falls into an affair with a fellow Columbia 1L named Jacob who is arrogant and a bit of a jerk, but damn good in bed. He is a detached and clinical about his skill, displaying none of the open, headlong passion she associates with really good sex. Despite that, they’re the best orgasms she’s had from someone who wasn’t herself (*and a sensation that isn’t a memory*) in what feels like forever. Veronica has actually started to wonder if her memories of Logan’s hands aren’t exaggerated. *They couldn’t possibly have been that good—felt that right—could they?* So Jacob is a welcome relief at first. There are several months of sporadic hook-ups that descend into basically hate-fuck sessions as it becomes more and more clear exactly what an asshole Jacob really is. Finally, somewhat reluctantly, Veronica kicks him to the curb. It had felt good to work out some of her aggression on Jacob. She’d usually slept well those nights.

Veronica decides that New York suits her to a T. The city itself both swallows her up comfortingly and lets her spread her wings. Her anger—still present although suppressed—feels safer here. Almost normal. It seems that most of the stereotypes of New Yorkers have their root in truth and Veronica learns to walk quickly in a crowd, her head down. Her wardrobe is gradually purged of all remaining bold colors, replaced with blacks, charcoal greys, sleek and business-like lines. Luckily, boots are still *de rigueur*. She never did quite buy in to SoCal’s flip flop obsession.

Oddly, though, as much as Veronica likes her new home, she has never felt as much like a California girl as she does once she’s moved away from California. She draws weird looks for months until she
forces herself to stop referring to I-95 as “the 95.” As little time as she has spent at the beach since she was in high school—first her detective work taking up her free time, then the not exactly beach-side location of Stanford—Veronica finds herself longing to see the ocean. When her reading group finally cracks and throws academia to the wind late in Spring semester for a spontaneous beach weekend, she expects to feel the usual feeling of peace and contentment that used to accompany her beach visits. Instead, everything feels slightly wrong. Too crowded, no cliffs; the Atlantic Ocean even smells subtly different. It is unsettling.

Apparently, growing up in California makes her a snob about weird things; she can’t shake the thought that the produce in New York is depressing and the Mexican food is seriously sub-par.

Also, it seems that humidity is not just a rumor in the land east of the Rocky Mountains, it is a real thing A sucky, sucky, real thing. She takes to straightening her hair more regularly, just to calm the frizzies.

To her surprise, Neptune, always a seedy beachside hellhole in her memories, does have some things (people) she misses.

The delights of living in New York are many and compensatory, however. Enough so that she rarely, if ever, thinks about what she misses. Rockefeller Center at Christmas more than makes up for the fact that the New York real estate market is the only place in the world that makes living in Southern California seem cheap.

Reliable public transportation, world class theatre, the MoMA, boundless job opportunities.

Yes, Veronica Mars likes New York very much.

It’s not a conscious decision, exactly, not to change her phone number when she moves across the country. It’s just…someone might need to reach her.

Life settles into a rhythm; a New York-style one, fast-paced and with little time for rest or reflection. Veronica’s 1L summer internship goes well, the firm likes her and she gets to do a significant amount of legal research and legal writing which help round out her resume nicely. The BigLaw experience is intriguing, if not exactly justice-filled. Lots of money and power flow through the corridors of Veronica’s temporary home and it is a seductive thought to consider how nice it might be if some of it flowed her way. She’s two years away from debt repayment, but every day the prospect ticks closer and becomes a little scarier. She keeps a running tally in her head. More money than all of the cars I’ve owned put together. More money than Dad’s new house and the new Mars Investigations offices combined. More money than a penthouse in that building. Or that one.

In her second year, Veronica finds herself choosing to take corporate law focused courses—Commercial Law, Securities, Antitrust laws, Advanced Contracts. They aren’t exactly fascinating subjects to dig her teeth into, but they do provide that familiar, longed for, mental burn.

As her second year of law school trudges on, Veronica starts to feel more at home at Columbia. Several of her reading group buddies have blossomed into full fledged friends. Friends she can study with and go out for drinks with. Friends who take her at her word when she says she is too busy to go out in October. Friends who don’t seem to notice when she drifts away for a while—snappish and irritable—in late January (seven years now), and then returns to her normal self as February wears on.
Linnea, Kari, Sean, and Asia; they’re great, but they aren’t Mac and Wallace level friends. They would never call and say, “We’re going out if I have to drag you; you need this” or “You will tell me what’s wrong.” They’re enough for her right now, though.

The nature of the law school experience is long, isolated days and nights. At least the people in her law school bubble understand the all-consuming nature of the beast. Linnea—one of the reading group girls—breaks up with her fiancé, who she’s been with for over five years, because of the pressures of law school. “He said I never make time for him” she sobbed onto Rachel’s shoulder while Veronica looked on in dismay, “That I’m not prioritizing our relationship. But he knew law school would be hard.”

Sometimes it seems like the only time she is not immured in case law or writing outlines is during her daily runs. Can of mace firmly in hand, Veronica has begun venturing outside of Morningside Heights and the well-trod paths along the river and into winding pre-dawn routes through surrounding neighborhoods. She knows it’s bad of her—old Veronica, adrenaline junkie Veronica coming out—but the buzz she gets from her less-than-safe excursions seems like the only thing keeping her going sometimes.

One of her Stanford psychology professors, Hobbes, was a devout Freudian. Veronica remembers him talking about Freud’s theory of the death drive, the tug all organic life feels toward oblivion. Annihilation. The analogy Hobbes used was standing at the edge of a high ledge or balcony and feeling—just for a split second—the urge to throw yourself over. Just to see. Several people in her seminar had looked confused, but Veronica’s chest had constricted in recognition. Yes. Just to see. What is over the edge?

So, like a smoker who just can’t kick that last occasional cigarette, she savor her runs, the thrill of manageable danger chasing up her spine.

Then she gets home, pulls out her books, and re-immerses herself in the complex world of corporate litigation.

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In the formless dark, Veronica sits up quietly and the cool sheets pool around her waist. He is next to her as she knows he will be. As he has been so many times before. He sprawls on his back, body radiating warmth, arms spread. The hand closest to her reaches in her direction; the palm an open curl. Veronica loops her arms around her knees and rests her cheek on the taut sheet-shelf it creates, tilting her head so that she is facing him, watching him.

It is her favorite thing, watching him while he sleeps. Awake he is just so much. So much movement, so much crackling energy, so many feelings. Asleep he is open and uncomplicated. Heartbreakingly young.

His soft breaths flutter into the air. Her eyes trace his face, the slack lines of his slightly open mouth. His cheeks and neck are rough with stubble. If she reached out and touched him it would prickle against her palm, but she doesn’t want to break the spell.

Asleep, like this, she thinks she can see the echoes of all of the people he’s ever been. The baby in the curve of his cheek. The little boy in the vulnerable line of his neck and the fan of his eyelashes. Her teen companion in the shape of his chin. Her tormenter, her lover, in the arch of his cheekbones and the relaxed bow of his mouth. Perhaps the man he will be one day is there, too, in the slight creases on his forehead or the line of his nose.
She watches him; counting breaths, counting years. The world around her has no shape, no light, no meaning. There is only her and the boy in her bed.

Asleep she can have him. Asleep she can keep him. Asleep she can lo—

The shrill beep of the alarm startles Veronica awake. Her mind reaches for the drifting wisps of her dream, but she can’t hang on to it. She searches for it in the shower, working the shampoo into her hair, but she can’t register or bring to mind anything more than the usual sense of peace and completeness that she carries with her.

It’s a Good Dream day.

Veronica’s 2L summer internship is a plum job by anyone’s standards, especially considering the hiring freezes that a lot of companies are undergoing in the poor economy.

She signs on to work for the corporate firm McLeod and Thomas—major players in the BigLaw world—with the understanding that if she impresses the higher-ups she will be groomed to take a position with the company after she graduates.

Long days of legal research and document review. Memo writing. Contract writing. Meeting, meetings, meetings. Summer in New York is hot and sweaty and slightly smelly, but Veronica doesn’t see much of it. Her days are spent on the 57th floor of a high-rise building, chilled by the overly-aggressive air conditioning, battened into her temporary cubicle by piles upon piles of file folders.

Towards the end of the summer, Wallace comes to visit New York for the first time. She can’t put him up in her dorm room, but he says not to worry about it, that he’s got another friend he wants to see too who he can crash with. His first night in town, they go out to dinner and catch up happily; Wallace is full of funny stories about his students (“Wait, you had to write what on the referral?”) It’s not until they’re at the after dinner drinks portion of the evening that she finds out that the friend he’s crashing with is Piz.

“Wallace! Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I dunno.” He shrugs. “Just didn’t want it to be weird.”

“So you were going to visit both of us at the same time and not say anything?” She smacks him on the shoulder. “Why, Wallace Fennel, you two-timing hussy!”

Wallace looks a little shamefaced, but still manages a muttered “Playa gotta play.”

“It’s only weird if you make it weird, Fennel. Bring Beaverton with you when we do the tourist thing tomorrow. That’s an order.”

Piz has changed a lot since she last saw him at Hearst’s graduation. He’s lost most of the awkward stammering and about three solid inches of hair. He’s still got that off-beat, self-deprecating wit she remembers, but the puppy-dog eagerness is gone—or at least dampened.

The three of them have a great time on their red double-decker bus tour. Veronica and Piz keep up an ironic running commentary (“And there is the biggest class action firm in New York, lots of shiny chrome and glass courtesy of bad meds and Blockbuster late fees.” “Ooh, look, Wallace! That club is
where bands go to die.

They go out to dinner and then drinks at a rooftop bar in Koreatown and Piz regales them with stories of his new job at NPR’s This American Life. Piz is exactly where he’s always wanted to be. He seems happy, and that’s intriguing to Veronica.

I could be happy like that. I could.

By the time Wallace leaves, Piz has her phone number and a promise to meet up soon for drinks.

They do go out for drinks a few times, she ducks his offers to go see bands play but spends happy weekend hours wandering around the Met with him. Her third year of law school starts and time gets harder to find, but Piz understands, or seems to anyway.

They’re clearly creeping slowly toward something and Veronica is allowing it to happen, she’s not rushing it along, exactly, just following a meandering path that feels a little bit inevitable.

Finally, a few weeks after Christmas—the first one where she hasn’t been able to see her father for at least a little while during the holiday—they make it official.

Piz is good for her, Veronica thinks. He knows...enough about old Veronica to welcome some glimpses of her into their new life. It helps her feel more balanced than she has in years. Not quite there, but more fully integrated. Law school is growing steadily less and less fulfilling as her third year advances and those students who haven’t already secured offers through their 2L internships scramble to find positions in the increasingly tough job market.

Piz is a respite from the grasping competitiveness that seems to have taken over the lives of all of her law school friends.

By the time she graduates in May and needs to move out of the dorms, their relationship has gotten comfortable enough for Veronica to consider a step she’s never even come close to before—moving in together.

Piz has been working on her for weeks in his passively-quirky way (“I can’t live alone, Veronica. I’m too pretty. Something might happen. Plus, I’m pretty sure Mike is getting a little too attached.”) So when he finally finds a quaint little apartment in Prospect Park that actually is quaint and not the miniscule hole in the wall that term usually implies, she shrugs and says, “Sure, why not?” Time to grow up, Veronica. She narrows her eyes at him playfully, “But if you think this means I’m doing the cooking, you’ve got another think coming, Piznarski.”

A month later, they are sprawled on Piz’s old couch—pink, covered with cabbage roses (“It’s ironic!”)—boxes still piled around them, each clutching a large bowl of Oreo ice cream. Veronica’s socked feet are slung into Piz’s lap. She wiggles them enticingly, hoping for a foot rub, but instead he props his forearm on her toes and waves his ice cream spoon in a vaguely wand-like gesture, seemingly conjuring a question out of mid-air. “So, what’s the longest relationship you’ve ever been in?”

“What’s this, Piznarski?” Veronica asks, her tone as airy as is possible around a mouthful of ice cream.
He shrugs. “I dunno; I'm just curious. Since I see so little of my law school girlfriend—“ Veronica rolls her eyes at what is quickly becoming a worn complaint, “—I like to take advantage of every opportunity to learn more about her.”

She points her spoon at him accusingly. “Could this be...is this...girl talk?”

“No! No.” Piz puts up his hands in a gesture of surrender. “I mean, okay, I was kind of hoping you'd tell me what you think of my hair later,” He vamps a bit, fluffing his hair, and Veronica snorts, “but no.”

She rolls her eyes again “All right then, girlfriend.” Piz executes what are clearly intended to be three "sassy" finger snaps in a z shape and Veronica spears him with a look. "No."

Piz dips his spoon back into the bowl, swirling it around in relentless pursuit of an Oreo chunk. “So, what was your longest relationship?”

Veronica sighs. “We're really doing this?” She lets her spoon clatter into her bowl. “Okay then. Probably Duncan Kane, the first time around. Almost two years.”

“That was...in high school, right?”

“Yeah,” she shrugs, “you know, it was more about holding hands in the hallway and wearing his letter jacket than anything else at that point.”

“And, since then?”

“I don't know. Brian? That was a little over a year, I think.” She smiles wryly. “Apparently I'm no good for the long haul, Piznarski. You have been warned.”

“Veronica,” Piz puts his ice cream bowl down on the arm of the couch and leans over to look earnestly into her eyes, “you're wonderful. If anyone was made for the long haul it is you. Relationships are all about timing. Maybe you just haven't been with the right guy, you know, at the right time.”

“Maybe.”

Columbia graduation is a blur of bright blue robes and hugs. Veronica’s father flies out for the occasion. She is frantically finishing up some last outlines for a class, so Keith spends most of the week before the ceremony being toured around New York by Piz and leaves enthusiastic about the life she has built for herself.

“My baby girl, all grown up and ready to take on the world,” he says into her hair as he gives her a fierce hug goodbye at the airport. “I'm so proud of you, honey.”

The plan for the summer is two-fold, spend the summer taking BarBri—the extensive bar exam prep course—and study like mad until the late July test date, then happily ascend to her first year associate position at McLeod and Thomas on August 1st.

Two days after Keith leaves, just as Veronica is registering for BarBri, the big blow falls.

Andrew Ferguson, a junior partner at McLeod and Thomas, and the one who had both overseen her
McLeod and Thomas will not be hiring her after all. The way Ferguson describes it, the firm is becoming a sinking ship—the company is undergoing a “major restructuring” and they are downsizing, partners are defecting in waves—Ferguson admits he’ll be leaving soon for a job at rival firm Truman Mann—rumors of bankruptcy have begun to spread internally.

Veronica hangs up the phone in shock. There had been some rumbling of problems last summer, now that she looks back on it, but she’d been so overwhelmed by her duties and so soothed by the confidence of the partners that she hadn’t thought much of it.

This is a major shock. She’s gone from being one of the people in her class with the brightest prospects to an uncertain future in a volatile job market in the blink of an eye.

When she tells Piz the news late that night after he gets home from work, he hugs her and says how sorry he is. Almost immediately he brightens. “Hey! Does this mean you can come to Burning Man with me? It’s going to be awesome Veronica; just what you need to get your mind off of all of this!”

Veronica stares at him, her eyes wide. Briefly she has a flash of herself tearing into his face with her nails, red blood spurting. The wave of sheer rage she feels terrifies her.

“I’m going out for a run,” she says scooping up her iPod and toeing quickly into her sneakers, not even bothering to change clothes.

“Okay, hey. I’m sorry. You’ll be—“

“It’s fine.” She cuts him off tersely. “I’ll be back.”

“Veronica!” His voice chases her out the door. “It’s dark out there. Be careful! You should at least take your…”

His voice vanishes into oblivion as she shoves her earbuds in and takes off down the stairs. She pelts off down the road into the darkness, feeling her anger rise up around her like a giant storm cloud, blotting out the world.

It is a tense summer after that. Veronica is incredibly lucky that one of her Professors gets wind of her predicament and helps her find a research assistant position with one of his colleagues at NYU. The position is a godsend since it allows her some breathing space to try to figure out exactly what the hell she is going to do with her life. Maybe I don’t want to work at a law firm. I could work for a nonprofit. Try for a judicial clerkship. The hours she is working for Professor Naruto mean that it makes more sense for her to push back her bar prep until the winter and take the bar exam—if she even still wants to take it—in February. Law school isn’t any less hectic as a Research Assistant and her days are filled to the brim, just the way she usually likes.

Something feels different, though.

Her normal life has cracks in it again and those random flashes of rage keep coming. Sometimes she has visions of herself ripping her clothes off in the middle of a meeting and screaming. Or punching a wall—hard—just because. Brief flashes of I could do it, they fill her with a terrible feeling of barely
leashed power, roiling, sickening and squirming in her gut.

*Is this it? Is this all there is? All there will ever be?*

Her nighttime runs continue and Piz won’t shut up about them. Those are fun conversations. He fires off shots (“You know, I am not the kind of guy who wants to have to beat people up if they hurt you.”) She shuts down—not able to find a place inside herself that cares enough to fight back.

He doesn’t seem to understand that she needs some sort of release; some way to ride out all of the tension in her life.

As the summer continues, though, New York Veronica reasserts herself. The habits of almost nine years take over and her anger goes back in a box, escaping only in slivers. Manageable. Distant. In late August, Veronica receives a statement in the mail regarding her student loans; she’ll have to start paying them off in January. The very next day, she signs up for Winter BarBri classes and starts her job hunt in earnest.

It is another tense, lonely Christmas.

________

The news of Carrie’s death, when it comes, is pretty much a total shock. Veronica had thought that Logan had gotten out; that he’d moved beyond their shared past (*moved beyond her*) and built something new. And maybe he has, but it turns out that he’s just as stuck in the patterns of their youth as she is.

*He’ll call.*

"I need your help Veronica," he asks.

Her answer is yes.

Her answer was always going to be yes.

________

It takes maybe a minute after she lands for Veronica to realize that the old tractor beam feeling is still there. Quivery and inexorable. It’s almost a comfort when they hug and she realizes that he still feels it too; that she’s not alone in her madness—her nine years of never quite suppressed insanity.

She can’t stop watching Logan’s hands—can’t stop watching him, in general, really—but especially his hands. They fall straight at his sides. They clench and flex oh so very slightly against the leather of his steering wheel. Broad backs and blunt fingertips, they grasp firmly, gesture decisively.

For a long time, his hands have been her most reliable masturbatory fantasy, but now it turns out she’s been picturing them wrong all these years. The thought should depress her, should emphasize the vast chasm that has grown between them, but instead it turns her on. Hard. What would *these* hands feel like? Instead of fluttering and dancing trickily, would they press firmly?

She can tell that this new Logan—Logan of the naval training and the nine years of maturity that look fucking great on him—is trying to be different. Oh, the gratitude and sincerity, his new groundedness, all of that is genuine to who he is now. But it’s not *all* of who he is. Just under the surface she can see the flashes of it; his intensity, the barely leashed grief so sadly familiar on his face, the old spark.
And seeing flashes of it in him makes her want to nurture her own flashes of old Veronica.

It also makes her want to bite him.

She can’t figure out at first what this is all about for him. Sure, he doesn’t want to go to prison; but what does he want from her? Lawyer vetting? Investigating? (More?)

His poker face has gotten better over the years and she almost believes him when he leaves her on her father’s porch with a kiss pressed soft to her forehead.

“Bygones,” he says, dropping the words casually into the cool night air. Bygones, like it doesn’t matter.

But it does matter, she realizes, turning over the tools of her abandoned trade in her room later that night.

It matters that he needs her.

It matters that she needs this.

The case against Logan is an absolute shit show. Veronica can’t even begin to count the number of problems with the timeline and the supposed motive. No one else seems to see them, though. The whole world—her father included—seems to be marching forward under the firm conviction that they have the right man and that the mighty justice system will have its way.

Veronica knows the truth; they don’t have the right person.

And, dammit, it is my place to care.

The investigating, every little bit of it, comes back at her in a rush. Some of it fits as smoothly as though she’d never left—her camera once again an appendage, the phantom limb pain she hadn’t even known she was feeling gone without a whisper. Some of it comes back harder—dodging her father’s questions, his disappointments. Also, clearly, her B & E skills are a bit rusty.

She’s been immersed in the legal world for almost four straight years now—ever since she took the paralegal job out of Stanford—and it just doesn’t feel like this. Veronica is angry, but for the first time in years—maybe the first time in forever—it feels focused. Like it’s a tool.

The looming student loans feel smaller and further away all of a sudden. I can manage without a law job. Other people manage. It seems okay to stay and stay and stay, because he’s not asking her to. He’s not trapping her, not grabbing at her like she’s the only life preserver in the ocean. So it’s okay. Sometimes she does see a hint of that drowning look in his eyes, and somehow that’s okay too. She ignores calls and cancels flights and avoids confronting Piz with what they both know is happening because everything that had completely consumed her life just days ago now seems inconsequential. This is important; finding out who killed Carrie. This matters.

And Weevil matters.

And the ridiculous level of corruption in the Neptune Sheriff’s Department matters.

And so does her father, and California’s death penalty, and her own damn happiness.
And then—oh my god—the sheer tingling rush of awareness that fills her when she figures it out. Better than the longest night run could ever be. Better than anything.

“I know who killed Carrie.”

*I’m not running away from me again.*

They have two weeks. And as much upheaval as there is in her life, as worried as she is about her father, as unsure as she is about where her life is going, Veronica is determined to enjoy it. It’s a funny sensation, feeling complete when you had long since stopped being aware that you were fractured. Funny, and unsettling, and kind of wonderful. Not normal at all.

*Logan.*

Veronica hasn’t spent this much time at the beach since she was in high school. *I was right about east coast beaches, they just aren’t quite the same.* She snuggles down into Logan, who is lying underneath her, savoring the feel of him, warm along her body. Logan is wearing the tight speedo swim shorts he wears under his wetsuit and a long-sleeved t-shirt. His skin has a drying film of salt and he smells briny and delicious. *Then again, maybe I was just missing this particular beach blanket.*

It’s the quietest time on the relatively private beach outside of Dick’s home. The early morning surf crowd has already packed up, but the sunbathers and families haven’t arrived yet. No one is looking at her draped on top of Logan. Veronica gives herself over to the feeling of ease suffusing her for a long moment.

Eventually, Logan sighs long and gustily and wraps his arms around her waist. “All right, detective. What’s the plan for today?”

Veronica props herself up on her elbows a little. “Hospital this afternoon; Dad’s supposed to have a session with the neurologist and I want to be there for that.” Logan’s hands rub soothing circles against the small of her back. As Veronica is mentally contemplating the rest of the day’s agenda, she fails to notice Logan stiffening slightly under her, until his complete non-sequitur of a question breaks into her thoughts.

“Veronica, are you angry with me for dragging you back here?”

She blinks down at him. “Whoa. Where did that come from?” He shrugs his shoulders a little, eyes vulnerable. “You didn’t *drag* me back, Logan. I chose to come back.”

“Yeah, but it felt…unfair. I didn’t, you know, plot it out or anything, but I think I pretty much banked on you staying. I knew, deep down, that you’d never be able to resist the case.”

*Apparently you still know me better than I do.*

Her mind is a swirl of thoughts, but the one that manages to fall from her lips is, “I’m not angry at you.”

“Okay,” he says, tilting his head a little.
It spills out of her, things she didn't even know she was thinking until they reach her lips. “You know I was angry for so long after...everything. And then I tried for such a long time to not be angry—to never feel anger at all. That was Stanford. And every time I did get angry, I felt guilty. It felt dangerous. But it just kept coming back.” Logan is furrowing his brow, trying to understand, and she knows that this is not coming out gracefully, but at least it is coming out. “But then, with Carrie’s case, it was like I remembered how to be angry about something—the right thing—without being angry about everything. It feels good.”

Veronica expels a puff of air. Absurdly, she feels exhausted. Wrung out.

Logan tightens his hands around her waist. “Are you staying?”

“Yeah.” She rests her forehead against his clavicle. “I think.”

“Why? You fought so hard to get away from Neptune. Why stay?”

*I'm not sure dammit; it just feels right.* Veronica snorts a little, abruptly done with the conversation—*ready to not think for a while*—and then pops up off the sand in a sudden motion. Re-energized, there is a glint in her eyes, her tone teasing. “I think that’s enough soul baring for one afternoon. I’m feeling a little...overwhelmed. And you know what happens when I feel overwhelmed emotionally, don’t you?” She starts to back away slowly.

Logan sits up, holding out a hand, halfway between laughing and serious. “Oh no, Veronica. Don’t you dare.”

“Too late.” She tosses him a mischievous glance and then takes off in a sprint down the sand. “Running!” She yells back over her shoulder. *Twenty-eight year old woman on the run. A metaphor no more.*

“That’s it!” Logan growls as he explodes off the sand, pelting after her, kicking up little plumes in his wake. “You’re going down!”

Veronica turns as he nears her, continuing to back away laughingly. “*I’m going down? Oh goody.*” With a lunge, Logan picks her up and throws her over his shoulders in a fireman’s carry. She squeals—she actually fucking squeals—and kicks ineffectually at his side.

“All right self, where is Veronica and what have you done with her? This is new territory; he’d always been so careful of her physically when they were together in the past. The last time he manhandled her playfully like this was before Lilly died.

Logan makes his way rapidly toward the surf, Veronica smacking him wherever she can reach and having basically zero effect. She is laughing hysterically but finally manages to squawk out, “Stop! Logan!”

He stills in his objective and runs one broad palm comfortingly over her ass. He shifts Veronica a little so that he can see her face. “Okay?” He asks softly, smiling down at her.

She can’t help it. She smiles back at him like a sap. “Yeah.”

“Good.” He hitches her higher up on his shoulders, eliciting another squeal—*dammit*—and resumes his run toward the ocean.

Logan may be dressed for the water, but Veronica is wearing jeans and one of Logan’s old sweatshirts, her hair a ferocious tangle. *This isn’t going to end well,* she thinks, but she can’t help
laughing wildly and letting out a whoop as he reaches the water.

When Logan is calf deep in the surf, he starts to shift her off of his shoulders and Veronica tenses in anticipation of being dumped into the frigid water. Instead, he flips her around deftly, his biceps bunching, so that she sits on his shoulders, one leg on either side of his head.

She laughs and kicks her heels into his chest. “Mush!”

“Hey, now,” he cautions, tickling the sole of her foot as he wades in deeper, “you’re in a very precarious position here Mars, I wouldn’t tempt fate.”

“Please,” Veronica scoffs and lightly squeezes her thighs together around his neck, “I could pop your head like a grape right now and we both know it.”

Submerged now up to his waist, Logan stops. Their laughter dies out into a companionable and contented silence, filled with only the crash of the ocean. They both stare out at the unending expanse, glinting in peaks and valleys of glassy graygreenbrown. Veronica’s fingers scratch lightly through Logan’s short hair, his body warm beneath her thighs. He leans his head back lightly against her stomach and sighs happily. As waves break against his body, they splash up, deliciously cold, to wet Veronica’s bare feet. Logan turns his head and presses a kiss to her jean-clad inner thigh.

“Hey, stand still for a second, I want to try something.” Veronica starts to shift her weight, working her way up so that one knee now rests on Logan’s shoulder.

“Whoa.” Logan spreads his arms out for balance and squares his stance against the on-rushing tide. Carefully, Veronica clambers up, knocking Logan on the side of the head a few times—he is surprisingly stoic—until she is standing fully upright on his shoulders, her bare toes gripping and digging in for balance. Logan’s hands come up to wrap around her calves and the back of her thigh to steady her.

“Trying to see what life is like for the rest of us? I understand that short people syndrome is actually going to show up in the next edition of the DSM.”

“Ooh, a short joke. How original.” She shifts her weight a little, “now shut up. I’m having a moment here.”

And then, with the vast Pacific Ocean buffeting them and Logan underneath her, solid and strong, Veronica Mars stretches her fingertips up to the sun.

Four days later, the reality of Logan’s imminent departure—now only five days away—is becoming much harder to ignore. Well before dawn that morning, Veronica is awake and sitting up slightly in bed, content to watch Logan sleep, his sprawl taking up a good portion of the mattress. How do you manage those tiny ship bunks? It’s one of a thousand questions that have drifted idly through her mind in the last few years. She wants more time to ask them.

In sleep, Logan’s slack face registers his sheer exhaustion. There are light purple bruises under his eyes and he looks dead to the world. Between Carrie’s death and the case and…everything—Veronica smirks a bit to herself—he obviously hasn’t been getting much sleep.

As her eyes travel appreciatively down Logan’s bare torso, tracing the sharp definition of his muscles, his chest hitches, interrupting the previously even rhythm of his breathing. Veronica’s eyes
fly back up to his face. He is still asleep; the corners of his mouth now turned down in a frown, forehead screwed up slightly in distress, his breathing suddenly harsh and ragged. Veronica reaches out to run a soothing hand across his chest. A low groan escapes him, barely loud enough to be heard, but it twists at her heart. Why didn’t she ever consider that he might have bad dreams too? He never did before. She rubs her hands more firmly across his chest and up his shoulders as he moves restlessly, his legs shifting against the sheets. “Logan,” she whispers as she leans her face down toward him, “Shhh, Logan.” His eyes snap open on a sharp inhale of breath. As he registers her face hovering over him, Logan exhales in an audible puff, reaching out his hands and pulling her into him in one smooth movement. He rolls them both onto their sides, so that he is curled around her, spoon style, his arms tight and comforting as they breathe together slowly for long moments.

“Sorry,” he says, eventually, his voice still low and rough with sleep. “D’I wake you?”

Veronica makes a sound in the negative, pausing before asking softly, “Bad dream?”

“No.” He reaches one hand up to scrub over his face, propping his chin lightly on top of her head. “Don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember your dreams?”

He chuckles, the tone somewhere between wistful and randy, “Only the ones staring you.”

“Funny,” Veronica teases, “I never dream about you.” It’s true, too, as far as she can remember. At least not since the horror-mares faded.

She grasps one of his hands, pulling it away from its resting place on her abdomen and tracing her fingertip lightly over the lines of his palm; up and down, forward and back. Her nail runs gently up the central crease to map the bumps and contours of his hand, dropping into the hollows to tickle the webs between each finger. Logan shudders slightly at the subtle, caressing touch and dips his head down to kiss the curve of her neck.

Since their reunion they’ve had fierce, they’ve had greedy—her arching over him, nails digging into flesh—they’ve had hard and pounding. This is going to be different. This is going to be reverent. Slowly and luxuriantly he runs his free hand up and down her body, brushing over every inch. Veronica brings his other hand, which she still holds captive, up to her mouth, suckling and nipping lightly at the sensitive flesh at the base of his thumb. “Mine.”

Logan smooths his palm down her thigh and, with a single efficient motion, hitches her top leg upward and over his hips so that she lays completely open to his touch. Veronica presses her back to his chest, feeling him hard against her, feeling his fingers as they tweak her hardened nipples and skim across her core.

She gives herself over to the pure rip-tide of sensation, content to take for the time being. Content to simply be. “Mine.”

There are long, slow, languid minutes of play. Veronica’s entire world narrows to the feel of Logan’s hands on her skin. His hot fingertips pressing firmly—I was so fucking right—into her, driving her spiraling upward and then gently coaxing her back down. Finally, minutes or hours or days later, he is nudging into her from behind, when she breathes out on a groan, “Logan, no.”

He freezes, hands trembling against her hips.

“I want to see you.”
With a shudder, he starts to roll them over so that she is on top, but Veronica takes control of the movement and positions herself under him. Face to face. His eyes envelop her, lock her in. She is alive and present and so fucking aware of everything.

She leans up and takes his mouth in a tender sip of a kiss as he presses into her.

*Mine. Always and forever mine.*

Their movements are slow and almost dreamlike, their eyes locked. When Veronica’s orgasm takes her, it is not a freefall into oblivion, but rather waves of intense pleasure that suffuse her, rolling through her body on and on until she thinks they will never end.

Everything is here and everything is now and—*mine*—Logan’s face in the gray light of dawn.

Afterward, there is silence in the bedroom, their heartbeats slowing in rhythm.

“Veronica, that was…”

“Yeah,” she replies softly.

She weaves their fingers together, Logan’s hands are limp, but he recovers enough to give her hand a gentle squeeze. He is sliding back under, eyelashes fluttering against his cheeks. Veronica is more alert, her mind skipping from small thing to small thing. *His eyelashes are ridiculous; the world is so unfair,* and, *I didn’t remember the hands wrong.* She gives a small shiver of remembered pleasure.

“Don’t leave.” Logan mumbles sleepily, pulling her sweaty form even closer to him. “Not this time, please.”

Veronica shakes her head very slightly in the negative against his damp chest, feeling his limbs go boneless under her. Logan’s breath takes on the characteristic light whistle that says he’s nearing unconsciousness.

She buries her face in his collarbone, “I missed you,” she whispers into his almost sleeping form “I’ll miss you.”

And then, even more softly as his breathing evens out into full sleep. “Don’t go.”

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Logan does have to go, of course. And it should feel like punishment, but in some ways it seems… right. She leaves. He leaves. They always come back. They always will come back.

That sentiment carries her through the first few weeks of deployment. It gets harder after that.

Why is this so difficult? She was happy in a lot of ways for nine years without him—really she was. She built a life, had a job, loved other people and she didn’t really think of him much. Or at least not after the first few years. She didn’t.

Now, after only two weeks back together, how can it hurt this much to be apart? They haven’t even defined anything. The loneliness, the missing him, it’s worse even than she remembers it being those first few months at Stanford. God, it just keeps getting worse, building up into a soul deep ache.
She’s been by herself in a crowd before, but it is so much harder now.

Veronica throws herself into her cases, rediscovers her belief in justice—a justice separate from the court systems, but not vengeful—and reconnects with Mac and Wallace, who slide back into their slots in her life with a comforting ease.

In the wake of the Aurora Scott case, even the tension with her father smooths out into something manageable.

It turns out that Thomas Wolfe was wrong. In some ways at least, you can go home again. Not that it’s easy, but it is right.

Veronica keeps her phone on her obsessively during those six months, just in case. Just in case what, exactly, she’s not really ready to articulate to herself, but Logan does mention that he might be able to swing a phone call when the ship is in port. It only happens once, a late night call from a random string of numbers. Veronica is asleep and her phone, for once, is far away and plugged into the kitchen outlet. She almost just rolls back over because what are the odds? Apparently they’re large enough to send her rocketing out of bed a bare moment later, skidding down the hallway and lunging for the phone, jabbing the answer button on the last ring, her pulse racing.

His voice is tinny and far away, like it’s being filtered through a string and tin cans. He sounds rambling and tired and it is so awkward—so much more so than their emails or their rare Skype conversations.

Logan is running out of steam and Veronica slowly becomes aware that that she isn’t holding up her part of the conversation. Her eyes are pressed tightly closed; she just wants to listen to his words, listen to his silence.

“Veronica?”

“Yeah, I’m here. You sound…good, Lieutenant.”

“Veronica, I have to go. I’ll email you when I can.”

“Okay.”

“Forty-eight days.”

“Yeah.” Her throat is tight. “I’m glad you called, Logan.”

His pause is long enough that she knows he understands what she is not saying; knows it’s not just this phone call that she means.

“Me too.”

Finally, finally, the days until he returns dwindle into a single digit, three, two, one, and then she’s checking into the downtown San Diego hotel she promised to book and preparing for the drive to the base.

Logan had been so insistent that she wouldn’t want to come to the base for his formal homecoming—the fly-in ceremony—wouldn’t want to deal with all of the pomp and circumstance, that Veronica
had almost convinced herself he really didn’t want her there. After a day of moping she’d snapped out of it and realized that Logan actually thought he was being considerate.

Jackass.

Setting up her surprise was almost fun, emailing Logan’s friend Beeper and arranging for her pass onto the base, anticipating Logan's shock when he sees her.

What Veronica is not sure of is what she’ll do when she sees him; how she’ll react. She’d like to think she’ll be coolly Veronica Mars, greeting him with a quip and a raised eyebrow.

Her first hint that that reaction may not be in the cards is the full body, heart-clenching, joyful-awed-overwhelmed feeling that swamps her as the jets fly into view and the crowd around her cheers. They swoop past, not as acrobatic or playful as the Blue Angels, but oh so much better because this time it is him—it’s Logan up there—and he’s coming back to her.

When she sees him across the tarmac, climbing nimbly out of his sleek death-machine, her body takes over and it turns out she is a girl after all, running at him and crying.

Logan Logan Logan Logan Logan.

There are a whirl of introductions that seem to settle the issue of their relationship status (“This is my girlfriend, Veronica.” “Veronica, my girlfriend.” “You remember me mentioning my girlfriend, Veronica?”) and Logan is as giddy as she’s ever seen him. Then they are back in her—his—car, speeding along the freeway with the top down; the fast lane of the 5 miraculously wide open and free. The wind is blowing through her hair and Logan—god it’s Logan; really here—is beaming. Her hand skims over him as he drives, playing with the sleeve of his uniform, toying with the short, soft hair at the nape of his neck, clutching his thigh.

Mine.

In response to the last, Logan grins at her and presses down on the gas pedal. Her hair whips back in the breeze as they accelerate. Veronica can feel the cat-in-the-creampot smile that seems to be permanently stuck on her face. One hand still resting on Logan’s leg, she lets her other forearm slip outside of the car, her hand making a blade-like shape that she undulates into the slipstream winds, riding the air currents.

It is a perfect moment—the perfect man, the perfect life for her—she would live in it forever if she could. And if she didn’t want to fuck him so badly.

She looks down at Logan’s lap momentarily. I do believe that motion is seconded.

“You know,” he tosses at her, his sincere grin taking the sting out of the words, “I wasn’t a hundred percent sure you’d still be here when I got back.”

Veronica rolls her eyes. “Oh, I see. This is serious conversation time, is it?” He smirks in response. “Well. I’m. Not. Going. Anywhere.” On each word, she fingerwalks her way up from his thigh, finally reaching the bulge in his pants and rubbing firmly. Logan thrusts his hips up into her hand with a moan and a muttered “Christ, Veronica.” Her turn to smirk now.

She smiles and tickles him lightly through his pants, her tone dead serious. “I came back to Neptune for you; I’m staying for me.”

Logan pants once, hard, rubbing himself against her hand and then glaring at her when she withdraws it. “Why did you decide to stay?”
This conversation again? Okay Veronica. She’s thought about this a lot since he asked her on the beach. She’s had months to come up with what she’s pretty sure is the right answer, but the words seem stuck in her throat. As she hesitates, Logan removes one hand from the steering wheel and slides it up her bare thigh and under her skirt.

Yahtzee.

“Now, now, Lieutenant,” Veronica demurs, but opens her legs a little wider, sliding down in her seat a little to give him more access. She starts forming her answer in her mind, assuming he’ll toy with her a bit, play with the edges of her underwear. “When I wa—” Logan slides two fingers directly into her. Veronica continues on a gasp, her hips curling upward. “When…before, it was like…oh god…like this storm ripped through my life and I had no option,” her breath hisses out, “but to try to live my life where I landed.”

Face fixed firmly forward on the road, Logan nods judiciously, seriously, while his fingers stroke her, thumb circling her clit. She is arching into his fingers, canting her hips. “I wa-was scrambling…fuck yes!…and angry about where I found mysel—Ah!”

The air is whipping past the car, thrumming all around her. She is throbbing. Everything is throbbing. It’s been so goddamn long.

When she stops talking in favor of letting out a guttural moan, the corners of Logan’s mouth quirk and he says coolly, “go on,” as his fingers make a ‘continue’ motion inside of her. Veronica braces her feet on the floorboards and arches up into his hand. “There!...I-I thought I could find something better if I could just get away from the wreckage.” Logan nods, biting his lip a bit and scissoring his fingers. Veronica comes up off the seat. “This time…Logan! Ah!...this time I’m choosing the storm.”

His fingers twist and press and fuuuuuuck. She’s over the edge and coming down before she even knows it, her face flushed. Well, there goes the leather.

There is silence in the car as Veronica straightens her skirt. Logan flexes and stretches his wrist, cracking it. Show off. She can’t help but notice the very self-satisfied smirk on his face. Just you wait, buddy.

He shifts a few lanes over in traffic, preparing to take the exit for the hotel. “Riding the storm, eh?”

Suddenly, Veronica is stunningly and absurdly proud, as though she had accomplished some great feat. The unaccustomed feeling wells up in her, rolling through her veins like champagne, little bubbles effervescing against her soul. She throws her head back, the wind flinging her hair around her in a wild blonde nimbus, and smiles a sly smile.

“Ride with me?”

Logan laughs right back at her—the same madness, the same glee, reflected back at her in her favorite mirror—and then makes a gun with his fingers, blowing on his finger tips and then holstering them.

“You couldn’t stop me.”
End Notes

Like its companion piece, the themes of this fic really snapped into focus once I settled on the title, a line from my favorite Dickinson poem and, in my humble opinion, one of the best literary encapsulations of grief ever written. Here is a pretty thorough but readable breakdown of the poem, if you are interested.

The sections in quotes from Veronica’s “textbook” on Adolescent Trauma are actually taken in part from The U.S. Government’s Child Welfare Publications and The Effects of Child Abuse and Neglect: Issues and Research, edited by Raymond Starr, David A. Wolfe (available via Google Books). Some of the other psychological theories and insights in that section are also from the same sources, but have been re-worked significantly in tone and content to fit my needs. If I have misrepresented anything I sincerely apologize!

This fic would not have happened without the kind encouragement of the denizens of Tumblr. Only you guys could help me find ways to (hopefully!) make nine years of higher education and avoidance interesting. A special hat tip goes to the estimable mysilverlining, whose ideas led directly to the aborted phone call/failed email scene and to starlightafterastorm who fielded a truly ridiculous number of messages about the Stanford dorms and Stanford in general.

Extra, uber, double thanks to marshmallowtasha for giving this several thorough beta reads and for patiently listening to me whine about this fic via email on a regular basis for weeks on end. Without her, there would be far fewer Logan references in this fic, and that would be a damn shame. You’re the best!

ETA: I am forever and deeply in love with the beautifully moving graphic art created by the amazing lilamadison11 featuring some text from this fic. Check it out!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!