Time, Make It Go Faster Or Just Rewind

by kmd0107

Summary

Logan being ‘the real-Logan’ is so familiar that she almost can’t help but give in to it, even if it’s just a one night pass. She’ll embrace this moment out of time and the walls and armor can go back up tomorrow.

AU from 1x4 Wrath of Con

Notes

First chapter written for January Veronica Mars Fic Prompts from vmficrecs on tumblr.
Option 4: Dialogue Generator - Incorporate one of the following lines of dialogue into your fic A. “I’ve been checking you out.”

Rating: R mostly for language and some sexual internal monologue
Character/Pairing: Veronica, Logan, Wallace, Georgia, Troy; Logan/Veronica.
Disclaimer: They're not mine. Rob Thomas owns all VM related things.
Spoilers: To be safe - the whole first season, and some foreshadowing of season two
Summary: Logan being ‘the real-Logan’ is so familiar that she almost can’t help but give in to it, even if it’s just a one night pass. She’ll embrace this moment out of time and the walls and armor can go back up tomorrow.
Warnings: Language, some sexual thoughts, underage drinking, mild reference to child abuse/assault
Series dialogue from vmtranscripts transcribed by Inigo Montoya

Veronica, Logan, and various other POVs.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 1 - Skinny Dipping for Lilly

"You look beautiful honey." Keith wrapped his arm across Veronica's shoulder and gave her a squeeze.

Veronica had decided to take the fashion advice of the ghost of Lilly and wear the red satin dress for homecoming. It was a little more daring than she was actually feeling and not exactly how she wanted to present herself to Troy, but, when she had seen the dress she could almost feel Lilly's presence. If only she had remembered that Lilly wasn't to be trusted…

"Thanks Dad." She smiled as a knock came at the door. Wanting to limit Troy and Keith's time together she rushed to the door. "Good, you're on time, night Dad! Don't wait up…" Pushing Troy right back out before Keith could get in a word.

Wallace and Georgia were already in the limo talking excitedly as Veronica slid across the seat. She was sitting on the bench along the back of the limo just like she had in another limo a lifetime ago. The memories were bittersweet. So much happiness and all the unbearable pain that followed. She let her eyes drift to the window as they drove and saw the deserted beach.

I've never…gone skinny dipping.

"Do you mind if we make a stop? There's something I need to do."

A skittish look crossed Troy's face at her words. "Well, I don't think that's a good idea, we should probably go right to the dance, right? I told your dad…"

Veronica ignored him and directed the driver as to where she wanted to stop.

A few minutes later the limo pulled into the parking lot and Veronica opened the door and started to undo the straps on her heels. "You have to stay here," she told Troy.

As she walked away from the limo Wallace's words made her smile, "Don't ask me, man. Stopped trying to figure her out day one."

The bottle of champagne was starting to get a little warm but he didn't care. There were several more bottles in a cooler in the back of his truck. *Fuck, should have just lugged the fucking cooler down here in the first place…* He got up from the blanket he'd tossed on the sand and headed to retrieve the cooler.

As he approached his truck he saw a limo pull into the parking lot and watched as a small figure emerged from the back. She was carrying her heels and walking toward the water. It was too dark for him to get much of an impression beyond small and in a dress. But his curiosity was piqued. The interior lights of the truck were set to off, so he was pretty sure his presence had gone unnoticed. He grabbed the cooler and started making his way back to the place he'd staked out just up from the high tide mark.
Settled back on his blanket he could now make out more of the little intruder and he was sure he recognized her. Surprising even him—not an easy thing to do—she stripped and moved towards the ocean. She hadn't looked his way so he figured she thought she was alone.

"Here's to you Lilly!" she yelled as she entered the water.

_Holy shit! That's Veronica Mars...That's Veronica Mars, naked, and not even twenty yards away from me..._

His breath hitched at the memory 'Okay, okay, okay, okay, okay. I've never...gone skinny dipping'. His heart began pounding in his chest and his mouth went dry. He watched her for a few moments and then pulled off his shirt, dropped his pants and boxers, and moved towards the water.

"Can you see her out there?" Troy asked an amused Wallace, as he squinted out the window trying to see anything in the darkness.

"Naw, man. But it's V, if she'd wanted you to join her she would have said so. Just cool your jets." Wallace shook his head and smiled at Georgia, who, much to Troy's frustration, seemed totally unconcerned with Veronica's strange behavior.

Troy continued trying to see what Veronica was doing when he was sure he saw another figure further down the beach moving toward her. But it was so dark he couldn't be sure. He'd give her five more minutes and then he was going down there.

The water was cool but not unbearable. Veronica decided she didn't care about ruining her hair and completely submerged herself in the calm water. She stayed below for a few seconds enjoying the rush of the water washing over her and imagining Lilly's reaction.

_Veronica Mars, skinny dipping is supposed to be a team sport... but points for effort!_

"I've never been skinny dipping with Veronica fucking Mars!"

Veronica let out a little scream as Logan lifted a bottle of champagne to his lips laughing.

"Dammit, Logan! What the hell are you doing here?!!"

He held out the bottle to her. "Drink?" He chuckled as she accepted the bottle and took a long sip. "I was just minding my own business, getting drunk here on the beach. And I see a little blonde strip and head for the water." He tilted his head and bought his index finger to the corner of his mouth. "And I think to myself, the ocean can be a dangerous place so late at night, I'd best offer her my services." He waggled his eyebrows at her.

"God, Logan!" She punched him in the shoulder as he moved closer to her and took another sip of the champagne. "Seriously, why are you here?!"

His eyes softened and didn't break contact with hers. "I couldn't stand the thought of going to the dance without her...you know, but I also couldn't stand being at home. Aaron's home and wanted to 'bond'. Fuck that! So here I am, naked in the ocean with you." His eyes darkened and moved down her body as if the water wasn't up to her shoulders earning him a smirk.

"Echolls, are you checking me out?" She asked him saucily.

"I've been checking you out since I was twelve years old." He winked at her, taking back the bottle.
What the hell am I doing? Am I flirting with obligatory, psychotic, jackass Logan Echolls?

Except he wasn't being a jackass, he was being the old him. He took another pull from the champagne before offering it back to her.

"Okay, she's been gone a long time. I'm going in." Troy opened the door and started making his way to the water. He came across the pile of her clothes and bent to pick them up. Well, well, well… maybe I was supposed to follow her down here after all.

As he got closer to the water he heard her voice, "...you checking me out?" Troy smiled to himself thinking this was further confirmation of his last thought when a familiar voice responded to her question, "...Since I was twelve years old."

Shit! Is that Echolls? What is she doing with him? He looked down at the bundle in his arms. What the hell is she doing naked with Logan Echolls? His mood had shifted from excited to well and truly pissed.

"What the hell, Veronica?!" he shouted at the two shadowed figures as he moved closer to the water's edge.

"Troy? I told you to wait in the limo," Veronica replied shortly, while Logan snickered loudly.

"Wow, Troy, you must not be much of a date to have missed this invite…oww! You pinched me!"

"Shut up! Troy, Logan here, saw me and wanted to make sure I was okay, which I am. If you could set my stuff back up where it was, I'll be back to the limo in just a minute."

Troy fumed. Who the fuck did she think she was?

"Yeah, I don't think so…this is fucked up! I'm leaving, but I bet Echolls here can help you find your way home."

With that Troy stalked back up toward the limo. What the hell am I going to do with her clothes? Can't let Wallace see, he'll never let me get away with it. But no way in hell am I letting her get away with that! He thought furiously and pulled out his cell phone.

"Hey, man, my date ditched me, can you pick me up at the entrance to the beach by the park?... Great, see you in a few."

Troy continued around to the other side of the limo, away from the water, and opened the door, being sure to keep the bundle of Veronica's clothes out of sight. "Hey, Veronica wants to just sit out here for a while, I called a cab, we'll catch up with you at the dance."

"Are you sure man? We don't mind waiting, right Georgia?" At Georgia's disappointed expression Troy knew he had won.

"Really, Wallace, it's fine, get the lovely Georgia here to that dance. We'll see you soon."

"Okay, I guess. Just remember, Mr. Mars'll have your ass if you hurt her, and so will I." Wallace gave him an only somewhat joking look. And Troy nodded seriously, shutting the door.

Like I care what you or 'Mr. Mars' will do, I'm outta here in a few days anyway… fuck them.

"Well, that was interesting," Logan chuckled to himself as Troy stomped away back to the limo. He
turned to look at Veronica. "What the hell do you see in that asshole, anyway?" He reached out for the bottle.

"Less than I did before tonight. Um... Logan, I'm pretty sure he didn't leave my clothes on the beach like I asked. And those lights are the limo leaving." She turned to meet his eyes, nervously chewing on her full lower lip.

"I'll bet he didn't. Don't worry about it, I gotcha." His smirk deepened and his eyes glittered wildly in the moon light. His voice softened at her less than pleased expression, "Seriously, don't worry, he didn't grab my clothes. You can just wear some of my stuff and I'll take you home."

"Ugh... Okay, you know Lilly is loving this, right?" He nodded his agreement. "Oh, god, you're going to tell everyone about this, aren't you?" she sighed heavily and pouted toward where the limo had departed.

*Oh my god, that was adorable, I'd forgotten all the little sounds she makes. I wonder what other sounds I could get her to make...* His eyes unfocused and a barrage of images of him and Veronica flew through his mind. *Where the hell did that come from? Good thing this water is so cold or this could get embarrassing really fast.*

He coughed, his voice a little rougher, "I think I can give you a pass this one time, in honor of Lilly and all..." he trailed off with an elaborate hand gesture from his free hand as he offered her the bottle back. "So here's the thing, right now we are both very much naked." He reached out and touched her shoulder, giving it a little squeeze, that sent a shiver down his back and caused her to tremble at the contact. *It's the cold, it has to be.*

"Trust me, I haven't forgotten." Her eyes moved from his face to his bare upper chest, where they lingered long enough to send another shiver down his spine. *Shit!*

He cleared his throat, "Right, um... yeah. I have towels in the truck. I'll go get them and meet you in shallower water?" He looked at her, she was short but much shallower water and she would be flashing him the goods, not that he had a problem with that. He couldn't help the smile that lit up his face.

"I don't think so. You go get the towels and leave me one while you go back to your truck and put on clothes. Got it?" He nodded, his smile not fading in the least.

Well, this is going better than it could have, but not quite what I had in mind when I got this harebrained idea. Thanks a lot, Lilly.

Veronica took another sip from the almost empty champagne bottle while she watched Logan move out of the water. The moon offered enough light that she could see the water glistening on his bare, toned back. *I must be tipsy, I'm checking out Logan Echolls' back.* And suddenly, it wasn't just his back she was admiring. As his ass appeared fully from the water a gasp escaped Veronica as a feeling of warmth spread through her.

"I heard that, who's checking out who now?" he laughed in a deep, sexy, voice.

*Shit, I am never living that down. What is wrong with me? It's gotta be the champagne.*

"You are so full of yourself, the water is just getting really cold, so hurry it up!" She tried to recover but he only laughed louder.

"Whatever you say, Mars!" He was now fully out of the water and took a couple of hip-swaying
steps before moving quickly toward his hideous Xterra.

She could only see his shadow and then nothing as he faded into the darkness of the parking lot. A minute later she heard the slam of the hatchback and then finally she could see Logan’s shadow appear back on the beach.

"All right Mars, your towel awaits you and I am heading back to the truck, as requested, and I will only sneak one peek." He was still laughing softly to himself as he deposited the towel at the water's edge and turned to head back up the sand.

Veronica immediately started making her way to the towel. True to his word, Logan was still heading up to the parking lot and so far he hadn't 'sneaked-a-peek,' much to her relief. Once she reached the towel she quickly wrapped herself in it and began drying off as best she could while walking toward the parking lot. She passed a large blanket and a cooler as she made her way to the Xterra.

As she approached the back of the truck she could see Logan, wearing only his cargo pants, with his back bare to her. She noticed a few dark marks that she hadn't been able to see earlier when he got out of the water, they could have been shadows but she didn't think so. Before she had time to think more about the marks he pulled on a tight t-shirt. Logan turned around and smiled at her then reached into the back of the truck. His hands reappeared wiggling what looked like a pair of boxers and one of this button down shirts.

"Sorry I don't have more to offer you, but I wasn't expecting to have to share my clothes with a tiny blonde this evening." He gave her another smirk that faded a bit as he spoke, "I'm also sorry that you needed me to offer these, I'm pretty sure if I hadn't been in the water with you boy-toy Troy wouldn't have taken off with your clothes." He stared at he feet as he toed the tire of the Xterra. He looked back up and a little smile appeared, "What were you wearing tonight? All I could tell was that it was red. Old Veronica never wore red…" He met her eyes.

"It was red satin and definitely Lilly approved." She took her turn to waggle her eyebrows. "And don't be sorry, this wasn't your fault. I'm kind of relieved, honestly. I knew it was just a matter of time before Troy showed his true colors, though I'd hoped for a somewhat less dramatic reveal." She sighed reaching out for the boxers and shirt. She looked around a bit, "Um… I'm just going to a…" She looked around more the heat of a blush creeping up her neck to her cheeks.

Logan could see her discomfort. She wanted to put on the clothes he had offered her but there wasn't much privacy. He rubbed the back of his neck trying to think of a solution and looked back at her. Her gaze had turned from nervous to dark as she stared at his chest. He looked down and realized she was watching his muscles move under the tight shirt. *Fuck, she really is checking me out. God, she's wearing nothing under that towel.* At the sight of her licking her lips he felt his dick twitch and start to swell completely out of his control. *Shit, she's going to kill me, baseball, grandmas, must get her in some clothes… Yeah, clothes.* He shook his head and started to act as fast as he could. He reached out and opened the driver's side front and rear doors.

"There! Makeshift dressing-room. I'll be down at the blanket, you saw it on your way up, right?" She gave him a small smile and nodded, stepping between the two open doors.

Logan quickly moved down the beach hoping she hadn't noticed that he was as hard as a rock. He took a few deep breaths and willed his damned erection away. This was not the time. Since the dedication of Lilly's memorial fountain—that she would have hated—he'd thought of Veronica a lot. A year of hate and torment from him and she still had been willing to share that tape. One of the last happy times they had all spent together as the fab four. And now tonight, they had laughed and
teased, maybe she had even flirted with him a little and he had liked it, wanted more even. And now this…he sighed down at his lap. He had always found her attractive but this was ridiculous. Being sixteen was impossible.

His revery was broken by the sound of the doors to his truck shutting. Thank god…she'll be covered up now and maybe we can continue this truce a little longer.

She threw herself down on the blanket next to him and laid herself out, staring up at the sky. "It's really beautiful out here," she said and turned to look at him.

Logan was sitting up about halfway down the length of the blanket. He turned his head to meet Veronica's eyes. "Yeah, beautiful." I did not mean to say that. "I mean…" he cleared his throat, "it's beautiful here, the sky and the water. Yeah…" He finished awkwardly. This is going well.

She chuckled softly. "What else you got in that cooler?"

"We are staunch and true and in rather a champagne mood'." He quoted at her as he reached into the cooler extracting another bottle of champagne and popping the cork. He took a long swig before offering it to her.

"Quoting Nazi era German artists, you're a strange one. Got any food in there? All this excitement kind of drained me."

"I'm the strange one? You recognized it. And no, no food. Besides not planning on sharing clothes with a tiny blonde I also didn't make arrangements for your metabolism." He patted his cargo pockets finally extracting his cell phone. "Shall I call for reinforcements? I don't think I can legally drive and I'm pretty sure you can't either."

"What did you have in mind? I think I could eat a horse," she told him.

"How about Cho's, something easy to eat at our current location?" He had already started searching for the number. "Hey, can I get a pepperoni on sweet n' spicy pizza and like," he looked at Veronica, "four, no better make that five cheesecake egg rolls…Yeah, we're at the beach by the park, the yellow Xterra…I don't know the address…Look just tell the delivery guy to call when he hits the parking lot…Okay, great, thanks." He ended the call.

"God, you are such an 09er." She glared at him but he could tell she didn't mean it.

"Whatever, you'll only be mad until I feed you, I can deal." He couldn't help laughing at her.

Twenty minutes later Logan's phone buzzed and the delivery guy met them with their bounty.

"Mmmm… this is so good. I love their cheesecake egg rolls, they're like crispy little bites of heaven," Veronica moaned, as she finished devouring her third roll.

"Well, at least you let me have two of them. Last time we had these together, I believe, I only got to have a bite of one before you stole it," Logan teased her.

"That was your own fault, clearly, you didn't order enough of them. You did better this time," she volleyed back, while stretching out on the blanket. She rolled onto her side and looked up at him. "Thank you, that was really good and I think I'm actually having a good time." I must still be a little tipsy.

"Of course you're having a good time, you're with me, I am nothing if not a good time."
"Well, Mr. 'Good-time', I'm not so sure you were a good time when you were smashing my head lights..." her voice trailed off, realizing she had stumbled into dangerous territory.

"Hey, Veronica, don't do that, we are having fun here. Let's just take this for what it is—a moment out of time—and not talk about any of that shit. More champagne?" He asked over his shoulder, reaching back into the cooler.

Veronica took a deep breath and decided he was right, why dredge all that up now. There would be plenty of time to battle with him after tonight.

"I'd better not, at some point I do have to go home and my Dad will kill me if I show up drunk as well as not in the clothes I left in. What time is it anyway?" She asked, What am I going to do about the clothes issue? Dad will pop a gasket if I show up dressed like this...

Pulling out his phone, "A little after 11:00 pm. What time do you have to be home? We could stop by my place and you could borrow some of Trina's stuff. I dunno maybe he wouldn't be as upset if you're in girls clothes. I really don't want to be shot by the sheriff." He grimaced.

"Would you prefer a deputy?" She giggled at her little quip. Definitely no more champagne for you, she thought to herself. "I told him not to wait up, but he's probably expecting me by 12:30 pm. I could text him and say I'll be a little later but...my phone is in my purse...which is in the limo." She jumped up and started pacing in front of the blanket agitatedly.

"Chill Mars, why don't I call it and see if anyone answers." He unlocked his phone and hit a speed dial.

Did he just use a speed dial to call my phone? He still has my number? She stared at him incredulously as he lifted the phone to his ear and made eye contact with her. Her expression elicited a sheepish grin and a shrug from Logan.

"Hello...Veronica?!" Wallace yelled so loud that Veronica could hear him when the call was picked up.

"Actually..."

"Logan, give me the phone!" Veronica sprang to grab the phone out of Logan's hand before he could say more. "Yes, Wallace it's me."

"Where the hell are you guys? Did you just say Logan? That didn't sound like Troy and you never showed up at the dance..." Wallace said, clearly upset.

"I know, I'm not with Troy—"

"Then who the hell was that?" He interrupted.

"Don't worry about that right now. I'm fine and safe." She smirked at Logan who gave her a little bow. "But I need to know, has my Dad called?"

"Yeah, he called and left you a message...I didn't answer. I was afraid to tell him you were off somewhere with Troy."

"Okay, Wallace, it's fine. Look I'm going to call my phone back and check the voicemail so don't answer and then I'll call you back, got it?" He gave her an affirmative response before hanging up. She quickly dialed back and put in the password for her voice mail.
"Hey honey, I hope you're having fun. I just got a call about a bail jumper in New Mexico. I'm headed to the airport right now. I should be back Sunday and I'll check in with you tomorrow. Be good." The message ended as the call waiting beeped on Logan's phone. She took a quick glance 'Asshole' was displayed.

"Asshole is calling," Veronica laughed handing the phone to Logan whose smile faded.

"It's my dad, um…hold on." He brought the phone to his ear with one hand and the other rubbed the back of his neck. "Dad?"

The voice on the other end of the line was so loud Veronica had no trouble hearing everything he said.

"Where the fuck are you?! I get home and all the champagne I put in the pool house is GONE! Do we need to have another conversation about your behavior, Logan? DO WE?!"

Logan licked his lips and his eyes flicked briefly to Veronica's. "I'm…um…well, there are still two bottles left. I'll be home soon…" he said, his good mood of moments earlier subdued.

"You'd better be!" He had hung up before Logan could say anymore.

"I'd better get you home…my dad is pretty pissed," he said sadly, looking defeated and worried.

What the hell is going on? I remember Logan's dad being pretty intense…something is definitely off with Logan's reaction.

"Maybe I should go with you, to your house. Wallace can just pick me up after the dance. Your house is closer and I don't think you should drive…" she trailed off.

"Oh, sure, I guess that makes sense. How drunk are you? I mean, I feel okay, but I drank most of that last bottle…I don't want to make it worse, you know…" He gave her a small smile that didn't reach his eyes as he set the unopened bottle of champagne back in the cooler.

"I'm fine, I can drive. Just give me your keys and we'll get going. Give me your phone, too, I still need to call Wallace back." He reached in his pocket and handed her the keys as well as his phone.

She quickly redialed her number. "Wallace…yeah, everything's fine…Can you pick me up at the address I'm going to text you? No, it's not a rush, just whenever you're heading home." She looked hesitantly at Logan, who seemed surprised at her words. "Dad's off chasing a bail jumper so my curfew is gone…Probably not until 1:00 am? That's fine…Really, have fun with Georgia and just text this number when you're on the way…Thanks, buddy!" She ended the call.

"Veronica, I'm not sure about this. You want to be subjected to me for at least two more hours? Maybe I should just take you home?"

"Don't be silly! Truce, remember? Onward to the Yellow Beast, let's go Echolls! I don't have all night." She rallied, racing for the car, more to hide her concern than to display excitement. She could hear Logan gathering the blanket and cooler behind her. I don't know what's going on with Logan and his dad but I'm sure as hell going to find out.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you for making it this far! This was my first Veronica Mars fic and as I'm sure you can imagine I was nervous to post this chapter. What was going to just be a little one shot has taken root in my mind and has evolved into more. So more chapters to come.

I don't have a beta so all mistakes were most definitely mine :) But if any of you out there have an interest in being a beta for future chapters drop me a line, I would love the input! And of course if you spot any problems let me know and I'll do my best to fix them.
Logan's mind was a jumble of thoughts as she drove them to the Echolls estate.

_I haven't had this much fun with anyone in a year… Why is she making excuses to spend more time with me? I know she heard Aaron, but he didn't say anything that should have caught her attention… Though maybe if she's with me he'll let this go, maybe… I'm seriously going to kick Troy's ass next time I see him… Or maybe I should thank him… He's going to tell everyone about this…_

"Shit." Logan's breath steamed up the window he was leaning against as they pulled up to the gate.

"Hey, what's the code? Or do you want to come put it in so I don't know it?" She winked at him when he turned to meet her eyes.

"Your code should still work," he said quietly. Why _didn't I have them delete her code? I guess I never had Lilly's deleted either…_

Veronica's eyes widened and a crease appeared between her eyes. Logan shrugged and she punched in the code he had given her four years ago so she could come visit him after soccer practice without having to be let in, 5683. The gate buzzed and popped open.

It was just after 11:30 when they parked the Xterra and headed for the main entrance. He abruptly turned to face Veronica, hands deep in his pockets. "Ronnie, maybe you shouldn't come in with me…I'm…" He took a deep breath and reached up to rub the back of his neck. "He…he isn't going to be happy. I don't want you to…" He looked away.

_Shit, what can I say to get her out of here; this is going to be so bad._ He looked down and shuffled his feet, kicking at a loose bit of gravel.

"Logan, do you really think he'll be anything but nice in front of me?" Her mouth was pulled in a tight line and her eyes were practically sparking.

_Girl has balls of steel!

"Let me be a buffer," she continued. "He might be mad but he won't want me to see that. Come on it'll be fine." She tilted her head and gave him a thoughtful look. "And leave the cooler in the truck."
He stared at her appreciatively for a few moments, gave her a smile and nodded his head, accepting her plan.

Logan approached the door and held it open for her with a courtly gesture. "Madame…" he said with an exaggerated accent, feeling somewhat buoyed by her plan.

They had barely made it into the foyer when a sinister voice broke the silence, "Logan, what the FUCK do you…Oh, oh my, Veronica, is that you? Please, excuse my language, I didn't realize Logan had company." He took in her unusual appearance, letting his eyes linger on her legs.

Logan's eyes followed his father's gaze. He quickly slipped his arm around Veronica's waist and tucked her into the side of his body. He knew he'd made the right move when he felt her press herself further into him. *You don't like how he's looking at you either, do you?*

"Um…Logan saved me from a bad situation tonight, Mr. Echolls. My date pulled a mean prank, if it weren't for Logan I don't know what would have happened," she quickly told him.

"Aaron, Veronica, call me Aaron. Is that so, Logan?" Logan nodded to his dad, without making eye contact. "Well, I'm happy you were able to help a friend. But that still doesn't excuse your…behavior. And did you drive after drinking three bottles of champagne? I don't think the Sheriff would appreciate that." He glared at Logan with sharp, black eyes followed by a smarmy leer when he turned to Veronica.

Veronica smiled, and said, "Oh, Mr. Echolls, I mean Aaron, I drove. And Dad's not the sheriff anymore…"

*Wow, that smile deserves Aaron's Oscar more than he does. She sounds so confident, but I can feel the tremble running through her. She's protecting me, but why would she do that? I've been so horrible to her.*

"No, I supposed he's…not. Regardless, I owe you a debt, Veronica." His eyes kept traveling over her body. "Logan, this discussion isn't over but I suppose it can wait until the lovely Veronica returns home…which will be?" he inquired.

"See, that's the thing. I was hoping I could stay the night…in a guest room of course. My Dad's out of town and I really don't feel comfortable home alone after what my date did. But only if that's okay with you and Mrs. Echolls, of course."

*What the hell is she doing?!*

"Well, Lynn is up in LA for the weekend, but I think that'll be just fine. Logan, you can get her set up?" He steepled his fingers, pressing them to his mouth, while his gaze lingered on her legs again. Logan squeezed her more tightly to him as Aaron finally turned to him. "We'll save our discussion about your behavior for tomorrow." Logan nodded grimly and quickly led Veronica out of the entry way and toward the back of the house. He shifted her slightly in front of him to block her from Aaron's view.

Once they had made their way to the french doors that lead out to the pool, Logan released the breath he had been holding in his rush to get Veronica away from Aaron.

"What wa…" Veronica started to speak.

"Not yet," Logan whispered into her ear as he released his hold around her waist and opened the door. He nodded out the door and she quickly made her way out to the pool. "Let's go to the pool house, um… I think Trina has an extra bikini in there." Or maybe I should just give her my t-shirt. I
can't decide what would be hotter: her in a bikini or her swimming in my clothes… Logan shook his head to dislodge the very poorly timed fantasies running through his head. Now is not the time, dammit. I need to get my game face on or Nancy Drew here is going to get us both in all sorts of trouble. Hell, she's the only person not totally taken with him…

After rushing Veronica into the pool house, Logan shut the door and started rummaging through drawers. He lifted a small red bikini from the drawer with a bit of a smirk. Pretty sure she's going to opt for my shirt instead…

"Here you go. Get changed and I'll meet you in the pool," he said, pointing to the bathroom. He was desperate to delay her inevitable questions to give himself a little more time to prepare believable answers. He headed to another set of drawers and pulled out a pair of board shorts.

"I don't think so mister! There is not nearly enough fabric here." She swung the bikini back and forth.

Without a pause he pulled his shirt off and tossed it to her. "Better?" He could see her staring at his chest again, and he couldn't help but chuckle when her mouth went a little slack. "Chop, chop, Mars, change and to the pool!"

Her mouth snapped shut and she marched to the bathroom.

As she shut the bathroom door, Veronica took a moment to look at Logan's bare back, which was now turned to her. Even in the dim light of the pool house she could see rows of scabs across his broad upper back.

What the hell is going on? And how many times have I thought that tonight? She turned on the faucet and splashed cool water on her face while she debated her next move. There was no way something wasn't going on between Logan and his father.

Aaron had always been nice to her during the years of the fab four, but her encounters with him had been few and far between and usually included Lynn. The man who had glared at Logan tonight was anything but that all smiles, movie-star dad. And almost worse was the way he had looked at her. Even tucked in against Logan she had been disturbed by it. And since when does Logan make me feel safe? Well, safe again…

She thought back to years of sleepovers and pool parties. To Logan sneaking over to pick her up when her parents were fighting all the time. Sitting on the beach crying on his shoulder about her mom's drinking…before Lilly was murdered, before her mother left, before she lost everyone but her dad. Seriously, Veronica, one night does not make up for the last year of cruelty and psychotic jackass behavior. As she thought Aaron's cold words and cruel face appeared in her mind.

"Do we need to have another conversation about your behavior, Logan?" his voice had been hard and menacing, his eyes dark and flat. "We'll save our discussion about your behavior for tomorrow." A shiver cold as ice ran up her spine at the memory.

A sharp knock on the door broke the memory. "You fall in? Come on, we're burning moonlight." She could hear Logan laughing to himself. She quickly finished changing and pulled his t-shirt on over the fabric-challenged bikini.

Veronica made her way across the large patio area to the pool and opted to use the wide stairs rather than jumping in as she used to. She was about waist deep in the water when a face shot up in front of her, eliciting a small gasp.
"Well, that was creepy." She sighed with a hint of annoyance.

"Oh? I was going for scary, or maybe startling." He gave her a big goofy grin. He had replaced the t-shirt she was now wearing with a fresh one and was wearing a pair of board shorts.

"Not that." She waved her hand at him. "Your dad," she said much more softly.

"What? Not taken by Aaron Echolls' smarmy charms and aging action-star physique?"

"Not so much." His smile got even bigger.

"You're the first…" he trailed off and then gave her a very intense look. "I remember you not being impressed by his acting skills but I don't remember you being this put off by him in the past?" he phrased it as a question, and it was clearly an important one based on the look he was giving her.

"Well…he's never paid me that kind of attention before." She shook again and he reached out, stroked her upper arm and squeezed her shoulder, causing warmth to spread from where he touched her through her body until he let go. "He wasn't around very much before…" she let her words trail off.

Logan looked down and away awkwardly, then replied softly, "Yeah."

"Logan…" But before she was able to say any more he picked her up and tossed her into deeper water, swimming quickly in the other direction. _Yep, just like old times._ She thought as she quickly plugged her nose.

They splashed and swam around the pool, releasing some of their nervous tension. After a few minutes Veronica held up her hands in surrender. "White flag!" she yelled, waving an imaginary flag above her head.

Logan nodded and waited for her to approach him. "Look Ronnie, I'm not so sure…"

"I think it's time…to rescue the cooler," she interrupted him, earning a look of disbelief from Logan. "What did you think I was going to say?" she teased before turning to head for the edge of the pool.

Rather than go to the stairs she had used before, she lifted herself out of the pool at the closest edge, causing her t-shirt to hike up and reveal her barely covered bottom. Logan moaned before he could get control of himself.

"Did you say something?" she asked, looking back at him with a guileless expression.

_Did she do that on purpose or does she really have no idea how hot she is? I've really got to rein this in or I am going to completely embarrass myself._

They made their way to the Xterra and Logan retrieved the cooler. They stayed silent as they returned to the pool, both clearly deep in thought. Logan looked over at Veronica as they approached the pool and he decided that if there was a god he was trying to kill him. Rather than stop at the pool, Logan continued on toward the hot tub.

Veronica quirked an eyebrow at him. "Hot tub, huh? Tired of the pool already?"

He winked at her. "I thought you might be cold." His gaze settled on her chest for a few moments then he waggled his eyebrows at her. She looked down at her chest and her face turned bright red as it clearly registered that she was nipping out very visibly. She raised her arms to cover herself and
turned away a bit. "Veronica, it's not a big deal. Hell, you saw my bare ass earlier. Come get in the hot tub and have some more champagne." He laughed a bit as she climbed into the hot tub, making a point of facing away from him as she quickly sunk down into the seat so that only her head and neck were above the water.

After she was settled, Logan passed her the newly opened bottle of champagne and gave her a very serious look. "Are you sure you really want to stay? I know your dad is gone but you could still go home with Wallace."

"You don't want me to stay?" she asked hesitantly, looking embarrassed again. "I'm sorry I just reacted when I saw how he was looking at you…Logan?"

He shook his head at her. "Not yet, more champagne first. And yes, I want you to stay but…I dunno this is so weird, this whole past year, I just…What are you doing here with me, Ronnie? You hate me!" He grabbed the open bottle and took a big swig, not wanting to look at her.

"I don't hate you, Logan. I can't say I like you very much these days, but we used to be friends. More than friends…family," she said sadly. "Anyway, you're the one who hates me, who has tormented and ridiculed me for the last year." The words came out without any heat, just sadness.

Before Logan could reply his phone buzzed. He reached out and answered it without looking. "Yeah?"

"Who is this? Where's Veronica?" Wallace spoke angrily into the phone.

"Hold on she's right…oomph…here." Veronica snatched the phone away, elbowing Logan in the chest.

"Hey-ya Papa Bear, you on the way?" Logan mouthed 'papa bear' at her, the question clear on his face. She shook her head and turned away from him, pausing to listen to Wallace.

"Really, I'm fine, I promise. I'll meet you at the gate in about ten minutes?" she told him and then ended the call, handing the phone back to Logan.

"Okay, I'm going to pop down to the gate, get my purse from Wallace, and then we can continue this little night-O-fun." She smiled grimly at him and reached for the bottle he was still holding.

"We are going to pop down to the gate. And I don't hate you." he told her, climbing out of the hot tub and heading over to a set of cupboards before she could reply. After digging around a bit he pulled out two towels and headed back to her. "I thought you might prefer…" He indicated the towel while waving his hand toward her torso.

"Oh! Thank you." She gave him a small smile, set the open bottle back in the cooler and wrapped herself in the towel. "You should really stay here. I don't think Wallace is going to take kindly to the idea of my staying here with you."

Then maybe you shouldn't stay, did you think of that? He thought but kept to himself because he found he really did want her to stay. I am seriously f***ed up…

"Just tell him you're working a case for me or something. The case of the missing boxer-briefs," he laughed as he lifted his shirt up enough to show that he wasn't wearing anything under his board shorts.

Veronica gasped, "Seriously Logan! Put yourself away!" She turned away, even more embarrassed than before.
Logan looked down and realized his shorts were clinging to his body in a much more revealing way than he had expected. At least I was half-hard earlier so no shrinkage to worry about here. He chuckled to himself and tried to give her a contrite look while covering back up. "Sorry, about that. Now I'm the embarrassed one." Not too embarrassed. He turned away, heading towards the driveway.

Wallace pulled up just a few minutes after they reached the gate. Georgia was no longer with him, and he did not look pleased to see that Veronica had company. Wallace let loose when she approached his window rather than the passenger door.

"What the hell V? Why are you all wet? And who the hell…Oh My God, why are you with Echolls?!" Wallace yelled at her while Logan gave him one of his little finger waves and a smirk.

"Calm down and keep it down, there is no need to yell." Veronica took a deep breath, and explained, "Troy ditched me at the beach and stole my…dress." She put her hand up to stop Wallace from asking for more detail. "I'll explain everything at a later date."

I'll just bet she will…

"The only important part is that Logan was kind enough to help me out in my time of need. And it turns out there is something he needs my help with. So if you can just give me my bag, you can head on home." She flashed her most winning smile.

"V, this guy bashed in your headlights," he said, clearly exasperated, but at a quieter volume. "And now you're going to help him? I thought that was only for friends and the occasional friend of a friend…"

"Or for large sums of money," she replied snappily. "Anyway, he and I, we used to be friends…It's not a big deal."

"Okay, but you need to call me in the morning. And if he does anything, you call me immediately."

Wallace's glare brought Logan up to the window. "Hey, man, I know Ronnie and I have had our um…'differences'." He made little quotation fingers. "But I promise I would never actually hurt her."

Wallace's gaze darkened. "Whatever man, like you all haven't hurt her already," he practically growled.

"Okay! Okay, boys play nice. Really, Wallace; I'm totally fine." She glared at Wallace. "Logan is not going to hurt me, now what I might do to him…still up for debate." She smirked at Logan who offered her a genuine smile.

Looking completely confused, Wallace handed Veronica her purse. "Call if you need anything." He glared at Logan one more time.

"Bye Wally, drive safe!" Logan called in a falsetto as Wallace rolled up his window, earning him a hard smack on the side of his head. "Hey! Weren't you just telling us to play nice?" He rubbed the side of his head gingerly. "And what did he mean about me hurting you? I know I haven't been very nice but he didn't sound like he meant that I hurt your feelings."

"You deserved it and I have no idea what he was talking about." She had turned back to the gate and was walking away.

Well, that was enlightening, and a complete lie…"I'm getting tired. Let's go find you something to sleep in and call it a night, okay?" he suggested.
"Yeah, I'm pretty tired too." She stifled a yawn as Logan placed his hand on her lower back to direct her toward the main entrance rather than back to the pool. "What about the rest of the champagne?" she asked when she realized what he was doing.

"Oh, yeah, can't just leave that out there can we?" he laughed and grabbed her hand, dragging her back in the direction of the pool.

Wallace fumed as he drove away from the Echolls estate. I don't get it. How can V stand to be around any of those assholes? He knew Veronica could handle herself now but he couldn't help but be concerned. Not after she had described the kind of things that the 09ers were capable of.

**FLASHBACK**

"Another big Friday night. You got plans?" Wallace asked her.

"I don't know. I might take Backup for a run or rent a movie maybe. What about you, Wallace? Your life still a non-stop Nelly video?"

"I found this on the floor in gym." Wallace handed Veronica a pink flyer.

"You want to crash an 09er party?" she asked.

"Maybe. I don't know what an 09er is."

"It's someone who lives in the prestigious 90909 zip code. They throw big parties where the alcohol flows and drugs abound. You never know, you might get lucky and end up with a spiked drink and not remember your night," she said, doing her best Robin Leech 'Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous' voice.

Wallace frowned. "You mean they roofie people?"

"It's been known to happen." She looked away. "On the milder end of the spectrum they punk people who pass out, use drunk girls as salt licks," at Wallace's confused expression she explained, "you know—body shots? Anyway, you don't want to go to one of these parties. Trust me."

**END FLASHBACK**

Veronica had never told him outright that she had been a victim of any of the things she described but he had gotten the distinct impression that she was speaking from experience. That combined with what he had heard through the Neptune High rumor mill gave him a very bad feeling about how she had gone from the bubble-gum, pink princess he'd heard her described as to who she was now.

Champagne rescued, they found themselves in Logan's room each with their own bottle and feeling drowsy.

Veronica rinsed off in the shower and changed into the soft flannel pajama pants and undershirt that Logan had left out for her. She smiled when she saw that he had left a new toothbrush sitting on the sink for her as well. After brushing her teeth, she headed back into his room to find that he'd opened and polished off half of a bottle of champagne. The one he held was now even with the bottle that he had left on ice for her.

"I figured you'd want the less full one…" he told her as he headed into the bathroom to rinse off and change, too.
"Don't mind if I do..." Veronica said to herself. She took a sip and started inspecting Logan's room. It had been almost exactly one year since she had last been there.

FLASHBACK

Lilly's funeral had been horrible, full of fake friends and flashing bulbs from the media circus. The only thing real had been Logan's hand in hers as they watched the casket being lowered into the ground. They'd stayed long after everyone else had left, holding each other and crying silent tears.

When it began to rain Lynn came, wrapped her arms around them both and led them to a car. Veronica had no memory of how they got from the cemetery to Logan's room but they had curled up on his bed holding each other until there were no more tears, just exhaustion. She could remember voices but it seemed more like a dream.

"Lynn, we should take her home..." She was sure her father had said.

"Keith, look at them, this is the first time I've seen Logan sleep since...well since..."

"I know. Veronica, too, but..."

"It's fine, when they wake up I'll bring her home; for now let them be. It's not going to get better for either of them any time soon."

She had slipped back into oblivion as their voices trailed off.

END FLASHBACK

Although it was nearly a year later, not much about the room had changed that she could tell. Logan had never had many personal items in his room beyond video game stuff and a few pictures of him with his mother and the fab four. Veronica was surprised that the same pictures were still on the built-in bookshelves, though now they were somewhat obscured behind books and other random items. Hidden behind a stack of old video games, she spotted the corner of a picture she would know anywhere. It was her slung over Logan's shoulder jumping into the pool at the Kane estate. They couldn't have been more than thirteen—before either of them had started dating their respective Kane. They both had big smiles on their faces and her hand was coming up to plug her nose. She had the same picture tucked away in her bedside table.

"I've always loved that picture," Logan whispered softly against the shell of her ear, causing Veronica to jump.

"Jesus, Logan!"

"Hey, keep it down," he said softly, a little further away this time. "I would say I didn't mean to startle you but I'd be lying." He smirked at her while taking the frame out of her hands. His chocolate brown eyes softened as he stared at the photograph.

"I can't believe you still have this."

"I don't have a lot of happy memories, Veronica. This is one of them. Why would I throw it away?" his tone was sad but there was a small smile on his face. "I meant it when I said I don't hate you, you know? You **should** hate me. I hate me. I've been horrible, but I could never hate you." His eyes glazed over and he turned away.

Logan set the frame on his nightstand and crawled onto the bed, now wearing loose sweatpants and a t-shirt like the one he had given her. **He must have an endless supply of t-shirts...** He reached for
the half-empty bottle of champagne with one hand and patted the bed with his other. "Come on, let's finish our spoils and crash."

Veronica walked around to the other side of the bed and crawled on, taking a sip from her bottle after she was settled a safe distance from Logan.

"You know I don't bite right? Well…unless asked." She felt her face get warm and he smiled at her brightly, clearly enjoying her discomfort. "I'd feel bad if you fell off the edge of the bed in your sleep," he chuckled softly.

"Well, that won't be a problem since I'm not sleeping in this bed. Which guest room should I use?"

Logan stiffened and sat up straight. "About that…did you ever notice that I never had you or Lil' stay the night when Aaron was home?"

"I guess I never thought much about it. Why?" she lengthened out the word.

"I would feel a lot better if you stayed in here with me instead of alone in one of the guest rooms. I'll sleep on the floor if you prefer, but this is an awfully big bed I'm sure we can work it out." He smiled but it didn't reach his eyes, which were practically burning with intensity. "The way he looked at you earlier…I don't want you to end up alone with him." His smile was gone, replaced by a scowl and a crease between his burning eyes.

Veronica shuddered, remembering the cold, flat eyes that had swept over her body and Logan pulling her into his own to shield her. She shook her head to clear the memory. I don't want to find myself alone with him either. "Okay, I'll stay in here. But you don't have to sleep on the floor, just no funny business, got it?"

Logan let out the breath he'd been holding and nodded, "Thank you." He took the last swig of his champagne and rolled the empty bottle under his bed. Veronica handed him the remains of her own, which he finished off and disposed of in the same way. "I'll take care of them in the morning." He slipped further down in the bed under the covers, placing both of his hands behind his head, and looked at Veronica expectantly.

She was still perched near the edge of the bed but knew she couldn't sleep like that. She shifted and crawled under the covers, scooting more toward the middle of the bed. She moaned upon settling into the unbelievably soft, yet fluffy pillows. "I'd forgotten about your awesome pillows." She sighed contentedly, sinking further into the comfortable bed.

Logan's soft laugh was barely audible, "I'm glad you still approve." And they both drifted off to sleep.

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FLASHBACK/DREAM

Veronica was reading in one of the comfortable chaise loungers surrounding the Kane's swimming pool. Lilly was arguing with Celeste about whatever her latest outrageous act had been. Duncan wasn't home from tennis lessons yet. And Logan was bored silly.

He'd been swimming laps in the pool while waiting for Duncan to arrive home, but he was rapidly losing interest. Veronica had arrived just a few minutes after him but she, after briefly greeting him, settled down into one of the loungers and was engrossed in whatever she was reading. From where Logan was in the pool, it looked like it might have been Pride and Prejudice, but he couldn't be sure. She had also pulled a small digital camera out of her bag and set it on the side table.
The camera had been a joint gift from him and Duncan for her thirteenth birthday. But really Logan had picked it out—Duncan had wanted to get her some silly pink purse. Sure, Veronica, would have liked that fine, but she had told Logan how much she wanted that camera when they had walked past it while in an electronics store at the mall. She had gone on and on forever about all the stupid shit it could do. Logan couldn't have cared less about any of that, but he did care about how excited she would be to have it. He hadn't been disappointed by her reaction. When she opened it she had flung herself at him. "You remembered," she had whispered in his ear before releasing him and, much more reservedly, hugging Duncan in thanks as well.

Logan climbed out of the pool and headed for the chaise next to Veronica. "Hey Ronnie, whatcha reading?" He grabbed a towel lying out and dried his hands then reached for the camera.

"Pride and Prejudice; just like you should be. We have a book report due on it this week." She gave him a suspicious look. "Please tell me you've at least started it."

"It's been many years since I had such an exemplary vegetable," he quoted at her.

"That's from the movie and is not in the book," she snarked back.

"Fine, fine. 'I have been meditating on the very great pleasure which a pair of fine eyes in the face of a pretty woman can bestow,'" he quoted again, this time giving her intense eye contact. He was rewarded with her sharp intake of breath. "See? I read, Veronica Mars." He set the camera down pointing it toward the pool and checked the angle. Then he jumped up, grabbed the book away and tossed Veronica over his shoulder. He jumped into the pool just as the camera took a rapid series of photos.

At school on Monday Veronica had gifted Logan with a framed copy of her favorite photo from the series.

END FLASHBACK/DREAM

A sound from the hall woke Logan from his dream-memory. A glance at the clock on his nightstand showed it to be just after 4:00 am. The LED glow cast just enough light to dimly see the photo he had left out last night, bringing a small smile to his face. Then he heard the sound again and a door closing. He stiffened and felt Veronica roll over toward him.

"What is tha—" Logan quickly rolled over and muffled her words with his hand.

"Shhh…come here and pretend to still be asleep," he whispered very softly as he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her close. He could feel her heartbeat speed up and felt as though his heart would jump out of his chest.

"It's the adrenaline, just the adrenaline. He turned her small frame so her back was to his chest with both of them facing away from his door.

He heard two more doors down the hall shut before his own door was soundlessly opened. He struggled to keep his breathing slow and sleep-like. Logan heard his father's huff of displeasure upon finding Veronica in his son's bed.

I'll pay for this, too, but at least I'll have earned it protecting someone, protecting Ronnie.

After the door shut and he could no longer hear Aaron's retreating steps, Logan let out a sign of relief. He could feel Veronica relax slightly as well and then she rolled over to face him. She was still in his arms and made no effort to remove herself. He could feel a slight tremble running through her body. The first moment of relief had passed and was replaced with something else, fear or maybe anger, he wasn't sure. He began rubbing slow circles on her lower back, hoping to offer her some comfort and himself too. He whispered almost directly into her ear, "It's okay, he's gone now, he's
not going to bother us. I'm here, I won't let him; it's okay." He kept up the stream of mostly meaningless comfort words until her body relaxed against his after a few minutes.

"How did you know?" Veronica looked into Logan's still concerned face. "God, what if I hadn't given in…" She shuddered again.

"I never would have left you alone, Ronnie, no way. Not even if you had refused to stay in here with me. And as to how I knew…it isn't the first time he's snuck into a guest's room uninvited." Though this is the first time that the person was jailbait…Logan took a deep breath and steeled himself. "I've heard him sneak into quite a few guest rooms over the years, especially when Trina would have her acting class friends over. They didn't seem to mind. Just like they didn't mind if my mom was home, if I could hear; didn't mind about much at all—I thought you might though, and he doesn't take rejection well. And if you didn't reject him, well…I…it would kill something inside me to hear you with him."

"Oh my god, Logan! I would never…your dad…just no!" She wrapped her arm around his waist and buried her face into his chest. "Ugh, Trina's friends would really sleep with him? He's so creepy and fake."

"They would let him fuck them. You are the only person I know who has ever realized even a fraction of what he's really like. It's how I knew we would be friends when we first met. Do you remember? You informed me that his movies were terrible and he couldn't act to save his life. You apologized when you realized what you'd said." He laughed in a soft huff.

"Yeah, I remember. You bought me ice cream."

"You really were the first person who didn't just say how much they loved him and ask if I would get his autograph or some stupid shit." He tightened his arms around her for a moment. "I'm so sorry, Veronica. I've been such a colossal jackass this past year. God, I knew you didn't deserve it, I was just so angry. You and Duncan are the best friends I've ever had. Now Duncan is just a zombie, and I destroyed our friendship." He pulled his arms away from Veronica and rolled onto his back, staring at the ceiling.

"Hey." She sat up meeting his eyes. "I'm not saying it's okay, but tonight…Well, I've missed you too. You're not the only one who lost everything and was angry. And you're not the only one who did the tormenting. If I remember correctly, I got you pretty good more than once." She gave him a half-smile. God, I love her smiles…

"Do you think we could be friends again?" he asked her with hope shinning in his eyes.

"I think we can try…but Logan, it doesn't really change anything. Everyone hates me and you being nice to me won't change that. Hell, they'll probably turn on you for the betrayal."

"Like I give a shit what any of them think. Okay, enough serious talk, more sleeping. We'll figure this out." He rolled back onto his side, facing Veronica who was facing him. He reached his hand out for hers and entwined their fingers. It was a gesture of comfort that they had shared many times during all those sleep overs with the Kanes before they had coupled off, and even a few after. "Sweet dreams Ronnie."

"Night, Lo."
Chapter Notes

A/N: I’m still in shock at all the reviews, kudos, PMs… You all are the best!

Very special thanks go out to Bondopoulos and BryroseA for their amazing Beta-ness and discussions!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Veronica woke the next morning with her hand still wrapped in Logan's, and still feeling a bit jittery from Aaron's late night check-in. I've always thought he was creepy, but now…

"Hey you." Logan smiled at her with sleepy eyes and gave her hand a squeeze before releasing it to slip out of the bed. "You sleep all right? Well…after, anyway?" he asked as he headed for the bathroom.

"Yeah," she assured him as he shut the door. She got out of the warm bed and stretched while she waited for her turn in the bathroom. As she walked by the window she saw a very unexpected sight.

"Logan, Logan! Hurry up, I think Dick's here." She ducked off to the side so that she wouldn't be visible from the driveway and checked again. Sure enough, there was Dick's silver truck.

"What are you yelling about?" Logan emerged from the bathroom with his toothbrush tucked into his cheek.

Veronica grabbed his hand and dragged him to the window, pointing out the most unwelcome arrival. "That, I'm yelling about that!"

"Shit..." he said harshly. "I'm guessing you are less then thrilled at the idea of Dick knowing you stayed the night with me." She nodded. "Okay, um..." He looked around his room for his car keys. "Here's what were going to do, I'm pretty sure he's here to go surfing since it's barely past 7:00 am. You're going to hide out in here until you see us leave, then you are going to take my truck and go home. Aaron won't be up for at least a few more hours, but I don't want you to wait. When we pull out you head straight home and then you text me when you get there."

"I guess… I'm not sure about taking your truck." I don't want him to get in more trouble than he already is; what would Aaron think if he found out I took it?

"Dick's not going to let me get away with saying no to surfing since I already ditched them last night. So the alternative is for us to walk downstairs together and to explain to Dick why you're here. I'm willing to do that. I meant it when I said I wanted to be friends again, but I can guess how Dick will react, and I'm not looking to get in a fight this early in the morning."

"Will you get in trouble for letting me take the Xterra?"

"Not any more than I'm already in. Plus this way you'll have to see me later." He smirked at her.

There was a loud crash down the hall and he was sure his panicked expression was a mirror image of Veronica's. Dick must be coming up the stairs. Logan quickly hustled Veronica into the bathroom
and tried to act as normal as possible. *This just keeps getting better...* Logan thought.

"Hey man, surf's up. Get your shit; we need to get out there!" Dick said, practically vibrating with excitement.

"Good morning to you, too. Give me a minute and I'll meet you down in the garage to grab my board. And keep it down, my dad's still asleep, Man."

"Sorry Dude, I'll be real quiet," Dick said, his enthusiasm momentarily dampened.

"Thanks. Now get the fuck out. I'll meet you downstairs." Logan tried to push him out the door.

"Dude, what's your problem? Come on...oh, I get it." Dick gave Logan a shit-eating grin. "You've got *company*, bowchickawowwow." Dick rolled his hips and pointed at Veronica's purse sitting in the chair where she'd left it last night.

"No man, I think that's Trina's, it's been sitting in here for a while..." Logan said lamely, hoping Dick would buy it.

"Whatever, see you downstairs." Much to Logan's relief, Dick headed out of his room. Logan waited until he heard his friend's padding down the stairs before he chanced calling out to Veronica.

"Veronica. He's gone," he stage whispered to the bathroom door, which swung open at his words. Her hair was tousled and he couldn't help but think how beautiful she looked.

"You need to get down there. I'll wait until I see you guys drive away." Logan started to open his mouth. "And yes, I will text you as soon as I'm back home, I promise."

"Okay, good." Before he could stop himself he had wrapped his arm around her and kissed her temple. I can't believe I just did that. But it felt so natural, like old times. She's going to think I'm crazy. He quickly took a step back and began rubbing the back of his neck nervously.

"Yeah...So I'll see you later," Veronica said, shifting her weight and fidgeting with the edge of the t-shirt she wore.

"I'll call when we're done surfing...I guess a few hours." Logan gathered his phone and wallet and rushed out the door.

Veronica waited until she saw Dick's truck turn out of the drive way and then, with Logan's keys in hand, she ran to the Xterra. She knew it probably wasn't necessary, but there was no way in hell she wanted to risk running into Aaron. She pressed the unlock button on the keys as she flew through the front door and practically leaped into the truck. She didn't relax until she was driving through the gate at the end of the driveway.

At a stop sign a few miles away, Veronica called Wallace as promised.

"Hey V... everything okay?" Wallace asked though a yawn.

"Everything's fine. I'm headed home, and I'm calling you as promised." She could hear Wallace fumbling around on his end.

"It's not even 8:00 am. I didn't expect to hear from you so early given all that work you had to do last night," he snarked at her.

"Hey, give me a break, Papa Bear. I am not my reputation. I really was helping him with
"It's not your reputation that is in question here...Anyway..." he stretched out the word, "now that I'm up at this ungodly hour on a Saturday, wanna grab some breakfast?"

They agreed to meet in an hour so she'd have time to take Backup out and to shower. Once home she texted Logan.

**From Veronica Mars to Logan Echolls, 7:53am:**
Made it home, call me later

He didn't text back, but she hadn't really expected him to.

Wallace met Veronica at her favorite diner, and the pair eagerly settled in to eat big stacks of pancakes and bacon.

"All right, V. Start talking. What happened to you last night? One minute you're strutting your way across the beach and the next I'm bringing your purse to Logan Echolls' place."

Veronica started explaining what had happened at the beach the previous night between bites of her breakfast.

"What do you mean Troy took off with your clothes? Why the hell were your clothes off to begin with?!" He was getting pretty agitated.

"Well, yeah, it's hard to skinny dip with your clothes on..." She snorted. *Obviously.*

"And Logan was skinny dipping with you?" This part was clearly confusing him.

"Logan was already at the beach, *which* I did not know. Apparently, he heard me yell out to Lilly, realized what I was doing and decided to join me."

"I think I'm missing a key part of this story. Why would he know what you were doing? I thought you guys hated each other. I mean, I know he was Lilly's boyfriend and you were her friend, but I just can't see you two having that kind of shared memory."

"I wasn't kidding when I said that Logan and I used to be friends, Wallace. We were best friends long before he ever dated Lilly and until she died. I was actually his first friend—well besides Duncan—when he moved here in the seventh grade."

"I can't believe it, V. It does not compute."

"Believe it BFF; we sat next to each other in Mrs. Nelson's class. Duncan had a different teacher, so Logan didn't know anyone except me. You may not believe it now but Logan is actually shy." Wallace gave her a look. "Okay, not shy in the normal sense. He could always command a crowd and did, but when it came to actually being himself...not so much."

**FLASHBACK**

"Thank god you're in this class too," Logan said to her as he dropped into the chair next to her. The classroom was setup with a bunch of small tables that sat two people. Veronica had chosen this table because it was on the side of the classroom with windows and near the front. She liked to be able to look outside when she was bored.

"Hey Logan." She smiled at him brightly. They had hung-out a few times now. First at a soccer
tournament that both she and Duncan played in, and then later when she was over at the Kane's with Lilly. "You don't know anyone else yet?"

He shook his head. "Just you, Duncan, and Lilly. Not that she counts for much…"

"Oh come on, she's my best friend." Veronica stuck up for her less-than-easy to get along with BFF.

"And she's a royal bitch." Logan winked at her and they both laughed, earning them stares from their classmates who were busily staking out their seats for the year.

"You'll help me, right? I missed a bunch of school last year after a snowboarding accident and I'm kinda nervous," He said very quietly.

"Of course I will, 'stick with me kid and you'll go places.'" She quipped at him in an 'Old Hollywood' voice.

"Said the envelope to the stamp!" Logan quoted back at her, causing them to both laugh loudly again, and earning them more curious looks. "Promise you won't ditch me, Ronnie? I don't know any of these people and you've seen what it's like as soon as they figure out who I am. I don't want to have to listen to a list of Aaron's achievements on my first day of school."

"I promise," she told him sincerely. He reached out for her hand and squeezed it tightly for just a moment before releasing it.

**END FLASHBACK**

Veronica cringed as the memory washed over her. It had seemed so innocent at the time…a snowboarding accident. She had broken her wrist snowboarding so it hadn't seemed so farfetched at the time. But now—knowing what she did about Aaron—she was suspicious.

"Okay fine. So he was a nice kid at twelve; sixteen is clearly not going as well." Wallace brought her out of her thoughts.

"Can't argue with you there."

While they finished their breakfast, Veronica told Wallace a heavily edited version of the rest of her night.

"I maintain that you should avoid this guy at all costs. I don't care how nice he was in the seventh grade, V. He's still the psychotic jackass who made it clear to everyone that you were fair game for torment," Wallace said. Veronica knew she couldn't argue with that either, despite whatever truce she and Logan had made the previous night.

"That's why you're my BFF, Papa Bear. I'll take it under advisement."

When Veronica got home, she started some laundry and tidied up the apartment while solidifying her plan to return Logan's truck and extract herself as quickly as possible. Maybe they could maintain their truce, but rebuilding their friendship was not something she was going to jump back into right away.

Logan was silently pensive during the drive to the beach with Dick and Beaver. With everything that had happened the night before, he was finding it difficult to process how he felt about all this new information. His renewed friendship with Veronica had Logan both excited and a little terrified. When they were kids he'd had a major crush on her, but nothing had ever gone farther than flirtatious
innuendo. She was his best friend, and, at the time, it hadn't been worth it to him to risk losing her; he had so few real friends. Just when he had started to think it might be worth it, he'd gotten caught in Hurricane Lilly. After all that had happened between he and Veronica over the past year, Logan knew he was lucky that she was even considering being his friends again. He could admit his crush had never truly gone away, but Logan had no doubt that his behavior after Lilly died had ruined any chance of them ever being more than friends. He huffed audibly.

"Dude, what's your damage? You haven't said two words and you keep making all these emo sounds," Dick's words pulled Logan out of his thoughts.

Not wanting to talk yet, Logan gave Dick the universal sign for 'fuck-off'.

"Wow, you're usually a lot more fun than this after you get laid," Beaver said, from the back seat, earning himself the same hand gesture.

Ignoring Logan, Dick and Beaver prattled on about the importance of a quality lay and how lame the dance had been last night. Logan tuned them out easily; it was a coping device he'd used for years. He was still confused about a lot of what had happened the previous night. Veronica had said she didn't like how Aaron had looked at him, but he wouldn't have thought that would be enough to instantaneously turn his worst enemy into his protector. But that was exactly what had happened. And then he had returned the favor. Some friend I am, exposing her to Aaron…

But Logan was sure that he hadn't imagined their renewed bond while protecting each other from Aaron. The more he thought about it, the more he knew that he wanted to protect her. And not just from his dad, but also from anyone or anything that might hurt her. I am superbly fucked up… I destroyed her headlights less than a month ago and now I want to be her fucking knight in shining armor…tarnished armor more like. Logan laughed to himself. Dick gave him a strange look but, fortunately, kept his mouth shut for once.

Thinking about that day on the beach when he broke her head lights reminded him of that Wally kid's comment about having hurt her enough already. What did he mean? Sure, plenty of pranks had been pulled, but slashed tires and cruel rumors didn't equate to anyone actually hurting Veronica. He supposed he was with the right people to do some reconnaissance. Dick might not be the brightest crayon in the box, but he had a real head for gossip and knew everything that went on in Neptune. And Beaver was so unimposing that people said things in front of him without even meaning to, so he was often a fount of this type of information.

They arrived at the beach and were unloading their gear when a silver SUV pulled up next to them. As Duncan Kane and Casey Gant jumped out, Logan's phone played the Law & Order "Dun Dun", the sound he had assigned to text messages from Veronica.

From Nancy Drew To Logan Echolls, 7:53am: Made it home, call me later

Dick looked over his shoulder. "Who's Nancy Drew? I knew you had a chick in your room; no way Trina would have a purse like that." Casey and Beaver both gave Logan a questioning look.

"Seriously, Fuck-off!" Logan snapped, pulling up his wetsuit.

"Dudes, we've got emo Logan today," Dick said, slapping Duncan on the back.

"I'm not emo. I'm just hungover," Logan informed them before anyone else could comment. He grabbed his board and headed toward the water. He was the first out and was glad to miss whatever conversation was going on back in the parking lot. They may have been his best friends, but sometimes he could barely tolerate them. Duncan used to be the exception, but zombie Duncan was
hardly what Logan thought of as fun or even engaging. The fact that Duncan was out surfing this morning was a good sign, but Logan didn't want to get his hopes up.

Dick joined Logan a few minutes later, bobbing on the ocean waiting for a good set. "Look man, I was just busting your balls. Hair of the dog?" Dick asked, passing Logan the flask that he always had on him. Logan usually had one of his own, but he'd forgotten it in his rush to get Dick out of his house before he saw Veronica.

Logan took a fortifying sip. "Dick, do you know if anyone has…” he paused, feeling uncertain.

"Dude, you know Sean's the one to talk to about drugs. I just got a sweet little pipe the other day that we should totally christen together if you pick something up."

"No man, I don't want weed. Um…I was wondering if you had heard anything about anyone hurting Veronica?" He rushed to get the words out and didn't make eye contact with Dick.

"What do you care about that skank? You know we hurt her all the time. Hell, I slashed her tires myself just the other day," Dick said proudly as the other three boys finally joined them.

"That's not what I mean. I mean hurt her, like, physically." Logan tried to sound nonchalant but there was an edge to his voice he was pretty sure even Dick wouldn't miss.

"I don't know man; isn't she the one who does the hurting with that freaky-ass stun gun thingy?" Dick responded.

"She didn't used to be like that. Maybe if you hadn't been such assholes to her she wouldn't have gone all super-bitch," Casey directed his comment at Logan. Casey was an 09er, and sometimes an asshole in his own right, but Logan couldn't remember him ever participating in any of the cruel things they had done to Veronica. Or even saying anything bad about her.

"Tell us how you really feel Casey," Duncan joked. They all stared at him open mouthed. Duncan just laughed and started paddling to catch the next wave.

*Duncan made a joke?*

"Seriously though," Casey continued, "it started with that party at Shelly's last year. It's like she was a completely different person after that. Didn't you guys notice?" They all shook their heads.

*Was that when she changed?* Logan stared out at the incoming set thinking back to that party. He'd been a mess, drinking almost constantly, fucking anything with a pulse, and taking his anger—and my guilt if I'm honest with myself—out on Veronica.

"That girl was not Veronica Mars. She was making out with random people. Didn't you use her as a salt lick?" Casey looked at Logan, who nodded in confirmation. Casey turned his attention to Dick. "You and Sean were pouring shots down her throat until Duncan made you stop. What do you think Logan? That sound harmful to you?" Casey asked him with a smirk.

"Whatever. She's just some skank," Dick said and paddled for the next wave in the set.

Logan covered his face with his hands to try to hide the anguish he was sure was only too obvious. "I was spending most of my time in a bottle then. I wasn't thinking much of anything. Now…” He didn't know how to finish the sentence. "Look Casey, have you heard anything? I get what you're saying, all of that was hurtful, but I think someone might have actually hurt her. You know, like physically hurt her. Do you think it could have been that night?"
"I really don't know. But she was different after that party," Casey said with a sigh.

"She stayed the night there," Beaver said quietly, surprising Logan, who had forgotten that Dick's brother was even there.

Duncan paddled back up after his ride. "Who stayed the night where?" He asked, rejoining the conversation.

"Veronica, at Shelly Pomroy's last December. Madison told me about seeing her the next morning when she was writing 'slut' and 'Abel it should have been her' on Veronica's car. She said her dress was torn and that she was crying and limping," Beaver said, an impish grin on his face.

Logan felt sick to his stomach, and, from the look on Casey's face, he suspected Casey felt the same way. They both looked at Duncan who hadn't said anything yet, but his face had visibly paled.

"Who died?" Dick asked with a chuckle, having returned from his ride.

Without responding, Logan started paddling to catch the next wave. He needed to get away from them before he did something stupid, like punch Dick for being an asshat, throw-up, or both.

The now mostly somber group surfed the rest of the morning without further mention of Veronica or anything else. The lack of conversation continued once they lay on the beach, exhausted. Dick tried to get them going a couple of times and finally gave up. "God, you are all a bunch of emo fucks today! Come on Beav, let's get out of here."

"Dick, can you give Casey a ride? I need to talk to Duncan," Logan said.

"Fine dude, whatever. Coming Casey?" Wordlessly, Casey gathered his things and followed Dick up to his truck.

Once they had driven away, Logan looked at Duncan, "Come on DK, get your shit." Logan stood up and headed for the silver Mercedes SUV that had been Lilly's. He strapped his board to the top and then did the same to Duncan's. They stripped out of their wetsuits and climbed into the SUV. Duncan went to put the car in gear, but Logan stopped him. "You know what I'm going to ask you," Logan said, staring out at the waves.

"No, I have no clue Logan. What is your problem?" Duncan snapped.

"What happened to Veronica at that party? You 'rescued' her from me during the salt lick and led her away. And I may have been wasted but I haven't forgotten that you begged me for my dose of liquid-X that night. What happened?" Logan growled. He could feel his temper rising as he glared at Duncan. Then Logan watched as his friend's usually impassive expression transformed into one he had never seen before and couldn't quite place. But in a flash it was gone again, as quickly as it had come, replaced by Duncan's now customary mask of indifference.

"Nothing happened, Man. Nothing, I promise. She was really out of it, so I took her to one of the guest bedrooms and put her to bed. I was pretty upset to see her acting that way at the party, so I took the X myself and spent the rest of the night with Shelly."

"You left her passed-out alone? Fuck Man, what if she'd had alcohol poisoning?" I just let him walk away with her. God, I didn't even care. "What if something worse had happened to her? What is the matter with you?" What is the matter with me? I hooked-up with that freshman and didn't think about Veronica again that night.

"What's the matter with me? What the fuck is the matter with you? Since when do you care about
Veronica? Last I remember, you, oh great King of the 09ers, were leading the charge against her,” Duncan spoke the harsh words nonchalantly, as if he were discussing the weather. It completely creeped Logan out. Duncan shifted his gaze out toward the ocean, nodded his head once, started the car and pulled out of the parking lot.

They didn't speak for the rest of the drive, and Logan was more than ready to be out of Duncan's car when they arrived at his house. Without a word to his friend, Logan quickly grabbed his things and unhooked his board. The second he had it off the roof, Duncan peeled out of Logan's driveway like there was a fire.

Logan dug out his phone and sent a text.

**From Logan Echolls to Nancy Drew, 12:37pm:**
Have lunch with me?

**From Nancy Drew to Logan Echolls, 12:38pm:**
Maybe, when?

**From Logan Echolls to Nancy Drew, 12:38pm:**
Pick me up in 45min - Italian or Thai

**From Nancy Drew to Logan Echolls,12:39pm:**
What do you think?

**From Logan Echolls to Nancy Drew, 12:40pm:**
Italian it is, see you soon

Logan was so focused on texting with Veronica that he didn't notice his father standing in the doorway of the house.

"What made you think it was okay to go play with your friends this morning?" Aaron's angry voice caused Logan to look up just as his father's fist connected with his cheek, knocking him off balance. Aaron then kicked Logan's legs out from under him, causing him to fall heavily onto the concrete floor of the garage and his phone to fly out of his hand. Logan took the moment his father needed to rebalance to pull his own knees to his chest and to cover his head with his arms. Bruised and broken legs and arms were easier to explain and, in the end, were less painful than ribs and jaws.

**Veronica…He thought as Aaron landed a kick to his shins. Have to make sure this is over before she gets here…**

Aaron kicked him twice more.

"Get to my study; we're not done."

Duncan's phone rang as he pulled out of the Echolls' driveway.

"Hello?" Duncan answered.

"Hey Duncan, it's Troy. Man, have I got some shit to tell you about. But first…what are you doing tonight?"

"Troy, dude, um… tonight nothing planned. What's up?" Duncan asked.

"Luke and I are making a little run to TJ. Booze, broads, and booze. You down?" Troy asked.
"Yeah, man. That sounds awesome. When are you headed out? I can be ready in like two hours."
Duncan told him glancing at the in dash clock.

"I'll pick you up then. See you man." Troy ended the call.

This was the best news Duncan had gotten all day. Kicking the anti-depressants was no cakewalk,
but dealing with Logan's bullshit had really put him in a foul mood. TJ was just what he needed.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Extra thanks and credit go to Bondopoulos for the Wallace & V dialogue in the
diner! It was a skimpy descriptive paragraph that she turned into what I think is a great
Wallace and Veronica moment :)
Veronica felt betrayed by her own emotions. After her conversation with Wallace, she'd decided to heed her friend's warning and keep Logan at arm's length for as long as possible. But she found she couldn't resist him or the slightly giddy feeling she got when Logan asked her to have lunch with him. *Ugh... I am a complete idiot, but it's just lunch; people have lunch together all the time. Anyway, I need to find out how his dad reacted after last night. Yeah, that's what I'm really going over for...* Even she could see through her own lame reasoning.

Veronica took a few minutes to put together a bag before leaving to meet up with Logan. She placed the freshly laundered clothes that she'd borrowed from him in her messenger bag along with a bikini that she wasn't embarrassed to be seen wearing. Years of friendship with Logan had taught her to always be prepared for a swim. She also grabbed what she would need to finish her weekend homework. While she wasn't necessarily expecting to spend the entire day with Logan, she wanted to be prepared for a few different options. She took Backup out for a quick walk and then headed for the Echolls estate.

After entering her code, she parked in front of the open garage. Veronica was surprised to find the door open but grew even more alarmed when she saw Logan's long board lying on the ground. In all of the years she had known him, Logan had always treated his boards like they were his babies. She'd never seen him leave one on the ground like that. Her foot hit something as she continued walking toward the abandoned board; it was Logan's cell phone. Why would he leave his phone out here like this? She got a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach when she heard a loud crack.

She entered the kitchen through the garage and followed the sound down the hall to Aaron's study. The door was only open a few inches but it was enough to see Logan on his knees, his back bare and bright red with several open gashes seeping blood. With an audible swish and smack, the belt made contact with Logan's skin again. She heard him groan in obvious pain. Veronica covered her mouth, but that wasn't enough to completely drown out her gasp. Luckily, Aaron had moved on to the speaking portion of the punishment and didn't hear her.

"Maybe next time you'll remember to keep your hands off my $500 a bottle champagne when you want to get a stupid little slut drunk." Logan turned around to face his father and saw Veronica. His eyes widened and he looked terrified for a split second before quickly letting his expression go blank and turning away.

"You two were so fucking sweet all cuddled in your bed like a couple of lovesick fools. I don't care if you want to fuck the hot little bodies you go to school with, but if you knock one of those sluts up, I'll kill you..."
through. She opened and closed it loudly and started giggling holding her phone up like she was talking on it. Doing her best impression of a vapid teenage girl, she started speaking loudly, "Oh my god, I can't believe you said that to her, you are such a bitch! Hey, I'm at Logan's. I'll have to call you later. Bye-ee." She tried to make as much noise as possible to alert Aaron to her presence.

She was halfway back into the kitchen when she saw Aaron coming down the hall. A huge fake grin plastered on his too tan face. "Veronica, I didn't realize you were coming back over today." He leered at her legs again, making her regret her decision to wear shorts.

"Logan and I are writing an article together for journalism and we have an AP History exam to study for." She patted her overstuffed messenger bag, trying to maintain her upbeat tone to mask her terrified ferocity.

"Oh, I see. Why don't you go see if he's in his room? I'm not sure where he's gotten off to." His smile never faltered but his twinkling 'Hollywood-Eyes' had gone flat and narrowed slightly.

"Okay then, thanks Mr. Ec… I mean Aaron." She gave him a tight smile and took off toward the stairs at a brisk walk. As soon as she was out of his sight, Veronica ran the rest of the way to Logan's room.

Of course he wasn't there. She hadn't expected him to be, since the only way to the stairs from Aaron's study would have led Logan past the kitchen and them. So she waited and tried not to think about what could be happening downstairs. Five minutes later, a very pale and defeated looking Logan opened the door.

He held a finger up to his lips. "Ronnie, I totally forgot you were coming back over. I wrecked really bad surfing this morning and haven't gotten cleaned up yet. Give me a few minutes and we can get started," he said it all very matter of fact and a little louder than he would normally speak.

She followed his lead and projected her voice, "Okay, I'll just order us some takeout while you patch yourself up. I told you that surfing hung-over was a bad idea. You're lucky you weren't seriously injured, you klutz." She pretended to laugh at him and pulled out her phone to call in their food order. Instead of Italian, she decided on Thai since it was one of Logan's favorites. I can't believe I ever bought his stories about being accident-prone. He is the most graceful person I've ever known. How did Lilly and Duncan not know about this? Or did they? The thought made her blood boil.

Veronica heard footsteps moving away from Logan's room as she finished placing their lunch order. She visibly relaxed, knowing that Aaron was out of earshot. Logan moved stiffly to the bathroom and tried to pull his t-shirt off, but doubled over when he started to pull it up. Veronica moved to his side and gently lifted the shirt away from his bloody back and carefully over his head. She could see tears gathering in the corners of Logan's eyes, which did nothing to stop those already in hers from spilling over. She led him to the toilet and indicated that he should sit down while she went through his medicine cabinet looking for disinfectant and bandages. She saw a bottle of Oxycontin prescribed in Lynn's name on the shelf. She filled a glass that was sitting by the sink with water, shook out two of the pills and handed them to Logan. Carefully, she cleaned each cut and applied bandages. But there was nothing she could do about the bruises that were blooming darkly across his back, arms and cheek.

She cupped his face, softly touching the bruise on his cheek, and felt him lean into her touch. His arms came around her waist and he pulled her closer to him as he rested his unmarked cheek against her stomach. She wanted to bolt out of the bathroom and escape everything she was feeling but she couldn't bring herself to leave him. Not like this.
When Logan spoke it was barely above a whisper, "No one's ever done that for me."

"You didn't want your mom to know?" she asked, whispering as well.

"She knows."

Veronica didn't know what to say. She suspected pity would make him angry and she couldn't find the words to tell him how what she had seen made her feel. Angry, terrified, defeated; things she was sure he felt, too. What good would it do to say them now? She reached her hand up and ran her fingers through his hair, gently letting her nails scrape against his scalp like she knew he liked.

FLASHBACK

"No, Lilly, you're doing it wrong. Watch!" Logan pushed Lilly away from the sink where she was shampooing the dye out of Veronica's hair. They had decided to put temporary highlights in Veronica's hair and lowlights in Lilly's. It was, according to Lilly, supposed to be a fun girl's spa day for them to get over both of their breakups and ready to meet new, more exciting guys. But Veronica felt more like it was 'torture Veronica day'.

"Lilly you're supposed to massage the scalp not tear it up with your nails." And he proceeded to work the shampoo into Veronica's hair while very gently letting his short nails scrape her scalp.

She moaned in pleasure, "Mmmm… Oh. My. God. Logan where did you learn to do this?" she asked breathily, enjoying having her scalp massaged.

"Um…" he coughed, "sometimes I go to my mom's stylist and I really like it when she does this." He finished working in the shampoo and started to rinse it out.

"I'm bored, come get me when you girls are done," Lilly called to them as she left the bathroom.

"I'm sorry, Veronica," he whispered when he heard the door close.

"What for?" she asked softly, still surprised he had been so quick to forgive her for telling Lilly about his kiss with Yolanda, but when Duncan had broken up with her without so much as a word he'd been there for her.

"For not getting here sooner. I was with DK and I couldn't exactly tell him that I was ditching him to save you from Lilly."

"Please don't tell Lilly. I know she's trying to cheer me up but…it's not working."

"What would work?" he asked.

"You massaging some conditioner into my tortured hair and scalp might." She smiled up at him.

"Let's see." He held up an open hand. "Hot girl—check, makes cute, sexy sounds during said procedure—double-check, teenage boy—check…four out of five; I think we've got a deal," he said laughing.

"What would make it five out of five?" Veronica asked.

"Nudity," Logan replied, grinning from ear to ear.

They bantered back and forth about what constituted cute versus sexy sounds while he finished washing her hair. She felt better than she had in the past week.
The gate buzzer sounded through the intercom, breaking the moment. Logan shifted away from Veronica and released her waist. She stepped aside, giving him room to move past her. He hit a button on a small control panel in his room that opened the gate. He started to bend down to grab a t-shirt from the floor but Veronica beat him to it and helped him slip it on. Slowly, they made their way downstairs to the front door where the delivery guy was waiting for them. Logan threw some bills at him while Veronica held the food.

"Kitchen or back upstairs?" she asked.

"Upstairs." He didn't want to risk running into Aaron again, especially with Veronica in those skimpy shorts. "If you're going to be over when Aaron's here you should maybe wear jeans—baggy, unflattering ones," Logan said, his tone light but his expression very serious.

"I realized that earlier, but there's nothing I can do about it right now." She shuddered, reminding Logan of how she had reacted the day before when Aaron leered at her.

"No, I guess not." Then he grinned at her loopily. "You could put some of my clothes back on. Just so you know, if it's just me feel free to wear as little as possible. I love looking at your legs." He smirked at her, enjoying the thought of her in his clothes or, even better, maybe out of them.

"Where did that come from?"

"Hey now, don't look at me like that." She tilted her head and winked at him then stepped onto the stairs and moved up a few ahead of him. "You like looking at my legs, huh?"

Interesting… he thought as he watched her sashay up the stairs.

When they got back in his room, Veronica insisted he sit down and relax while she spread out all the different cartons of food. The Oxycontin didn't do much for Logan's appetite, but he knew how much Veronica could eat so he figured they'd still finish everything and laughed to himself. His laugh turned into a hiss from the pain searing through his back and abdomen. Dammit…getting the shit beat out of you sucks…

"Logan? How badly are you hurt?" She set her carton down and gave him a look that was almost maternal. Not a look his mom would give, of course, but one from someone who really cared; someone not drowning in a bottle.

"I'm good. No broken bones, so I'd put this one in the 'Logan Winning' column." Jesus, I shouldn't have said it like that. She stared at him like he had grown a second head then turned away. He could see her eyes glisten, but no tears fell. "Really Veronica, I promise I'm okay. I heal fast. By Monday it'll be like it never happened." She nodded her head, but he could tell that this conversation wasn't over.

They ate their takeout mostly in silence, passing the various cartons back and forth so that they each got a bit of everything—except for the spring rolls, which Veronica devoured all on her own. She must have a tapeworm or something. How can someone so tiny eat so much? It had always surprised him; even Lilly, who would eat in front of him, was pretty picky about what she ate. But Veronica had never been that way, and it was always fun to watch her. Lilly had joked to him and Duncan that watching Veronica eat should be a category of porn. Veronica had protested at first, clearly disturbed, but the topic soon become an ongoing joke between the rest of them.

"Logan?"
"Veronica?"

"When you moved here in the seventh grade...you told me you had missed a bunch of school the previous year because of a snowboarding accident..." She let her words hang.

"Right, a month...or maybe it was five weeks. That was not so much a 'snowboarding accident' as a 'beaten-with-a-snowboard intentional,'" he said wryly.

"Jesus," she hissed under her breath.

"Yeah, that one definitely goes in the 'Logan Loses' column. One concussion, fifteen stitches on my head, one broken leg, a broken arm and three broken fingers. Plus, I bled when I peed for like a week or two. He was a lot more careful about what he hit me with after that. I think he must have paid off the social worker that time," he deadpanned. Sighing, he gave up all pretense, clearly exhausted. He didn't want to talk about this, but Nancy Drew over there would, no doubt, push until he gave up the goods anyway. And he just didn't have any fight left in him. So much for keeping all this from her..."I actually think it pushed them to move us to Neptune. They'd run out of emergency rooms and doctors that they could take me to without anyone getting suspicious."

"God Logan, and your mom knows?" She looked horrified. "Duncan? Lilly?"

"I'm not sure about Duncan, but Lil' had to know. She saw the bruises and cuts. She never asked."

"I can't believe I didn't realize...all this time. How did I not know?" Tears were sliding down her cheeks.

"I worked really hard to make sure you didn't know. I knew you would tell your dad and there was nothing he could do. Not against the Great Aaron Echolls!" He angrily threw his arms wide in a grand gesture and winced. "It's not as bad as it seems; he's not around much, and when he is I usually avoid him as much as possible. You remember how much time I spent at the Kanes'." She nodded. She had been there almost as much as he had.

"Yeah, I remember, I was hiding from my own...problems, too. I haven't heard from her in months," she said sadly.

Logan nodded, feeling his own bitterness for shitty mothers. Neither of us can catch a break, can we?

"Well, aren't we the sunshine and rainbows committee?" He sighed and moved to sit closer to Veronica, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. The Oxy is finally kickin' in...nice. He thought when he only felt a twinge as he lifted his arm this time.

"Am I the sunshine or the rainbows?" she asked looking faux serious.

"Definitely sunshine; you practically have a halo. Anyway, I'm the colorful one." He pointed to the bruise on his cheek.

"Do you want to talk more about it?"

"Ugh... no, I didn't even want to talk about this. It's too much. Shit, Veronica, I didn't want you to know all this crap." He shakily let out a breath. "I think I need to take a nap before I spill any more of my secrets to my greatest enemy." He pointed an unsteady finger at her. Wow, I'm losing it. How many of those did I take? Two from Veronica...two more while she set up lunch...then a couple hits from the flask under the sink...Yeah, that'd do it.
"I'm not your enemy Logan, but go ahead. I'll just study while you rest."

"Go home, Veronica, you don't have to guard me. I've been living with this for years." He slipped carefully under the covers of his bed to lie on his side.

"I can't, I was in your truck, remember?"

He was fading fast. "Take it…don't talk…to…Aaron." His eyes felt heavy. "Later though…" his eyes closed, "talk…Shelly…" and he drifted off to sleep.

Veronica settled in at Logan's small desk and studied for their AP History exam. Logan slept so soundly that Veronica felt the need to check on him frequently to make sure he was still breathing. After about two hours, she could hear Logan whimpering and sounding distressed. She walked over to the bed and gently touched his shoulder. "Logan, it's just a dream, wake up."

His eyes opened wide and wild. Then he unexpectedly reached out and pulled Veronica to him, burying his face in her stomach. She let him cling to her for a few moments, and then slowly leaned away so she could see his face.

"Logan? Are you okay?"

"Stayed…you…still here…." he mumbled incoherently.

"Yeah, I'm still here. Why don't you try to go back to sleep?" She brushed his slightly damp hair off of his forehead.

He tightened his hold on her. "Here…come here." He started to scoot away from the edge of the bed, pulling Veronica along with him.

"Logan stop," she said gently, trying to extricate herself from his tight grip. Undeterred, he continued dragging her onto the bed. She felt a familiar panic begin to rise up from the pit of her stomach; her legs turned to jello and her heart raced. "Logan. Stop!" she said with all the force she could muster.

He opened his eyes. "Please Veronica," he said it so quietly that she barely heard him. He didn't let go of her, but he loosened his grip and stopped pulling.

Veronica felt the panic recede slightly as his grip on her relaxed. "Logan, I need you to let go of me. If you can do that I'll get into bed with you."

He looked up at her with unfocused eyes and let go of her waist.

"Thank you," she said, full of relief. After a few deep breaths, she carefully climbed onto the bed and let Logan lay his head in her lap. She gently resumed the scalp massage she'd been giving him earlier and continued to take deep breaths as she counted down from one hundred. By the time she reached zero he had fallen back asleep. Veronica slumped down against the headboard and pillows, trying to find a more comfortable position. Logan's slow inhalations and the feel of his steady pulse were soothing to her frayed nerves. She focused on his body's rhythm and found herself drifting.

She woke with a start. It was dark outside and Logan was no longer sprawled across her lap. She could hear the faucet running in the adjacent bathroom. It shut off and Logan came back into the room, still a little unsteady on his legs.

"I'm sorry. Did I wake you? I tried to be quiet but I'm feeling a little…um…"
"High?" she offered.

"Yeah, high." He giggled.

*Great, Logan is high on painkillers and I just lost...* she looked at the clock...*over an hour of study time.* She wanted to be mad. In fact, she was sure that she was mad, mad at Aaron, mad at losing study time, but not mad at Logan. Try as she might she found it pretty hard to imagine being mad at this six-foot-tall, teenaged boy who was giggling like a little girl.

He staggered back to the bed and threw himself over Veronica's legs. A look of pain crossed his face, finally stopping his giggles. "Owww," he whined.

"Did that hurt? I'm amazed you can feel anything at all. How many Oxys did you take?" she asked very seriously.

His eyes were still unfocused but they were directed at her. "Um...how many did you give me?"

"Two."

"I think four or maybe five then. Definitely not more than five. And then whatever was in my flask." His giggles were back.

"Logan we can't let your dad see you like this." She was sure that, if the champagne theft had led to his current injuries, being caught high as a kite—even if it was because of said current injuries—was not going to earn him any goodwill from Aaron.

At her words Logan shook his head. "No, no, no, no, no, Aaron will be very un...happy with me."

"Will he bother us if we stay up here?" she asked.

"We're supposed to have 'family' dinner." He made wiggly-quote fingers and erupted in giggles again.

"Okay. I'll take care of it. Stay here for just a minute." Veronica patted him gently on the head and squeezed his hand. Her anxiety from earlier was starting to build again. *How am I going to get him out of here?* She walked to the window, noticing that he tracked her every movement with his whole head rather than just his eyes.

Logan's Xterra was right next to Aaron's silver Mercedes sedan, where she had parked it earlier. *So much for small miracles.* It was possible that Aaron had left with his driver, but Veronica wasn't prepared to take the chance. She started moving around the room, collecting all of her belongings before packing a bag for Logan.

Ten minutes later, Veronica had them both packed and ready to make the journey to his truck. She debated taking their bags out first then coming back for Logan, but she decided it wasn't worth the extra time. She put on the backpack that she had filled for Logan, and then she slung her messenger bag over her shoulder. Logan had watched her the whole time, and his eyes looked a little clearer than before.

"Okay Logan, here's the plan. I'm going to take you to my house. Dad's gone until at least Monday so you can sleep on the couch until then."

"Okay, 'Ronica." He held out his hand to her as he rolled off the bed.

He put his arm across her shoulders as they made their way out of his room. When they approached
the staircase, she carefully wrapped her arms low around his hips. Their descent was slow, but they made it without incident. They continued all the way to the entryway before Veronica heard a door shut. She rushed to get them out of the door, shoving Logan through and quickly shutting it behind them. He had gone down on one knee in her haste, but recovered quickly, considering his impaired state.

"I don't think…we're going…to make it," Logan huffed out between hisses of pain.

"Keep moving; we're almost there." She had the passenger door open and Logan was leaning heavily on her to get in. She pulled the seat belt across quickly, opened the rear door to toss their bags in and ran to the driver's side door.

She turned the ignition over just as Aaron knocked on the window. She jumped a mile and looked at Logan who had turned his face away. She schooled her features and pressed the button for the window to go down.

"Mr. Ec… Aaron, how can I help you?" she asked as sincerely as possible.

"Where are you kids off to?" he asked with a crocodile smile.

"To grab some dinner and then to keep working on our homework at my place. We'll probably be working on it most of tomorrow, too."

"I'm surprised to see you putting so much effort into your school work, Logan," Aaron said sternly.

Veronica watched as Logan slowly and deliberately turned his head to look at his father. "Veronica doesn't suffer fools gladly," he said and turned away again.

"Um…of course not," Aaron replied as if flustered. He was clearly no stranger to his son's quips and wit, but Veronica could tell that Logan's comment had gone over Aaron's head. "Absolutely. I'm so pleased that your friendship is having such a fine influence on him, Veronica. Well, you kids have fun."

Veronica threw the car into reverse and was already rolling down the driveway as Aaron stepped back from the truck. She drove straight to the Sunset Cliffs Apartment complex that she and Keith called home.
Chapter Notes

A/N: Huge thanks once again to Bondopoulos and Bryrosea! This story is so much better thanks to them :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 5 - All This Talk Is Getting Me Down

By the time Veronica pulled his car up to her apartment, Logan was grateful that he could feel the Oxy fog start to clear. He never expected Veronica to stick around for any of this, let alone actually bring him home with her. She helped him out of the car and into her apartment, where the puppy he barely remembered when they were friends was now a full-grown, scary-ass pitbull.

Logan hesitated at the doorway, waiting for Veronica to harness the killer dog. Much to his surprise the dog—'Backup' she'd called him—sniffed his leg and threw himself at Logan's feet for a belly rub. He carefully knelt down and obliged the no longer scary dog.

"Oh, Backup. You are such a killer aren't you? You're going to eat me alive!" Logan could feel a case of the giggles building again but was able to keep most of them down. After a minute of indulging the dog, he slowly walked toward the couch with Backup ghosting his every move.

"Seriously, Backup? Some guard dog you are!" Veronica scolded as she unloaded their bags.

Logan settled himself on the couch and Backup didn't hesitate before curling up next to him, putting his sweet, blocky face in Logan's lap. Logan absently patted Backup's head and rubbed his ears, much to the dog's delight.

"You wanna tell me what you want for dinner or do you need a little more time to flirt with my dog?" Veronica snapped, clearly irritated at Backup's blatant affection for Logan.

"Admit it, you think it's adorable that I turned your attack dog to goo." A few giggles escaped from him.

"Less adorable, more annoying." Veronica snarked at him and held up a few takeout menus.

"You still know how to make grilled cheese?" Logan asked.

She glared at him, but there wasn't any heat behind it. "Of course."

"I want grilled cheese and tomato soup." He said with childlike exuberance. He gave her the famous Logan smile that always managed to melt even the coldest of hearts.

"I think I can do that." She turned away and started digging through cupboards, pulling out pans and the necessary ingredients.

Logan was mesmerized. When Veronica was set on a task she always moved with such deliberation. No movement wasted. It was something he had always admired about her.
Growing up an Echolls had its perks, for sure, but the things he had really missed as a child were the more normal things: box mac and cheese, sleepovers with smores, and holidays that weren't a production, literally. Consequently, he didn't have his first grilled cheese sandwich with tomato soup until he was a teenager. There had been plenty of sandwiches and soups over the years but never combined and certainly never with anything as simple as American cheese or Campbell's soup. The few times a nanny or maid had tried to give him regular food, Aaron had expressed his anger at his son eating such 'plebian fare'.

A few minutes later, delicious smells filled the combined kitchen/living room. Logan tilted his head back and inhaled the aroma. He remembered that the first time he'd had this particular delicacy it had also been prepared by Veronica. They'd been hungry one rainy day at the Kane's when the household staff had the day off, and Veronica was the only one who knew how to do anything in the kitchen.

**FLASHBACK**

"I'm starving! Why did Celeste have to give the staff the day off?" Lilly griped as the group of four wandered into the large kitchen.

"I'll just order something. Quit bitching," Logan snapped at Lilly. *God she's annoying.* Lilly was getting ready to start her freshman year of high school, and Logan hadn't thought it was possible but her annoying factor had increased along with her hotness.

"We don't have to order anything. I'll make us something to eat." Veronica confidently walked into the huge kitchen and started opening cupboards, selecting items that could be used to make them a meal.

Logan couldn't take his eyes off of her. She had moved into the pantry and was on tiptoes trying to get something far out of her reach. Without a thought, Logan moved to help her, causing him to collide with Duncan who apparently had the same idea. Duncan bowed out, allowing Logan to step forward and grab the two little Campbell's cans off the top shelf.

"Thanks." Veronica said, smiling brightly as she resumed the preparation of a meal that Logan was entirely unfamiliar with.

He took a seat back at the island and continued to watch her, but now he was also watching Duncan. His friend seemed equally intrigued by Veronica's actions. Veronica moved to the stove to heat up the soup and grill the sandwiches that she had assembled. A very displeased Lilly appeared before him and Duncan.

"What the hell is the matter with you two? Haven't you ever seen someone cook before?" Lilly was clearly pissed because she wasn't the center of attention.

Logan always assumed that was one of the main reasons Lilly dragged Veronica with her everywhere. Veronica usually let Lilly run the show and deferred to her on most things. It was strange because Veronica was never like that with him; she never let him get away with anything.

"Have you?" Duncan teased her.

"Veronica, what exactly are you making?" Logan did his best to ignore Lilly.

"Grilled cheese and tomato soup, obviously..." She swept her hand over the evidence that would have been obvious to most, but Logan was not your average teenager.

"Never had it." Logan declared.
Veronica turned around, mouth hanging open in shock. "Well, my friend you are in for a treat. This is a Mars family specialty!"

A few minutes later she served them and sat down. Logan watched as she lifted one of the triangle shaped pieces of her sandwich and dipped it into the soup. She made a little "mmmm" sounds as she ate the bite. She went to dip the sandwich again and saw him watching her.

"What? Am I that entertaining?" She asked.

"Yes, you are. So I dip this," he lifted a wedge of his own sandwich, "in here?" He pointed at the soup. She nodded and dipped hers again and took another bite using exaggerated movements. Logan tried his and couldn't stop himself from making a similar "mmmm" sound. "Wow, you weren't kidding. This is really good."

Veronica smiled, "Thanks. It's easy to make, you know. I could…"

"Thank you Veronica." Duncan interrupted her.

"Sure Duncan, anytime." She leaned around Logan and gave Duncan an easy smile.

Lilly was picking at her sandwich and making huffing sounds until Veronica addressed her. "Yes, Lilly? Is there a problem with the food?"

"It's all carbs and fat. I can't eat it." Lilly pouted.

"Whatever Lilly, I'll eat it. Give it here." Logan leaned over and snatched her plate and bowl. He set them between him and Veronica. "You only made yourself one… we can share Lilly's."

Lilly stormed off, much to Logan's amusement, and the others finished eating their lunch.

Later that night Lilly cornered Logan. "I don't like how you're looking at Veronica." She said petulantly.

"What are you talking about Lilly? How do I look at Veronica?" He was really regretting taking a break from the video game marathon.

"The way you should look at me." She batted her eyes and pressed herself against his chest.

Logan swallowed, his heart racing as she rubbed her breasts against him. "Um… Lilly, what are you doing?" His voice cracked.

"What do you think I'm doing, Logan?" She whispered seductively and slid her hand up to his cheek. "Do you want to kiss me, Logan?" She purred.

He nodded and closed his eyes as Lilly pressed her lips against his.

Maybe not so annoying after all… he'd thought as she dragged him into a guest bedroom.

END FLASHBACK

Veronica slid the sandwiches onto plates, poured the warmed soup into bowls and set them at the small kitchen-counter seating area. "Dinner's ready." She called to Logan who was staring off into space.

"Oh, sorry. Got distracted."
Veronica watched him carefully get up from the couch and walk stiffly to the kitchen. "You seem… better isn't the right word." She was at a loss for words. "Um… less high? Are the drugs wearing off?"

"Less high," he chuckled. "Yeah, I feel significantly less high, but I'm also starting to hurt more. Do you have something over-the-counter I can take after we eat? As much fun as it was, I'd rather not repeat my earlier performance."

"Something we can both agree on." She smirked at him.

They ate their dinner quickly and settled in the living room to watch some TV. Even with her nap earlier, Veronica was exhausted so she knew Logan had to be even more so. She looked over at him. He was sprawled across the couch with Backup curled up at his feet. His hair stuck up stiffly from the salt water and sweat.

He caught her staring, "Do I look that bad?" He smirked at her playfully, wincing only a little as his bruised cheek pulled. He ran his hand through his hair and frowned. "I haven't showered since surfing… Did you pack me a change of clothes?"

"I did; stay here and I'll get the shower setup." She rose and headed for her small bathroom.

"You know Veronica, I am capable of doing that myself." He called down the short hallway.

"Do you know where I keep the towels?" He didn't respond. "That's what I thought." She set his things in the bathroom along with a clean towel and turned on the hot water. It always took a few minutes to heat up. She headed back to the living room. "Do you need any help?"

"You can join me and scrub my back." He winked at her as he got up off the couch, being careful not to disturb Backup, who was snoring softly. "Seriously though, if you could help me with my shirt and the bandages that would be good. Wet bandages are gross."

He slowly followed Veronica to her room where she pulled out her desk chair, motioning for him to sit. She helped him pull off the t-shirt and carefully removed the bandages, inspecting each cut for signs of infection. "This is really going to sting under the water." She cringed.

"It'll be fine. I've done this before." He said sadly and shut the bathroom door behind him.

*I'm going to destroy Aaron Echolls!* She thought as rage coursed through her. *What kind of father does this? Should I tell dad? Is there anything he can do?* She knew that if she did divulge this to her father, Logan would be furious. He seemed resigned to the fact that she now knew but he hadn't expressed any interest in having her help him stop it… She didn't think he would want her to tell anyone about what she had seen; yet she knew she had to do something.

But what?

Twenty minutes later, Veronica was still no closer to a decision when Logan emerged from the bathroom dressed in the flannel pajama pants she had packed for him. Veronica moved so he could sit in the chair while she reapplied antibiotic cream and fresh bandages.

He waved away her offer to help him put a fresh shirt on. "I'll be more comfortable without one." He dry swallowed a few ibuprofen from the bottle Veronica had left out on the desk for him. "Not like I have to hide it from you now…” He said softly, rising from the chair and heading back to the living room.

Veronica brought a clean towel for him to lean against so he wouldn't get blood on the couch if he started bleeding through the bandages again. She helped him get settled and then knelt in front of the TV to pick out a DVD for them to watch. "Do you have a preference?" She asked him.
"Something funny?"

The clock said it was only 7:30pm, so she picked out a couple of options in case they wanted to watch more than one. She held up her first choice, *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*. He nodded his agreement.

"Veronica?" He asked as she settled back into the reclining chair. "There's something I want to ask you."

"Okay." Veronica could feel the tension in the room. Logan was gearing up to ask her something she wasn't going to like.

"What happened at Shelly Pomroy's party last year?"

"No." She pulled her knees up and crossed her arms around them.

"Something happened; I know it did. Please tell me."

"No! I'm not talking about this." She jumped out of the chair and practically ran to her bedroom, slamming the door.

*How could he possibly know anything about that night?* She paced a familiar pattern around her room. Her heart raced and her hands trembled. *Deep breaths, slower steps.* She worked to regain control.

"Veronica, can I please come in?" She saw the door open just a crack.

"Fine, fine, come in." She continued to take deliberate steps through the space of her room as he settled himself on her bed and watched her.

"We don't have to talk about... what I asked before. But Veronica, are you okay? Last night you had... like a panic attack after Aaron, and now... I'm worried." His eyes burned with sincerity.

"You're worried? Isn't that refreshing! Weren't so worried about me that night, were you?" She could feel her barely regained control slipping when Logan grabbed her wrist. She yanked it away, "Don't touch me!"

He held up his hands, "I'm sorry, I won't do it again. I'm sorry." He scooted a little further down the bed, creating more distance between them.

*Deep breath; discomfort not danger, deep breath.* She chanted in her head. She could feel Logan staring at her, but she pushed it out of her mind. She had to stay focused if she was going to keep it together. No way was she going to let him see just how bad this could get. Logan was the last person she wanted seeing her as vulnerable.

With her breathing back to normal, Veronica let the familiar feel of anger fill her, which strengthened her control. She walked over to the bed and sat on the edge farthest from Logan. "As much as I would love to tell you about that night, the only thing I remember is being handed a rum and coke and then waking up the next day. So I'm afraid you'll have to ask someone else."

She heard him release a shaking breath. "Okay Veronica. Have you talked to anyone about this? You know, like a counselor or something?" He asked in a gentle voice.

"What do you think?" She snapped at him, "Have you talked to anyone about this?" She waved her hand at his bare chest.
His eyes down cast, Logan shook his head.

Veronica nodded, stood up and moved back into the living room. She grabbed a blanket off the back of the couch and curled up next to Backup. "I'm going to hit play if you don't get back in here soon." She called down the hall.

She heard Logan come back into the room and felt the couch move as he resumed his spot against the towel. She hit 'play' and was thankful that he didn't say anything more. A few minutes later, they were both laughing and singing along to the ridiculous song and dance number.

"Tight tights!"

Halfway through the movie, Veronica was surprised to find that Logan had fallen asleep. She grabbed another blanket, covering him with it. Before the end of the movie she had fallen asleep on the couch too.

Luke had been nervous about this trip for days. Last summer Hank Zigman had offered to help Luke get ready for varsity baseball. Luke knew sports were his best bet to get out of Neptune. Sure being the son of a congressman sounded glamorous, but it wasn't. And the fact that his parents were ultra conservative, or at least California's version of it, did nothing to encourage Luke to want to stay nearby after he graduated.

It had started out simple enough. *Here drink this. Oh your muscles are sore... take this. You know if you really want to reach your goal I have this amazing injectable just like they give the pros - real simple...* By the time Luke had realized what he was doing he was in too deep. He owed Zigman thousands of dollars and had no way to pay him. Prestigious as being a congressman was, the pay didn't go too far when you lived in the 90909. He'd been given the choice pay up or work as a drug mule.

"Are you going to sit back there and mope the whole time?" Troy asked, meeting Luke's eyes in the rearview mirror as they pulled away from the San Ysidro border crossing.

"I just don't see why Duncan gets to sit shotgun." Luke replied petulantly, not wanting to reveal the real reason for his sour mood.

"Duncan gets to sit shotgun because he and I have things to discuss." Troy said mischievously.

"Right, so let's hear it T. What is it you've been dying to tell me?" Duncan asked.

"Well, you know how I was supposed to take your girl Veronica to homecoming?"

"She's not *my* girl. But yes I know you took her to the dance." Duncan replied.

"See that's the thing. I didn't take her to the dance. We were headed there and she insisted we make a stop at the beach. I waited and waited and finally I walked down to the water, and you'll never guess what I saw." Troy said dramatically.

"No, I won't. So just tell me." Duncan sounded impatient.

"I found her dress and a little red lace thong..." Troy pretended to spin an imaginary pair of panties on his finger.

"Dude, why the fuck would you think I'd want to hear about you and Veronica hooking up?" Duncan growled at Troy.
"But that's the best part, man. She wasn't waiting for me. She was skinny dipping with somebody else. Guess who? You gotta guess." Troy was absolutely giddy.

"Um… that new kid. Walter or William?" Luke guessed. He had seen Veronica sitting with the kid at lunch since the first day of school so it seemed like a reasonable guess.

"Nope! Try again." Troy said.

"Weevil?" Duncan laughed out loud, catching Luke by surprise.

"Logan fucking Echolls!" Troy crowed, bouncing up and down in the seat.

Troy's declaration was met with absolute silence. Luke couldn't believe it. _Logan? He hated Veronica. And she hated him. Why would they be skinny dipping together?_ This didn't make any sense.

"You're lying." Duncan seethed.

"No man. Saw them with my own eyes. But I walked off with her clothes. Left her there." He laughed loudly at his prank.

"How is that doing me a solid? You left my gir… ex-girlfriend naked with my best friend."

"Whatever man. It was hilarious. Guess you guys had it right all along. She is a total bitch and a slut." Troy spat out.

The rest of the trip down to Tijuana was filled with ludicrous tales of Troy's various exploits. Duncan couldn't bring himself to be even mildly interested. When Troy had said Veronica was skinny dipping, Duncan was reminded of homecoming before Lilly died. But _his_ Veronica wouldn't, no couldn't, have done that. It was why he'd guessed Weevil. Because, as ludicrous as that thought was, the reality was even harsher. _Logan and Veronica? Logan and Veronica. Logan and Veronica!_ The pattern repeated itself in his mind on a loop.

While in Tijuana, the guys went to all sorts of bars and saw things that Duncan was sure he could go a lifetime without seeing again. But through it all, he couldn't shake the image of Logan with Veronica. _My Veronica._ He wasn't sure what he was going to do about it, but he was certain they would both pay. She was his; they were perfect together. Duncan couldn't let Logan ruin her sweetness—her innocence—that belonged to him. He didn't care if being with her was 'wrong'. _Who are they to tell me whom I can or can't have…_ He thought as he passed out in Troy's dad's car.

"Wake up!" Luke yelled, startling Duncan awake.

"I've spent the past forty minutes listening to Duncan dry-heave so you could buy a deformed piñata?" Troy sounded pissed.

"Dude, everything was closed. It was the cheapest souvenir I could find." Luke laughed. Duncan could hear an edge to his friend's voice, but was too busy in his own head to care.

"All right. Have we had our fill of Tijuana?" Troy asked.

"No." Duncan said.

"Yes." Luke said at the same time.

Troy started the car and headed back toward the border.
Maybe Troy's mistaken. Veronica would never do that with Logan. He knew, of course, that Logan would fuck anything that walked his way. But he didn't believe Veronica would do that. Veronica loved him; he knew it. And she hated Logan. No, he was sure that Troy was mistaken. Then again, he thought, Logan was asking an awful lot of questions about Veronica while we were surfing the morning after Homecoming. If something had happened between them the night before, it would definitely explain Logan's renewed interest in Veronica. But he'd asked about the liquid X…

FLASHBACK

Duncan didn't want to go to Shelly's party but Logan had insisted. They all needed this, Logan had said. Let loose. Forget. Duncan knew that Logan had two doses of liquid-X on him; they'd talked about it on the way to the party. Duncan had never dabbled in recreational drug use like Logan and Lilly, but he thought tonight might be a good night to start.

"Logan, you don't need both those doses, do you? Care to share?" Duncan whispered into Logan's ear after taking a walk through the party. "I could use a little something to take the edge off."

Logan started at him blankly, then smirked. "Of course DK. Enjoy." He said, passing him a small vial and slapping him on the back. "Remember, if you're going to take that try to keep the booze to a minimum or you'll just pass out instead of rolling. And you'll fuck anything on this stuff, so if you're gonna hookup you might want to save it for another time." Duncan pocketed the vial as Logan passed along his sage advice.

END FLASHBACK

After hours of letting the information that Troy had imparted churn around in his head, Duncan decided that he would call Logan when they got back and find out what was going on. This all had to be a big mistake. He'd never told Logan that he still had feelings for Veronica or why he had broken up with her, but he just couldn't believe Logan would betray him like that. No, neither of them would do that to him. Veronica loved him; they belonged together. He was certain of it.

"All we want to do is eat your brains, We're not unreasonable, I mean, no one's gonna eat your eyes, All we want to do is eat your brains."

"Wha..." Veronica startled awake to the strange song. She looked around the room and saw Logan's phone lit up on the kitchen island. The phone went silent as she made her way into the kitchen, only to start up the strange ringtone again. She grabbed his phone to see who was calling.

"Zombie Donut." She said out loud, staring at the caller ID. Is this supposed to be Duncan?

She decided to answer the call, "Logan's phone." She said in as chipper a voice as she could muster for three in the morning.

"Veronica?" Duncan's incredulous voice came across the line.

"Yeah, it's me. Logan's asleep. What do you need?" Veronica could hear Duncan clear his throat.

"I need to talk to him. That's why I called him." He snapped at her.

Veronica held the phone away and walked over to Logan. "Logan, Duncan's on the phone for you." She shook him gently until his eyes peeked open.

"Donut? Why is he calling?" Logan asked groggily, his eyes drifting back shut.
"He says he needs to talk to you…"

"Logan, LOGAN! Get on the phone." Duncan's voice shouted from the phone hanging by Veronica's side.

Logan slowly reached for the phone and Veronica helped him sit up. His body was clearly stiff from falling asleep in an awkward position.

"Yeah, Duncan. I'm here. What's up man?" Logan asked, pausing and then shaking his head.

"I guess, where you at?" Logan looked up at Veronica and mimed writing. She retrieved a pad of paper and a pen, which Logan began writing on.

"Okay, well it's going to be at least an hour… Yeah, yeah, I'll hurry." He hung up the phone.

"So… I need to go pick up Duncan at the USA Border Grille and Diner." Logan frowned, not looking at Veronica.

"Logan you aren't in any shape to drive!" She told him, alarmed.

"Yeah, I know that…” he looked up at her, "I was kinda hoping you would drive." His lips curved in a crooked smile.

"Ugh! Fine, let's go. Um… you need to put on a shirt… and jeans. I don't want Duncan getting the wrong idea."

Ten minutes later, dressed and caffeinated, they headed out to pick up Duncan.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I hope you all like Logan's fun ringtones. I have Logan’s text message alert tone for Veronica (Law & Order's Dun Dun) but I need a good ringtone for her. Feel free to leave suggestions in comments, to PM me, or on Tumblr.
Chapter Notes

A/N: Thank you so much to Bondopoulos and BryroseA for editing, conversation, and for holding my hand when I doubted my decisions or needed help fixing them. You are both amazing! Before Bondopoulos got her hands on this chapter the format was... ugh, not good. For the time, effort, and painful Word complications I owe her so much!

More thanks to everyone who had been reviewing, commenting, following, favoriting, leaving kudos. It really is like my birthday every time I get one of those notifications.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 6 – We're Nothing But Strangers

By the time Logan and Veronica arrived at the diner, Duncan was positively seething. He'd spent the better part of the last hour pacing the diner parking lot trying to get a grip on himself.

Why would Veronica be with Logan at three o'clock in the morning? Why was she answering his phone? Were they sleeping together?

"Arghh!" Duncan yelled, kicking the side of the building for the fifth time.

"Duncan, dude! You're going to burst a blood vessel if you don't chill the fuck out." Troy called out from where he and Luke were waiting.

"How are you so calm, man? Your dad's car was stolen!" Luke asked Troy.

"I'm resigned to my fate. They're sending me to boarding school when they get back anyway, so what do I care? I'm more concerned about Duncan; seriously man, why are you so worked up? It isn't even your car." Troy asked Duncan, confusion etched on his face.

Duncan turned to glare at Troy and Luke, "Veronica answered Logan's phone." He said, and then he kicked the building again.

"Logan, is that Duncan?" Logan heard Veronica ask. He tried to pull himself out of sleep, but his mind was resisting. He felt her gently shake his arm to wake him up.

"Wha...?" He groggily responded, blinking his eyes. He turned the direction she was looking. "Is that Duncan?" He said alarmed.

"I think so." Veronica said, pulling to a stop a few yards away from where Duncan was getting violent with the wall.

"Duncan! What are you doing?!" Logan shouted out his window as it rolled down.
The door behind Veronica opened suddenly, startling him. "Hey, Veronica. Logan." Luke said as he climbed into the back of the Xterra. "Duncan's been like that since he talked to you guys earlier."

"Luke? Duncan didn't mention you were with…" Logan trailed off as Troy climbed in after Luke.

Logan glared at Troy who looked about as pleased to see Logan, as Logan was to see him. Troy's expression changed to vaguely amused as he turned to look at Veronica. Logan fumed.

"So DK went to TJ with you, huh? Lemme guess, you told Duncan some version of Friday night's events?" The edge in Logan's voice could have cut glass.

"Well if by 'version' you mean told him what I saw, then yeah, I did." Troy smirked at Logan and then leaned around to look at Veronica. "Found yourself another rich dude, eh, Mars?" His eyes sparkled with delight at his taunt.

"You can get the fuck out of my truck." Logan sneered.

Veronica reached across and placed her hand on Logan's forearm. "It's okay, I don't care what he thinks. But one of us needs to go get Duncan and I'm pretty sure he's not going to want it to be me." She said in a low voice.

Logan nodded and gingerly let himself out of the truck.

"Duncan? What are you doing? You're going to hurt yourself if you keep kicking that wall." Logan tried to keep his tone light.

"What is going on with you and Veronica?" Duncan turned to stare at Logan, his features twisted with anger, fists clinched at his side.

"Going on? Ronnie and I are trying to be friends again. Is that not okay with you?" Logan was truly taken aback by Duncan's intensely emotional response. It hadn't been since before Lilly's death that he had seen much of any reaction from his best friend. Admittedly, in the last two days he had seen several small signs of life from Duncan, but nothing like this. What could be igniting this massive change, he thought.

"Veronica hates being called Ronnie!" Duncan yelled, kicking the wall again.

"Wow man, I know she doesn't like it. You don't need to kick that wall over it though." Logan held his hands out in surrender, trying to calm Duncan down.

"Then why do it?" Duncan's voice had taken on a pleading tone that made Logan think he isn't only talking about bad nicknames.

"She was one of my best friends. I've missed her. Don't you miss her DK?" Logan asked, trying to find the root of what was going on with Duncan. But Duncan dismissively turned away and headed for the truck. Logan followed, unsure of what had just happened.

Duncan approached the front seat but Logan didn't think Veronica would want to sit next to Duncan for the long trip home. Logan placed his hand on Duncan's shoulder only to have it shoved off as Duncan whipped around.

"What now?!" Duncan shouted.

"Take the back." Logan told him, shaking his head and offering no alternative. Logan shouldered himself in front of Duncan and got into the front seat. At Veronica's concerned look he mouthed
Logan remained quiet for the drive back to Neptune, not wanting to potentially start a fight with Duncan. They'd had little sleep, and he wasn't certain what was going on. Drifting in and out of a restless sleep seemed the safer option. On top of all the drama, he was really starting to hurt again.

Veronica watched as Logan stiffly approached Duncan who was ranting outside the diner. She didn't think Duncan would hurt him, but Logan couldn't deal with anything other than sparing of the verbal variety in his current condition.

"So, you and Logan, huh?" Luke asked from the backseat.

"She moves fast man; gotta stay true to that reputation." Troy snickered.

What was I thinking going out with that asshole? "Sorry to disappoint but Logan and I are just friends. Thanks for that, by the way, Troy. I don't think we would have put aside our differences if you hadn't pulled your little clothing theft." She smiled back at him sweetly. "And unless you want to find out if Logan's reputation for hitting first and asking questions later is true, I suggest you keep your mouth shut on the ride back to Neptune."

While Veronica would never admit it out loud, she was actually a little grateful to Troy for his actions. If Troy hadn't been a complete douchebag, Veronica never would have discovered what Aaron was doing to Logan.

Trauma may not be the best foundation for renewing her friendship with Logan, but she hoped it might be enough to at least dissolve their war. The truce they had established over the past two days felt tenuous. While she wasn't about to sit idly by and let anyone be abused—let alone someone she used to consider a friend—the hurt of the past year couldn't be erased. If Lilly's death had had taught Veronica anything, it was that she couldn't predict how others would behave in the face of a crisis. Even though he had recently come to her aid, it would take a lot more than a skinny dip and a sleepover for Logan to earn back her trust. The fact remained that when the going got tough, Logan had turned on her. Guess we'll see on Monday...

A movement outside the car caught her attention and she turned to see Duncan walking awkwardly toward the car with Logan slowly trailing behind him. Duncan approached the front passenger door and was getting ready to open it when Veronica saw Logan place his hand on Duncan's shoulder. Duncan's eyes narrowed in anger as he whipped around. She could see Logan shaking his head and indicating the backseat.

"I can't believe Logan is letting you drive the beast." Luke said nervously, redirecting Veronica's attention.

"Um… yeah." She looked back at Logan and Duncan. "He was drinking earlier… so we thought it would be better if I drove," she lied. "I found him passed out earlier next to a bottle of Jack. Unluckily for him, his bedside table caught his fall." She fabricated quickly to explain his bruised face. None of them would be suspicious of Logan drinking, and she certainly couldn't tell them the real reason he couldn't drive.

Both doors opened; Duncan climbed into the backseat and Logan into the front. Veronica quickly looked away from the glare Duncan gave her. She looked to Logan for guidance, but he only shook his head. "Later" he mouthed, motioning for her to start driving.

An hour of awkward and stilted conversation later, Veronica pulled up to the Kane estate.
"Logan, a word." Duncan said as he exited the truck, slamming the door behind him.

Veronica watched as a tired and resigned Logan slowly climbed out of the seat next to her. She heard the door behind her open and assumed the other two boys has also gotten out of the truck, so she was surprised when she felt a tap on her shoulder.

"Veronica?" Luke said hesitantly.

"What can I do for you Luke?" She asked stifling a yawn.

"There is a bit more to all of this than just the car being stolen…” Luke let the sentence drop.

"All right, let's hear it." She waved her hand for him to continue.

Great, just great… Logan was so done with this night. Or was it already morning? Whatever, he thought to himself. Logan followed Duncan up to the front door, moving even more slowly than earlier. I really need to get some sleep.

"Logan, a word." Duncan said as he exited the truck, slamming the door behind him.

Logan was so done with this night. Or was it already morning? Whatever, he thought to himself. Logan followed Duncan up to the front door, moving even more slowly than earlier. I really need to get some sleep.

"Tell me right now, are you fucking Veronica?" Duncan whispered harshly.

What? Logan couldn't believe it. Not that he hadn't ever thought about Veronica that way; she'd had a place in his rotation even when they were enemies. Maybe especially while we were enemies. But it was Veronica, she was his best friend, turned enemy, turned…whatever they were now. He was so caught off guard by Duncan's question that he didn't answer for a moment. He knew he must have looked like a fool, standing there with his mouth hanging open.

"I... no… God, dude. No, I'm not fucking Veronica. She and I are trying to be friends again." He was completely taken by surprise at Duncan's rage. He'd expected some choice words from Duncan about him and Veronica trying to reestablish their friendship. Certainly something had gone very wrong between Veronica and Duncan, and that was before her father had mishandled Lilly's murder. But this… Is Duncan jealous?

"You call skinny dipping and being asleep together at three in the morning being just friends?" Duncan asked, incredulous.

"The skinny dipping was not planned and would have been a lot less questionable if that asshole you call a friend, Troy, hadn't taken off with her clothes. Nothing happened... What do you take me for DK?" Duncan quirked his brow at Logan. "Fine, maybe I would do it, but do you really think that of Veronica? After a year of being a complete asshole to her, now she'd let me fuck her… really? If you think that, you don't know her at all!" Logan could feel his anger pushing through his exhaustion.

"You're the one always calling her a slut…” Duncan threw back at him.

"You know I made all that shit up." Logan sighed, his guilt overriding the blissful anger.

"Do I? Maybe not. What were you doing with her at three in the morning, Logan? She answered your phone. You both clearly hadn't been awake. Just having a slumber party? Braiding each other's hair?" Duncan still looked furious.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but since when do you care about... well, anything? You've hardly spoken to her in a year. I told you we're just friends—well, trying to be at least—and you're completely freaking out. Yesterday you couldn't have cared less when I mentioned her to you."
Shaking his head, Logan thought back to their conversation at the beach. Duncan had barely batted an eye at Logan's questions about Veronica's welfare.

"Fuck you, Logan! She's… She's…" Duncan sputtered.

"She's what Duncan? What is she?" Logan snapped at his friend shaking his head. "She's my friend; I can't believe I forgot that for so long." Leaning in close, Logan said much more quietly, "She's not your girlfriend anymore Duncan, you need to get it together." Not waiting for a response, Logan turned on his heel a little quicker than he meant to and grimaced through the pain in his back as he made his way to the truck.

Logan settled into the passenger's seat and fastened his seatbelt. "Let's get out of here." He sighed. Logan knew that he was exhausted from lack of sleep and all that he had gone through the day before, but he'd never expected to feel so drained from two discussions with his best friend. He wasn't even sure that his two exchanges with Duncan's could be considered discussions. He groaned loudly and stared out the window as Veronica drove.

"What's going on with Duncan?" She asked after a few minutes.

"Honestly?" Logan rubbed his face with both palms, letting his fingers drag his mouth open as he yawned.

"Preferably, unless you can make up something more entertaining than reality. You know how I like to be amused." Veronica joked.

"I really have no clue what that display back there was all about." He gestured dramatically. "Troy told him about us skinny dipping and he was pretty upset about you answering my phone in the middle of the night. But when I tried to explain he wasn't exactly receptive. I think he just has the wrong idea. I'll try to talk to him again tomorrow when he's had a little time to calm down. He hasn't shown this much emotion since Lilly died. I'm just not sure what's going on." He yawned again and leaned his head back against the window. "Can we just go back and get some more sleep? And I need some more ibuprofen, my back is killing me."

"Yeah, I think more sleep would be good." She smiled at him.

Logan watched as Veronica carefully navigated her way back to her apartment. She braked slowly and accelerated smoothly, both of which he was grateful for. The discomfort that started as a dull ache on the drive back to Neptune was now full-blown pain.

When they arrived back at Sunset Cliffs, Logan carefully made his way into her apartment. "Just toss me another blanket and I'll be good to go." He called to Veronica who was headed to her room.

She came back into the living room, dressed in her pajamas from earlier, holding a pillow and blanket. "Logan, I want you to take my bed. It's more comfortable than the couch and with how much you must hurt…" her words trailed off.

"I'll sleep in your bed if you sleep with me." He tried to leer at her but they were both too tired for the innuendo to hit home. Veronica snorted and shook her head, setting the bedding and a bottle of painkillers on the end of the couch before walking back to her bedroom. Once he heard her door shut, he stripped down to his boxers and pulled on his previously discarded flannel bottoms. He dry swallowed a few pills as he sank into the old couch. It wasn't as comfortable as his bed, and probably not as comfortable as Veronica's, but he didn't feel right taking her bed. And he hadn't pushed the issue of them sharing because, unlike his bed at home, Veronica's bed really wasn't big enough for them both. He laid his head on the pillow and immediately was enveloped in her scent. What is that?
A few hours and some much needed sleep later, Veronica woke up feeling somewhat refreshed. She didn't feel much better about her current situation, but with uninterrupted sleep she had gained some perspective. Her and Logan's middle of the night run to the border hadn't gone anywhere close to the way she had expected. Though, if she thought about it, nothing in the last few days had. *Maybe I should just throw in the towel and embrace what comes at me,* she thought fleetingly. *Yeah right!* She snorted to herself, climbing out of bed.

Veronica quietly opened her door and tiptoed down the hall to check on Logan. He was still asleep on the couch with Backup curled against his chest. *Logan Echolls is spooning my dog; now I've seen it all.* Neither looked like they could possibly be comfortable, but Logan's face was relaxed and peaceful.

Trying her best not to wake them, she headed into the kitchen and set about making coffee. Logan hadn't told her much about his confrontations with Duncan, but neither discussion seemed to have ended well. Both parties had been yelling, and Duncan had left looking so angry. She had never seen him look like that before.

"Good morning." Logan's voice, deep with sleep, called out from the living room.

"Afternoon actually." She turned and smiled at him. "Coffee?"

"Yeah, thanks. So what's the plan for today, Mars?" He was rubbing the sleep from his eyes with one hand and shifting Backup with the other.

"I thought we'd have this coffee here, maybe something to eat… I have a study date with Wallace later and some filing to catch up on at the office. You're welcome to stay here while I'm gone." She hoped he would. Veronica wasn't thrilled at the prospect of, yet again, explaining Logan's presence to Wallace. Though Veronica was surprised to find that, after a few hours of sleep, she wasn't particularly angry with Logan for asking about Shelly's party the night before. *Something to think on later…*

"I think I'll tag along. I have some studying of my own to do." Logan lifted himself off the couch and headed for the bathroom.

He was still moving stiffly, but Veronica thought he looked a little bit better this morning. The coffee was ready, so she pulled down two mugs and added cream and sugar. *I hope he still takes his coffee the same way,* she thought idly, avoiding thinking about how she was going to deal with Wallace.

"Wanna learn how to make bacon?" Veronica asked as Logan came back into the kitchen/living room.

"What makes you think I don't already know how to make bacon?" Logan asked with a smirk. Of course he had no idea how to make bacon…

"I figure if you still can't make a grilled cheese, then you probably don't know how to make bacon. Or pancakes? Waffles maybe?" She laughed.

It was good to see her seeming relaxed and joking. He really wasn't sure how today would be. On top of their 'fight,' if one could call it that, over Shelly's party, they'd had to deal with Duncan. He was not looking forward to explaining that the reason Duncan was so upset was because he thought they were sleeping together. *I'm going to have to tell her, that should be fun.*
"Teach me Mars Wan Chefnobi. Teach me the ways of the little people who don't have personal chefs." Logan winked at her, hoping she would remember how much he hated the food his parents' chef made.

"He still doesn't make anything pronounceable, huh?" Veronica grinned at him.

"Nope, can't remember the last time I ate something at home that I recognized as food. So bacon and… I'm thinking pancakes. Think you can teach this child-of-movie-stars to actually do something domestic?"

Veronica's laughter was contagious and pretty soon they were both laughing so hard that tears were running down their cheeks. *I don't think I've laughed as much in the past year as I have in the last three days, even with an Aaron encounter.*

"I'm not sure I'm up for the challenge, but I'll die trying if it comes to that." She said in mock seriousness.

"It may come to that. One time I tried to make one of your grilled cheeses. The fire department may have been called." His whole body shuddered at the memory. He'd meant it to be funny but he could tell she knew better. *Shit.*

"When?" Veronica asked, all humor gone.

"A few months after the first time you made them for us."

"The time you told us you were going to see your mom in that off-Broadway play or when you had the flu?" She was too smart for her own good.

"The off-Broadway play, the flu was for something else…"

**FLASHBACK**

Logan sat alone in his room doing what he did most nights when Lilly wasn't around, playing video games. His girlfriend claimed to be busy studying with Veronica. They'd only been together a couple of months, but Logan had already caught her in more than a few lies about where she was and whom she was with. He tried not to let it bother him, but it did.

He tossed the controller down in frustration. *I'm such an idiot.* He started rummaging around under his bed to find the bottle of whiskey he kept hidden there. His hand had just felt the neck of the bottle when his phone started to the play the London Bach Choir singing *"You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes you just might find you get what you need.”* In his surprise, he'd smacked his head on the frame of the bed.

"Aaww, hold on, hold on, I'm coming." He said to no one.

He stared at the caller ID, *Deputy Ronnie.*

"Hello?" Logan said, a bit surprised and confused since she was supposedly busy 'studying' with Lilly.

"Logan… um… can I come over?" Her voice was barely above a whisper, and he could hear yelling in the background.

"Ronnie what's wrong? Where are you? Where's Lilly?" He fought the urge to whisper back.
"They're fighting again, but this time it's different…" Veronica choked on the last word.

"It's okay, I'm on my way. Can you meet me out front?"

He heard her hiccup before she replied, "Yeah."

"I'll be there soon." He told her, ending the call.

His parents were in LA for the next few days so he figured he'd just swipe the keys to the extra car they kept for Trina when she visited. He'd driven more than a few times and, despite only being thirteen—almost fourteen, he thought excitedly—he was sure he could get to Veronica's and back without a problem.

Veronica was sitting on the steps of her front porch when he arrived, her arms wrapped around her knees. When Logan pulled up in front of the driveway, she quickly scooped up her bag and ran to the car.

"Thank you." Veronica breathed as she wrapped her arms around his neck across the center console.

"Anything for you, Ronnie." Logan hugged her back and then gently shifted her back into her seat so he could resume driving. He got a good look at her before he started pulling out. She had tear tracks on her cheeks and her nose and eyes were red and puffy.

"Do you wanna tell me what happened?" Logan asked.

She took a deep breath, "We were eating dinner, dad and me. Mom came home… drunk, again. She had a bunch of groceries and started yelling at dad for making dinner when she had just picked up everything to cook." She sighed and wiped at her eyes. "So dad tried to get her to calm down and it just…" She shook her head and looked out the window.

"It's okay, I get it." Logan had seen Lianne Mars in one of those moods and he had plenty of experience with similar situations involving his own mother. "But where was Lilly? Why didn't you leave with her?" He asked, even though he suspected he already knew the answer.

"Lilly? Lilly wasn't as my house. Isn't she with you? I expected her to be with you when you picked me up." Veronica sniffled, but her words were getting steadier.

Logan sighed, "She told me she was studying with you tonight."

"Oh… maybe you misunderstood?" Veronica tried to soften what they both knew. Lilly had lied to both of them about her plans for that night.

"I think maybe we both did, huh?"

Veronica nodded, avoiding eye contact. "I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for. Let's get back to my place and make some popcorn and stay up late watching movies. Does that sound good?"

"Yeah, it does. Thank you. Hey, you shouldn't be driving!" She smacked him on the arm.

"What, I'm driving? I thought you were driving?" He flashed her a grin.

They made it safely back to Logan's house and had their movie night, both falling asleep on the big sofa. They were woken up the next morning by Logan's cell phone playing Nelly's Hot in Herre, Lilly's ringtone.
"Hey Lover! Are you awake yet?" Lilly purred over the phone.

"I am now Lil'. Did you have fun studying with Ronnie last night?" Logan asked, watching Veronica blink sleepy eyes at him. He quickly put his finger to her lips when she opened her mouth to speak.

"We had a blast hittin' the old books! So are you free? Let's go do something."

"Sorry Lil' I'm kinda busy, I'll call you later." Logan ended the call before she could respond.

Logan scooted toward Veronica, who had lain back down on the couch, and put his head on her shoulder. "She said she was with you last night…"

"I heard." She said, rubbing her hand up and down his arm that was thrown across her waist. "I'm sorry Logan. I know she cares about you…"

"Yeah, she really cares about me. Cares about both of us. How many times did you call her before you called me last night, Ronnie?" He looked up at her.

"Five."

"Do you have to go home or can we just watch movies all day? Maybe eat nothing but dessert?" Logan asked, sitting back up.

"Movies and dessert? I'm in!"

A week later a ticket arrived in the mail showing Logan driving through a red light in the 90905…

END FLASHBACK

Logan shook himself out of the memory. He didn't want Veronica to know about the punishment he had gotten for driving to get her. He didn't regret it. Never had. That had also been the first time he and Lilly broke up. Ironically, Lilly had broken up with him because she thought he was ditching her for another girl. But Logan was pretty sure the night and day he spent with Veronica was a lot more innocent than whatever—whoever—Lilly had been doing.

"Okay Mars, back to the cooking lesson. What have you got going on here?" Logan pointed to the pan with the bacon in it.

"That's bacon and this is a frying pan. Together they create tasty-deliciousness."

Chapter End Notes

A/N2: So we got to see Logan's ringtone for Veronica 1.0 but you'll have to wait a little longer to find out his current ringtone for her…
A/N: As always huge thanks go out to my betas Bondopolous and BryroseA! This chapter will wrap up the weekend and then it's back to school…

Chapter 7 - Your Shadow Weighs A Ton

Wallace was walking up the stairs to Mars Investigations when he heard an unexpected voice. Did V invite someone else to our study session? Last week they had made plans to get some serious cramming in today for their AP History exam. But she hadn't mentioned anyone meeting them.

Wallace pushed the door open to find Veronica laughing with… Logan?

"Hey Wallace, you made it. I hope you don't mind if Logan joins us; he has to take the same test." She had stopped laughing and was chewing on her lower lip. Wallace knew it was one of her nervous habits.

"Yeah, of course. How's it goin' man?" Wallace reached his hand out to Logan. Logan looked surprised, but accepted Wallace's hand. Logan shook his hand firmly, but not jackass aggressively like Wallace was expecting.

"Better than last time you saw me. I was kinda drunk and may have been rude." Logan smirked at Wallace.

"Uh hun, you were both of those things. And today?" Wallace looked at him skeptically. Richie rich had more of a reputation for being a giant asshole than for studying.

"Today, my good Wallace, I am going for amusing," Logan turned to wink at Veronica, "and academic."

Wallace watched as Veronica's serious expression shifted back to laughter. Apparently, the jackass was succeeding in at least one of his goals for the day; Veronica definitely looked amused.

Wallace tossed his bag on the floor at the end of the couch. Veronica had stacks of flashcards all over the coffee table and a textbook was open facing Logan. A few cartons of take-out were scattered around the office. They looked comfortable with each other and clearly had been there a while.

"Hey V, can we talk for a sec? In your dad's office." He jerked his thumb toward the office.

"Of course. Excuse us Logan." Wallace saw Veronica give Logan an apologetic smile as he headed into Mr. Mars' office.

After the door shut, Wallace turned to look at Veronica. "What happened to staying away from him? Did you see his face? All bruised from what? Fighting? And the guy is psychotic! He used a crowbar to bash in your headlights." Wallace tried to keep his voice down as he gestured toward the
"I said I'd take it under advisement, and I did. It's complicated. I can't really talk about it, but I promise you everything is fine. Logan has mostly been on his best behavior." Veronica had already turned, heading back into the other room.

"I just don't get it." How can she stand to be around this guy after everything he's done? Wallace shook his head and began to follow her to the door when Veronica turned back around.

"I know you don't and there is nothing I can tell you that will change that. Give him a chance or don't. But for today he's our study buddy." She shrugged, opened the door, and headed back to the couch.

Wallace hesitated in the office long enough to hear Logan whisper, "Veronica, should I go? I don't want to cause a problem." Wallace didn't wait to hear Veronica's response. He decided that he was being rude, and while rude may be the norm for the Logan Echollses of the world, it was not Wallace's way.

"All right Echolls, I guess we're cool until V says otherwise." Wallace sat on the couch next to Veronica and reached for a pile of flashcards. "Let's kill this test."

An hour later, Wallace was feeling overwhelmed by all the information he'd reviewed. He was grateful when Veronica's phone started to ring.

"It's my dad." She held up the phone and headed for her dad's office, shutting the door behind her.

"Can I ask you something?" Logan asked. He'd turned very serious in the few seconds since Veronica had left the room.

Wallace nodded, "What's on your mind?" Wallace watched as Logan pulled his shirtsleeves down over his hands and waited for him to speak again.

"Friday night, you said something about Veronica having been hurt." Logan looked up from his lap. Wallace nodded at the clearly distressed 09er sitting across from him. "Do you know what happened?" Logan said in a voice so soft and small that Wallace almost couldn't hear him.

"Naw, man. She's just said some things that made me think, you know… Why don't you ask her?" Wallace shook his head, thinking about the party flyer and the resulting conversation.

"I did…" Logan looked back at his lap.

Wallace snorted. Bet that went really well. Out loud he said, "And what did she say?"

"What do you think? She shut me down; said she had no idea what I was talking about." Logan sighed.

Wallace nodded, "Kinda assumed you were part of whatever happened to her, to be honest."

"I can see why you'd think that." Logan frowned and then turned pleading eyes to Wallace. "Look I know you have absolutely no reason to believe or trust me, but… God she is going to kill me. But later, when I asked again, Veronica got really upset and said something about not remembering anything after having a drink at a party last year. People had GHB at that party and I know that she woke up there the next morning. I know something happened but she won't say what, though I can guess…" Logan paled and shifted in his chair. "When I pushed her about it she had a... um, like a panic attack. It was the second time I've seen her do that in the past few days."
Wallace was shocked. He'd had a pretty strong sense that something bad had happened to Veronica, but she had never confided any details to him beyond generic warnings. The rest of what Logan said started to hit him.

"Panic attacks? You saw her have not one, but two? What did you do?" Wallace sneered harshly.

"Well, the first time…" Logan was back to pulling down his sleeves and twisting them around. "My dad…" Logan's voice cracked. "Look, it's complicated, but no one hurt her and she was fine after a few minutes. The second time, like I said, was when I tried to get her to tell me what happened to her. I'm surprised that, after everything I just told you, the panic attack is what you're most upset about." Logan's mouth rose slightly on one side as his eyes rolled up to meet Wallace's.

"Give me a minute; I'm getting there." Wallace took a deep breath and looked at the door of Mr. Mars' office. He could hear Veronica talking and moving around in the office. Assured that she wasn't wrapping up her conversation, he turned back to Logan. "You said you know she woke up there, not that she said she did… And you know people had GHB at that party?" Logan nodded in confirmation, his eyes glassy and intense.

"You know these things because you were there." It wasn't a question.

Logan nodded again, "I remember her acting weird that night. But I may have been um… preoccupied with my own issues. I asked around and found out that she was seen leaving the next morning. They said… well, that she was a mess. I don't know what to do. I don't want to upset her again but if someone... I want to try to make it right."

Wallace stared at Logan, really looking at him for the first time. This guy wasn't the cruel ringleader of the 09ers who he'd seen at school. He looked beyond miserable and sincerely distressed about what might have happened to someone he wasn't even friends with anymore. Maybe the seventh grader Veronica described as her best friend is still in there after all.

"You're right, I have no reason to trust you, but for some reason it seems like Veronica has decided to let you back in her life. And either you are a much better actor than either of your parents or you're worried about my girl, too." Wallace stood up and awkwardly patted Logan on the shoulder. "I get the feeling there is more to this than you're telling me, and we're not done talking about this. Not by a long shot. But I'm not going to say anything to V. For now."

Logan looked relieved and resigned. "All right, thank you. Really, thank you."

"Now get your shit together, we have one more thing to talk about." Wallace smiled tightly.

"We do?" Logan raised his eyebrows.

"What are we going to do to Troy?"

Logan smiled, "I'm sure between the two of us we can come up with something."

"Dad, you really don't need to worry. I'm fine for one more night. Get the bad guy and I'll hold the fort." Veronica told her father confidently. "I'd better get back out there. Wallace needs all the help he can get."

"Okay honey. Be good and don't just eat ice cream," Keith told her.

"No promises. Love you, dad."
"Love you, too, kid." And the call disconnected.

"Alright boys, are you both still alive?" Veronica walked back out to the outer room of the office to find Logan and Wallace sitting quietly, each holding a stack of flashcards. "Who are you and what have you done with Wallace and Logan?" She asked, disturbed to find them working in companionable silence.

"What? You know I'm capable of being civil." Logan smirked at her, but his eyes lacked their usual mischievous glint.

Wallace leaned back against the couch. "I am as much of a marshmallow as you are, Mars. And your boy here needs more help than I do." Veronica quirked an eyebrow as they shared a look. They're up to something.

"Okay, you two are freaking me out." Veronica shook her head as she moved to join Wallace on the couch. "In other news, I have a case." This was directed at Wallace, but then she observed Logan with interest. "Hmm… but I think you could be a valuable asset."

"Setting a honey trap?" Logan asked her with mock seriousness and a wink.

"Actually…" She spent the next ten minutes filling them in on all that Luke had shared with her. His debt to Zigman, the trip to TJ, the drugs in the piñata.

"He claims Duncan and Troy had no idea what he was up to. Logan, he said you were originally supposed to go on that trip…" she let the sentence hang.

"Yeah, I was. Two things before you ask: one – I did know that Luke was picking up illegal stuff in Mexico, and two – I had no idea when Duncan called us to get him that he was with them."

Veronica watched as Logan tugged at his sleeves but maintained eye contact; she was pretty sure she believed him.

She nodded, "I want to start by seeing if we can find Troy's dad's car. It has a security system but we can't have it activated without filing a police report. Let's see what we can dig up in the mean time."

Wallace headed for the computer on Veronica's desk while she pulled out her laptop.

"What can I do?" Logan asked, moving to sit on the couch next to Veronica.

"How are you at filing, sweet cheeks?" She asked, playfully slapping his unbruised cheek.

"Who am I, William Powell?" Logan asked, offended.

"Ha! You wish. He played the detective. If anyone's Nick, it's me; you, doll face, are Nora."

Veronica quipped at him and he batted his eyelashes at her.

"Who does that make me?" Wallace asked.

Veronica and Logan shared a look. "Shaggy." They said in unison.

"You two are so weird together." Wallace shook his head. "And speaking of together, don't think I missed that you two had a little sleepover… again."

A few hours later, Logan and Veronica made their way back to the apartment. Logan knew that Keith wasn't expected back until late the next day, but he was worried about his own homecoming. Even if he put it off until Monday, it wasn't going to be pleasant. Logan had just locked the door
behind them when his cell phone chirped.

From Asshole to Logan Echolls, 7:14pm
Heading to LA tonight, mother back tomorrow afternoon

From Logan Echolls to Asshole, 7:15pm
Still working on project, home tomorrow

Logan sighed with relief. Aaron was headed to LA and he would probably stay for at least a couple of days.

"Good news?" Veronica asked him.

"Yeah, you could say that. Aaron is headed to LA." He tried to be enthusiastic but just couldn't summon it.

"Oh, of course. Um… If you want I can just pack up the extra food for you to take home with you. I'm sure you want to sleep in your own bed…” She sounded disappointed. Is she disappointed?

"Actually, he didn't say when he was leaving, and to be honest I don't want to risk it. If it's okay, I would rather just stay with you again tonight. And I'm still not feeling great about driving; I was hoping you would drive me to school in the morning." He kept his eyes down, not wanting to reveal how much he wanted to spend more time with her.

"If you don't want to risk it…” Veronica smiled shyly. "Besides dinner, what do you want to do? We finished studying."

"Can we take Backup down to the beach? I'd kinda like to stretch out and walk around a bit."

"That actually sounds really good."

Logan and Veronica put their gyros and salad in the fridge to eat after their walk on the beach. If Veronica was honest with herself, she was feeling pretty nervous. She had a lot on her mind that she wanted to discuss with him, but she wasn't sure how to broach the subject.

"Logan?"

"Veronica?"

"Um… I want to ask you something but I don't want…” Veronica looked out at the surf trying to find the right words. "Have you ever thought about turning him in?" She blurted it out before she could stop herself. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry—it's none of my business." She flopped down onto the cold sand.

"It's okay. I've never really talked about this with anyone," Logan took a deep breath and sat down next to her. "Turning him in? No, I've seen him pay people off, so no I never really considered that. It's only eighteen more months. You saw a bad day, but this isn't really an everyday thing."

"Logan, come on! You said earlier that this time wasn't that bad. All of those times you were 'sick' or taking 'special trips' - I may have been blind but I'm not stupid. How many of those were actually because you were too hurt to come to school?" She stared into his eyes, her mouth drawn into a tight line across her face.

"I'm very healthy and not particularly fond of visiting either of my parents on set," was all he said.
But it was enough; it only confirmed what Veronica had suspected. Aaron Echolls was beating Logan on a regular basis, and badly enough that he'd missed school at least once a month for almost as long as she had known him.

"I want to do something." She said softly.

"Ronnie…" Logan sighed, "What is there to do? I can't leave until I'm eighteen. Even then, I don't have access to the first tier my trust until I 'complete high school'." He emphasized with quote fingers. "I wouldn't have any way to support myself other than bumming off people. Not to mention that my trust isn't irrevocable; Aaron can change the terms at any time. I can deal until then."

"What if I could give you some options? Options that wouldn't mean having to live like the rest of us?" She smirked at him.

"I'd listen. But seriously, it isn't a death sentence…"

She hoped he was right. "Okay, I'm getting hungry and I think Backup is done running around. Let's head back."

When Logan stood up, he reached for Veronica, and she could see the strain in his face. He was feeling better, but the cuts and bruises were still hindering his movement. She was determined to find options to get him away from Aaron. She couldn't imagine leaving him to this for eighteen more months even if he had been dealing with it for almost that many years.

They made their way back to the apartment mostly in silence, Veronica's mind spinning with possible ways to help Logan. She unlocked the door and let Logan and Backup in before her, so lost in thought that she jumped at the sound of Logan's voice.

"Veronica, the answering machine-thingy is blinking." Logan pointed out as he headed for the refrigerator to retrieve their dinner.

Veronica pushed the play button, "Hi, Keith, it's me. I might be a little late to dinner since I came into work—Oh, wait a minute. Um, I'm sorry. I'm just going to call your cell."

"Who was that? Her voice was familiar." Logan said. Veronica fiddled with the phone and put her finger to her lips, shushing him.

"Hi, you've reached Rebecca James in the Counseling Office at Neptune High School. I'm away—" Veronica cut off the call.

"It was Ms. James."

"As in 'Student Counselor' Becky?" Logan looked incredulous; "Your dad has a date with Becky?"

Veronica just shook her head and dialed a number into the phone. "Dad, when you get this you need to call your date for tonight and let her know you're still out of town. Love you." And she ended the call.

Without comment, Logan passed her a gyro and the bowl of extra tomatoes they had ordered.

Logan watched Veronica while they ate. She seemed subdued in a way that didn't align with the ferocity he had seen in her eyes when she asked what he wanted to do about Aaron. As far as he knew, Keith Mars was still married to Veronica's mother, waste of space though she might be. *Is this the first time she's heard of him dating?*
"Veronica?" She looked up at him a little dazed. "Did you know your dad was dating?"

"Hmmm… um… No, this is the first I'm hearing of it. But mom, Lianne, she's been gone – a while now." Veronica stabbed an olive on her plate.

Logan thought about the last time he knew for sure that Mrs. Mars had been around. *Had to be around the time they moved into this place.*

"But it makes sense I guess. Before he left for this trip, my dad pulled out a box of her things for me to go through." Veronica abandoned her fork and walked to her room. A few minutes later she emerged with a filing box. "He wanted me to pick out anything I wanted to keep."

Logan watched her set the box on the counter and stoically began to pull things out: a framed picture, a small envelope, and some other items. *What kind of mother leaves when her daughter's best friend has been murdered?* Even his, habitually absent, mother had been there more for him than Lianne Mars had been for Veronica. The guilt over how he had treated her overwhelmed him again. *Her best friend died, her father lost his job, her mother left, and we were terrible to her…*

"Hey, look at this, a safe deposit box key?" Veronica held a brass key up to Logan.

"Does it say which bank?" He asked her.

"Neptune National, that's downtown." Veronica told him, looking at the small envelope the key had been inside.

"What do you want to do?" Logan didn't know anything about how safe deposit boxes worked, but he assumed that the person who rented the box would need to be present to open it.

"I can make a death certificate and get them to let me open it." Her eyes had that shine in them he had come to recognize as 'Veronica on a case.' It was hot, but also a little scary.

"Really? You can do that?" He didn't doubt her ability, but was still surprised.

"Piece of cake." She smiled. "Ooo, cake. Did you order any dessert?"

"You haven't finished your dinner and you're already thinking about dessert?" He laughed.

"Have you met me? Of course I'm thinking about dessert. But seriously… you ordered dessert, right?" Veronica's brow furrowed and she glared at him.

"Hmmm… I dunno. Will loukoumades work?" He smiled, holding up another container.

"Um…fried dough with cinnamon and honey?" She asked, grabbing the box. "Yeah, I think I can work with that, but there's only eight in here. What are you going to have?" She maintained her glare until Logan presented a second container with a big grin.

Full and a little tired, Logan moved to the couch to watch some TV and relax. He watched Veronica flip through the channels while he thought about what he wanted to do next. Tomorrow he could go back home and not have to worry about Aaron for a few days. But when it really came down to it, Aaron wasn't the biggest bad on his list of problems for tomorrow. School was going to be interesting.

So much had changed in the last three days that Logan felt like his head was still spinning. He and Veronica were rebuilding their friendship, she knew his darkest secret, and he was pretty sure he knew a big one of hers. But how would they handle everyone?
"About tomorrow…" Logan tried to find the words but found he didn't quite know what to say.

"Tomorrow, yes? Are we going to go back to the status quo?" Logan could hear the disappointment in Veronica's voice.

"Only if that's what you want. As far as I'm concerned, fuck em." He smiled, hoping that she felt the same way.

"Fuck em, hmmm… sounds apropos considering what you've been saying about me for the last year." Much to his relief, she winked at him. Then the good humor in her expression slid a bit, "It's been different, um… nice? This," Veronica waved her hand between them, "I don't want to go back."

"Good, me neither. I do want to warn you though, I'm pretty sure Troy has been telling people a rather exaggerated version of Friday night. And he knows we were together on Saturday night, too." He rubbed the back of his neck and shifted his gaze to the floor. "And there's Duncan… I didn't tell you before but he accused me of sleeping with you, though he used more colorful language. That was part of what he was so upset about." Logan pushed his fingers through his hair drawing his eyes back up to meet Veronica's. "I denied it, of course, and told Duncan that we were working on our friendship. I don't know if he believed me, but I don't think Duncan would say anything. Unfortunately, Troy overheard, and I don't think he'll keep quiet.

"Logan, even if Troy only told the truth it wouldn't matter; it all sounds pretty scandalous. Anyway with my 'reputation' it won't matter what anyone says. By the end of the day I'll have done you and half the guys at the dance. I'm used to it, but what about you?"

Logan couldn't believe she was worried about him. Veronica's reputation was completely false and entirely his fault. His, on the other hand… "Veronica, my reputation should be far worse than yours, hell I deserve worse than they even say. Believe it or not I've been a much bigger slut than I've let on. I'm just not much for bragging about my drunken misadventures. The difference is my 'promiscuity' just makes me cooler in their eyes." Logan sighed and buried his face in his hands, too embarrassed with himself to look at Veronica.

"Somehow I don't think people thinking that you hooked up with me is going to give you more street cred."

Logan couldn't take the tension in his limbs anymore and began pacing the living room. Why should either of us have to worry about such stupid shit?

"Veronica, I don't care. I. Just. Don't. Care. Most of those people aren't really my friends." He stopped to look directly at her, "they aren't worth caring about." Logan stared into Veronica's wide, surprised eyes for a moment before he resumed pacing. "Do you think any of them would care if they knew what my home life was really like? Think they would patch me up, smuggle me out, and stash me away? No! I've been horrible to you and you did all of that. I may be an asshole, but I'm not stupid. I screwed up, but now I know where my loyalties belong." He declared, finally sitting back down on the couch.

Veronica stared at Logan, her mouth slightly hanging open.

"What?" Logan asked her.

"Welcome back, Logan Echolls! God I've missed you." She launched herself across the couch and into his lap to hug him tightly. He only winced a little, but he was pretty sure she didn't notice.
Chapter Notes

A/N: This was a fun one to write (especially the beginning). Thanks to Bondopoulos & BryroseA for all the betaing this took. There is a particular bit that I was a bit nervous to write and Bry was my guinea pig – lets just say the words 'tasteful masturbation' came up… consider yourselves warned.

Thank you to everyone who has stuck with me this far - this was supposed to be a little one-shot that has grown completely out of my control. I have it plotted out through the end of season 1, so hopefully that will put any concerns you might have about me continuing it to rest :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 8 - I Watched It All In My Head, Perfect Sense

Logan woke up to the smell of coffee and the sound of soft humming. He let his eyes open just enough to see into the kitchen. He smiled when he saw that Veronica was moving around and humming to herself.

"You're not fooling anyone. I can see that your eyes are open." Veronica picked up a mug of steaming coffee and sat on the coffee table, holding the mug under Logan's nose. It smelled heavenly, "Good morning."

"Good morning." Logan closed his eyes and inhaled deeply before sitting up and accepting the mug. "What time is it?"

"6:30, do you want the first shower? And no Hollywood showers; there's only like fifteen minutes of hot water." Logan started to open his mouth, but Veronica stopped him with her hand. "No, I do not want to conserve water by showering with you. I already recycle." She grinned at him cheekily before heading back to the kitchen.

Logan couldn't help but laugh; that was exactly what he was going to say. "Come on Ronnie, what about Reduce and Reuse?" He said, taking a big sip of the coffee.

"Well, lookie here, I'm making us both lunch and putting it in one bag. Looks like I've already taken care of Reduce, sorry. Now, if you can come up with a good Reuse I'm all ears."

Logan knew she wasn't serious, but his sixteen-year-old brain couldn't resist. It quickly started providing him with all sorts of versions of Reuse, all of which involved her, of course. He decided he'd best take her up on getting the first shower. Maybe a cold one would be better… He quickly headed back to the bathroom while Veronica was busy finishing their lunches. Which is sexy, too, dammit.

Once in the bathroom Logan remembered that a few of his cuts still had bandages on them. Carefully
turning to see if he could get the bandages off by himself, Logan felt a sharp tearing sensation. Dammit, I'm going to need help. The pain helped push back some of the urgency he'd felt earlier, but Logan wasn't sure if he could handle Veronica touching him right now. He made one more attempt to reach the edge of the closest bandage when he heard a light knock on the door.

"Logan, do you need help with the bandages?" Veronica called through the door.

Logan groaned, kill me now, just put me out of my misery. He reached for the door, "Yeah, I need help." Thankfully, his voice came out steadier than he actually felt.

As Veronica's small hands carefully peeled the bandages away, gently inspecting each cut, his whole body tingled and he started to feel overheated.

"Hey, are you feeling okay? You're really warm and breathing a little fast." Veronica asked, reaching up to touch his forehead with the back of her hand.

"I'm fine, j-just um…" he stuttered not knowing what to say. He needed to get her out of there before she noticed the incredibly obvious boner he was sporting. He turned his back to her, "How do they look?"

She touched his back where the worst of the cuts had been, causing him to shudder. "Better. I don't see any signs of infection…"

"Good, okay good." He cut her off and began fumbling with the shower curtain. "Alright. Well, unless you've changed your mind about joining me, I'm getting naked now." Logan turned the water on, keeping his back to Veronica. A moment later he heard the click of the door shutting.

Logan decided that a cold shower wasn't going to fix the problem as quickly as the alternative. He cranked the hot water on and started running through his list of favorite scenarios. But his mind—and other things—wouldn't cooperate. His mind kept going back to Veronica in the ocean with him, Veronica in that little bikini, Veronica wrapped in his arms.

Fuck it! He decided, giving in.

Ten minutes later, Logan turned off the water feeling clean and much less tense. He dressed quickly and headed back out to the living room.

"How's your back feeling? I heard noises." Veronica's eyes were soft, but she quirked an eyebrow at him.

"My back's feeling much better as long as nothing touches it and I don't move too abruptly. I don't think I need bandages anymore. Thanks." Logan smiled and ignored her second comment, hoping she would let it go. Of course, being Veronica Mars, she pushed the issue.

"And the noises?" Veronica gave him side-eye as she walked past him into the living room.

"Well, you see Veronica, when a young man awakens in the morning he often finds himself…"

"Okaaay, no I get it, but did you have to use all the hot water?" Veronica called from down the hall.

Logan headed to the coffee pot to refill his mug and scoped out the cereal options. He did feel kind of bad for using so much of the hot water, but it had been necessary if he was going to function at school today. Pushing the thought away, he glanced at the brown paper bag sitting out on the counter. She made us lunch. He peeked into the bag and saw a container of fruit salad, a couple of sandwiches, pudding cups and two bottles of water. It was beyond adorable and he couldn't wait to eat this lunch with her.
Lunch…

Last night was a turning point for Logan. He hadn't spent very much time during the last year evaluating the people in his life. He had been a walking disaster, cruel and horrible to pretty much everyone. Getting wasted—fucking anyone willing. If Lilly could see me now… she'd probably be proud. Somehow that realization didn't make him feel better.

He stretched, trying to rid himself of the negative thoughts. His whole body ached. Another day of ibuprofen it is. The bottle wasn't where he remembered leaving it, so he headed back to Veronica's room. Thinking she was in the bathroom, he pushed her door open and came face to face with a completely naked Veronica.

"Oh my god, get out! What are you doing?" She scrambled for the towel she had laid out on her bed.

Logan groaned, quickly closing his eyes and turning around. "I needed the ibuprofen. I'm so sorry. I'm just going to hold my hand out," he pushed his hand out behind him, "and if you could put the bottle there I'll pretend this never happened and go back to my coffee."

The bottle of pills was instantly in his hand and her hands were gently pushing him out of the room by his biceps. Even pissed off, she remembered not to push on my back, he thought fondly. The image of her naked didn't hurt either. I'm going to need another shower…

Veronica grabbed her messenger bag and their lunch and set them by the door. After their second embarrassing event of the morning, Logan had escaped by taking Backup out for a walk. Boys… Thank God for dry shampoo and shower caps, shaking her head at the thought of Logan using up most of the hot water. She was definitely going to mention the hot water issue to her dad again.

When Logan returned with Backup, they headed out to the parking lot. "Le Baron or Xterra?" Logan asked.

"Um… I guess the Xterra; that way you can drop me off here after school. Think you'll be up for driving by the time school is out?"

"I think so. Guess we'll find out." Logan smiled, still not meeting her eyes, his cheeks a little pinker than usual.

Veronica climbed into the driver's seat while Logan put on his seat belt. "Logan, um…" her cheeks flamed red.

"Already forgotten. Let's pretend we got up, you made coffee, I took Backup for a walk, and now here we are. Okay?" Logan offered her.

"Well, I was willing to count it as the peek you said you would take at the beach, but I'm just as happy to forget it instead…" Veronica turned in the driver's seat to fully face Logan and clapped her hands together. "So what's the plan for when we get to school? Do we just act like this it's totally normal that we're arriving together and head for our lockers?" She asked.

"I think that makes sense. We'll be getting there a bit early," he said looking at the clock, "so maybe there won't be too many people there yet? Wait a second, does that mean I still have a penalty-free peek?"

Let him think about that next time he wastes all the hot water. She shifted back around and turned the key in the ignition. She really hoped he was right about school not being too crowded this early but, considering that it was the Monday after homecoming, the rumor mill was most likely already in
full force. It was anybody's guess what they would arrive to.

A few minutes later, Veronica pulled into the Neptune High parking lot. Logan directed her to an open spot next to a silver SUV.

"Ready for this?" Logan smiled, reaching for Veronica's hand. She met him halfway and they gave each other a reassuring squeeze.

Logan climbed out first, while Veronica paused to observe her surroundings. Dick Casablancas was coming in fast at one o'clock. *If I get out quickly and head in the opposite direction…*

"Logan, man! Who's that driving the beast?" Veronica could hear Dick's booming voice through Logan's open door. *Crap, too late now. Time to face the music.* She hopped out and met Logan at the front of the truck.

"Dick Casablancas, this is Veronica Mars; Ronnie I believe you know Dick…" Logan playfully offered.

"Ronnie? Why is Ronnie driving your truck? Was this what she wanted in payment for Friday night?" Dick asked, slapping Logan playfully on the back.

*Yep, the rumor mill is in full force.* Veronica could see the pain flash across Logan's face. She quickly moved to pull him away from Dick. "That's right Dick, and the rest of our deal involves him walking me to my locker so… bye now." She reached out for Logan's hand and moved him in beside her. *So much for acting like this is normal.*

"Thank you." He whispered into her ear as they entered the school.

Veronica knew that their actions were going to be misinterpreted, but, despite all of her misgivings, she thought, *I. Just. Don't. Care.*

Logan kept a firm grip on Veronica's hand until the pain in his back ebbed. He could feel the stares even after he released her hand. He'd had so many days where he'd had to endure stupid questions and inadvertent back slaps, body checks, and overall pain-inducing encounters that he couldn't help but appreciate the distance that her nearness afforded him.

Halfway to Logan's locker, Ashley Banks approached them and reached out to wrap her arm around Logan's waist. He was mentally preparing himself for the pain that would accompany her touch when Veronica moved her body between him and Ashley. Ashley's arm wrapped around Veronica's waist instead and Ashley quickly recoiled.

"Logaan, what the hell? Why are you walking around with her?" Ashley squawked, trying to move in closer to Logan again.

*What is wrong with these girls? I let her go down on me once and suddenly we're BFFs?* Logan started to open his mouth to tell her just what he thought when Veronica cut him off.

"Hi Ashley, wasn't homecoming, like, so much fun!" Veronica said in a fake, perky voice. Logan couldn't help but smile as Veronica led him away from Ashley and toward a side hall. Once in the hall, Veronica pulled him into a little alcove. "What do you want to do?" She asked, turning to face him.

She looked so intense, so unlike 'Pep Squad Veronica'. No, this was 'Kick Ass Veronica' and she was on his side. He reached out for her hands. "Walk you to your locker and then mine, followed by
Calculus?" Logan presented it as a question so she could still back out if she wanted to.

Veronica nodded and gave him a very small smile. "Unless you want the rumors to be worse than they already are, you might want to let go of my hands."

Reluctantly, Logan released her hands after giving them one last squeeze. She was right, of course. It was one thing to present themselves as no longer enemies, but holding hands would get everyone saying they were an item. Logan had enough blowback to deal with from Duncan already. If he and Veronica were careful, they could navigate the school while presenting themselves as friends without it getting blown out of proportion. Yeah right.

"Troy, I heard you finally came to your senses and ditched the skank." Madison playfully slapped Troy's arm. I can't believe he ever gave Veronica Mars the time of day.

"You know it. Had to cut 'er loose." Troy put his arm over Madison's shoulder. "You'll never guess who she's with now." He whispered in her ear.

"Madison! Madison, you'll never guess what just happened!" Ashley Banks yelled, a little out of breath.

Madison huffed at Ashley, "I'm talking to Troy, Ash."

"Oh Troy will want to hear this too." Ashley grinned and her eyes lit up.

"I will? Let's hear it then." Troy winked at her, stepping away from Madison.

Madison frowned, "Well?"

"I just saw Logan Echolls walk into school with Veronica Mars. So of course I went to rescue him from her and the little bitch stepped between us. But here's the weird part, Logan looked relieved and let her drag him away!" Ashley said indignantly.


"As it turns out," Troy smiled broadly, his eyes glinting with excitement, "I was going to tell you that I know first hand that Logan spent the weekend with Veronica and that it was clothing optional. If you know what I mean."

"You're both crazy, he hates her." Madison assured them as she looked down the hall to see Logan emerge from a side hall with a small blonde at his side. She was so distracted that she missed Dick's arrival.

"I know, right Maddie? Ronnie drove him to school this morning." Dick leered suggestively then leaned in to kiss Madison, but she turned at the last second so the kiss landed on her cheek.

"No shit, man?" Troy hopped up and down a few times bumping Madison in the shoulder.

"Watch it!" She yelled at him, stepping further away. But her eyes were still stuck on the retreating figures of Logan and Veronica. What will Duncan think of this?

Wallace's first period had been a shit show. They weren't supposed to speak anything but French during class, but Madame Rousseau had given up about halfway through. All anyone could talk about was Logan, Veronica, and Duncan. Wallace didn't comment, but he listened closely. Veronica
would want to know what was being said. Everyone was talking about the dance and how Veronica had ditched Troy for Logan. A few people even knew about the skinny dipping, though their versions sounded more like the start of a porno. V's going to love that. To make matters worse, everyone was talking about Troy's dad's car getting stolen, so he was getting even more sympathy from the 09ers.

Wallace entered Mr. Wu's second period science class only to be intercepted by Logan, who dragged him to a bench at the back of the room. Seating wasn't strictly assigned, but Wallace really preferred to sit closer to the front. He needed to do well in this class so he could take AP next year.

"Wow Logan, nice to see you, too." Wallace grumbled, taking the seat Logan indicated.

"Right, pleasantries…" Logan offered Wallace his hand, "Good morning Wallace, I hope all is well today. Would you like to contribute to the wreaking of misfortune upon someone we both find repugnant?" Logan smirked and rubbed his hands together in a villainous fashion.

"Yeah, yeah, I want to help you mess with Troy. Especially after what I've been hearing, man. You should hear what people are saying about you." Wallace whispered conspiratorially.

"I've heard some of it. I don't care what they say about me, but what about Veronica? What have you heard?" Logan's customary smirk morphed into narrowed eyes and a scowl.

"Nothing all that different from before, honestly. You know, stuff about her being a gold digger and having moved onto you as a target. A whole bunch of different versions of what went down Friday night. Something about the two of you having sex in one of the side halls before school started… That kind of stuff." Wallace wasn't surprised by the way people were acting; it was par for the course at Neptune High. But he was surprised that Veronica had put herself in this situation for Logan. Up until now, the rumors about her had been baseless and Veronica had ignored them. But now it seemed like she and Logan, while maybe not deliberately setting out to fuel the fire, weren't trying to prevent it either. "You two had to know people were going to go crazy if you showed up here together. If you're so worried about V, why did you have her drive you to school?"

Logan began kicking the side of the table and flipping a pen through his fingers. Then he abruptly stopped and used the pen to point to the remainder of the bruise on his cheek. "When I got this my back got fucked up, too. I haven't felt up to driving. It's why I was staying with Ronnie this weekend… she was taking care of me." Logan resumed flipping the pen through his fingers.

"Okay man, that makes more sense. But what happened to you?" Wallace looked at Logan, trying to see if there were any other apparent injuries, but with the long sleeved shirt and pants all that he could see was the fading bruise on Logan's face.

"It's complicated." Logan fiddled with his shirtsleeves, "Anyways, Dick kinda messed up our plans of separating once we arrived on campus. It doesn't matter anymore though. It's done. I'm more interested in fucking with Troy." Logan said.

"Fine, don't tell me." Wallace shrugged. He recognized evasion; he certainly got enough of it from Veronica. "How do you want to deal with Troy?"

"I'm not sure; my go-to method would be to beat him up," he smiled and cracked his knuckles. "But I'm pretty sure Veronica would be pissed if I did that. Can we do the whole PI thing? You know check for priors and stuff like that?"

Wallace nodded his head, "I know the passwords to a couple of the online databases that V and Mr. Mars use. We could start there and see if anything pops up that we could use against him. We'll get a
lot further with Veronica helping us."

"Mr. Echolls and Mr. Fennel, would you like to share with the class what's so interesting?" Mr. Wu called them out for not paying attention.

"No, sir." "Sorry, sir." They said in unison. Mr. Wu continued his lecture.

Wallace tried to pay attention for the rest of class but realized it was a lost cause when he overheard a couple of seniors commenting about him and Logan. Not only was everyone in school talking about his BFF, but now it appeared that he was part of the gossip, too. *Great, just great.*

When the bell rang, Wallace walked with Logan to Veronica's locker, deciding to accept his fate as the even-more-gossip-about friend of Veronica Mars and now, he guessed, Logan Echolls. Veronica was waiting at her locker when the boys arrived.

"Was second period as fun for you guys as it was for me?" She grimaced.

"I'm sure we had a lot more fun since Wally, here, and I had each other for support." Logan chuckled.

"Yep, we were the talk of the class. Literally V. Everyone was talking about us like we were a new couple or something." Wallace couldn't help laughing; it was all so ridiculous.

When Veronica didn't laugh or comment, Wallace watched as Logan's expression turned more serious, "What happened?"

"It's nothing…" she trailed off, not looking at either of them.

Logan tried to put his arm around Veronica, but she just shrugged him off and slammed her locker. "I don't want to talk about it." She sighed and looking deflated, turned away from them both. She walked into the girl's bathroom before they could stop her.

"What do you want to do about that?" Wallace asked a somewhat crestfallen Logan, eyeing the hall full of students staring at them.

Logan reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet, and extracted a couple of bills. "Will you go grab a hot chocolate with whipped cream from the student store? I'm going to wait here in case she comes out."

Wallace rushed to the student store to get the hot chocolate before their fifteen-minute break was over. Luckily the line was short and he returned with the drink just as the first bell rang.

"Here, you'll need these too." Wallace waved two tardy excuse slips at Logan.

"Thanks man, I've got this. I'll see you at lunch." Logan assured Wallace and then disappeared into the girl's bathroom.

Wallace left and started jogging; he made it to the office just as the final bell rang.

*Stupid skinny dipping. How did something that was supposed to be a tribute to Lilly get so out of control? Stupid question, Veronica. When was anything involving Lilly ever under control?* Veronica sighed. She should have known better.

Veronica paced the bathroom. She was close to getting her emotions back to a reasonable level when she heard the door open. "Find a different bathroom; this one's occupied!" She yelled without turning
to see who had entered.

"Oh come on Ronnie, I think there's room for both of us." Logan smiled and extended a steaming to-go cup to her. "Hot chocolate with extra whipped cream."

"How do you do that?" She asked him, accepting the cup.

"Do what?"

"Know what will make me feel better?" She inhaled the sweet smell and carefully took a sip. "Mm…"

"It's no big secret that you have a thing for chocolate and sugar." Logan smirked at her.

His comment had her fuming all over again. Yes, Logan had always known how to make her feel better, but also how to make everything hurt that much more. And, because of that, so did the rest of the 09ers.

"You're right, my life is one big fucking open book!" She spat, slamming the cup onto the counter and causing a little to spill out. Veronica hastily turned and reached for a paper towel to clean up the mess. When she turned back around, Logan was standing just a foot away from her.

"What do you mean?" He asked, gently squeezing her shoulder.

"I just—I really hate those spiteful…" Veronica took a slow, deep breath before continuing. "Madison, Ashley and Shelly were just being themselves. Calling me a slut, accusing me of trying to seduce you while I was with Troy. You know, stupid stuff."

"I know they can be awful, but Ronnie, that stuff doesn't sound that different from the…" He trailed off, eyes down cast and shoulders a little more slumped than a few moments before.

Veronica reached out for his hand, "I know Logan. And really, it wasn't that bad. I don't actually care what they say about me. I'm just angry because I was trying to have this… one last fling with Lilly. It was a moment in time just for me. It was supposed to be special. It was supposed to only belong to me. And now everyone knows about it. They're mocking it." Veronica released his hand and picked up her cup.

"This is all my fault. If I hadn't been there none of this would be happening." Logan pulled on his hair, taking his turn to pace the small room.

Veronica stepped forward, blocking Logan's path, "Hey, I don't regret it. If I had to share that with anyone I'd choose you. I just would have preferred not to also share it with the whole school, but what can you do?"

Logan nodded, but he still looked like he was standing under a dark cloud. "Let's get to class before any new rumors get started." He said, reaching for his and Veronica's bags. He flashed her the tardy slips, "That Wallace sure is handy." A small smile finally reached his face.

"You have no idea." Veronica smiled.

Where are they? They should both be here! Duncan could feel the anger building again. He had already endured two hours of gossip about Veronica and Logan, and even some about himself.

Duncan had arrived on campus early that morning, hoping to catch Logan before classes started.
When he had seen Veronica driving Logan's truck, the emotional turmoil and anger of seeing them together over the weekend had risen again. During the break between second and third periods, Duncan had followed a very upset Veronica from Mrs. Murphy's English class. He was ready to swoop in and comfort her when Logan and that guy who follows Veronica around had disrupted his plans. Duncan waited, hoping to get a moment alone with Veronica before Journalism started, but she had ducked into a bathroom. To add insult to injury, Logan had followed her in when the bell rang. Duncan tried to convince himself that it was nothing, but his anger and jealousy were like an open wound. Logan and Veronica were picking away at his self-control.

Logan lied. Veronica is a whore. How could they? How could she? Duncan couldn't sit still any longer. The bell had rung ten minutes ago, but Logan and Veronica had yet to arrive in class.

"Ms. Dent?" Duncan asked, approaching the Journalism teacher's desk.

"Yes, Duncan?" She responded with a smile.

"Did you send Logan and Veronica on an out of class assignment?"

"No, but now that you mention it, I'm surprised they aren't here." Ms. Dent got up from her desk and headed to the door, which was pulled open from the other side just as she got to it. "Well there you two are. Is everything all right?" Duncan heard her ask.

Logan nodded, handing Ms. Dent two tardy excuse slips while Veronica mumbled something Duncan couldn't hear.

Duncan took a seat at the table in the center of the room so that he could watch Logan and Veronica no matter where they sat. He tracked their movements until they settled at the computers in the far corner of the room. Logan put himself between Veronica and the rest of the room, making it so Duncan could only catch occasional glimpses of her.

Over the class period, Duncan watched as Logan and Veronica shared a whispered conversation and casual touches. Although this jealousy of Logan and Veronica's relationship was something he hadn't felt in a long time, it wasn't exactly a new sensation.

FLASHBACK

The long ride home from the late-summer soccer tournament had been excruciating. Duncan was more than two hours late for his date with Veronica, and he knew that she was waiting for him at his house. At this point there wouldn't be time for a date at all before he had to take her home. Duncan had texted to let her know he was running late, and she had replied quickly, telling him not to worry and that she'd be there when he got home. God, he loved her. She was so sweet and kind and beautiful. She was everything he could ever want.

Duncan entered the Kane estate with a little skip in his step. He was about to see his girl. He could hear a movie playing in the den and decided it would be fun to sneak up and scare her. She would scream and then would want him to hold her tight.

Duncan quietly slipped into the room and got low to the ground so that he could approach her without being seen. He was almost parallel with the couch when he realized Veronica wasn't alone. Duncan moved so that he was a little in front of the couch and saw that Logan was pressed up against Veronica's side with his arm draped across her shoulders. Veronica's head was resting on Logan's shoulder and his head was leaning against hers, a blanket covered them. They were both sound asleep.
Duncan felt his heart stutter as pain lanced through his chest. He rushed out of the room as quietly as possible and up to his room, his mind a jumble... He was almost to his room when he ran straight into Lilly.

"Hey Donut, where's the fire?" She smiled at him.

"I… I… They…” He couldn't form what he had seen into words; he felt like he was going to explode at any moment.

"Chill out, they aren't doing anything. They fell asleep watching a movie. I thought they were cute. He pines for her. She has no idea, of course." Lilly laughed to herself.

"Wha… what do you mean 'he pines for her'? Logan's your boyfriend!" Duncan felt angry on his sister's behalf even if she didn't appear to be upset herself.

"Geez Donut, are you blind? Your best friend has had it bad for Veronica Mars for years. I just scooped him up before he had a chance to do anything about it because I knew you liked her."

"Right, because you're so selfless…” Now that he could direct his anger at Lilly, something he was very used to, Duncan found that he had regained his ability to speak in full sentences.

"Fine, I didn't like that he wasn't paying as much attention to me." Lilly sighed. "But really none of that is the point. Don't you see? They are both going to feel guilty as hell when they wake up and will want to make it up to us. It's the best!" By the time she finished her sentence, Lilly was past Duncan and almost to the stairs. "Come on, let's wake 'em up. You might finally get more than just the usual over-the-shirt action after this, little brother." She winked at him.

Duncan watched as Lilly bounced down the stairs. He felt horrible, but maybe there was something to what she had said. And his hands would be clean; he wouldn't even have to do anything. Veronica's embarrassment over falling asleep with Logan would make her try even harder to please him. And she made Duncan so happy; that could only be a good thing, right?

Lilly was waiting for him in the hall. As Duncan approached, she made a big show of loudly greeting him and calling Logan and Veronica's names. A few moments later, bleary-eyed Veronica and Logan stumbled out into the hall to greet them. Duncan noted that Logan didn't look all that happy to see Lilly, but that was quickly forgotten when he saw Veronica's bright smile.

END FLASHBACK

Duncan emerged from his daydream to see Veronica with the same bright smile from his memory, except it was being directed at Logan. Duncan jumped out of his chair, knocking it over in the process, and stormed out of the room.

Duncan headed straight to his car, slumping down in the driver's seat and staring back at the school.

"Dammit Lilly!" He screamed at the steering wheel. "She was supposed to be mine. You said she'd be mine." Duncan could feel his face growing warm and tears building in his eyes. He started the SUV and sped out of the parking lot.

Chapter End Notes
A/N2: Thank you to Bondopoulos for the intense re-write we did of the scene in girls bathroom. The plot was trying to get away from me and she helped rein it back in with hours of back and forth on google docs! You're the best :) 

A/N3: I want to make a couple of quick comments about my Duncan. First, I'm so glad you all despise him so much (hehe). I want emphasize that a lot of what he thinks and the way he remembers things do not necessarily reflect what 'actually' happened. And if you feel like he's a bit all over the place in how he is thinking and reacting, you're correct, he is and it is intentional.
Out From The Shadows

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thank you to all the new Followers and Subscribers this past week! And you new lurkers, too :) I'm so excited to see so many people enjoying my story. Extra big thanks go out to Bondopoulos and BryroseA! Betaing, handholding, encouraging, I am so lucky!

I'm posting this early in honor of the one year anniversary of the Veronica Mars Movie! Additionally, this is the longest chapter so far, I hope you enjoy the new POV introduced in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 9 – Out From The Shadows

After Journalism, Logan and Veronica had parted ways, she to PE and he to Computer Lab. Trying to concentrate on his assignment, however, was proving to be, hmm… a fruitless endeavor, Logan thought as he skimmed his fingers across the keyboard and flicked them at the screen. If it weren't for the stupid AP History test sixth period, he would have seriously considered skipping the rest of the day. But Logan knew Veronica wouldn't ditch a test, and he wasn't going to leave her to face the wolves on her own.

Instead of being productive, he spent most of the class wondering where Duncan had taken off to. Logan had noticed Duncan watching him and Veronica earlier, but he'd decided to follow Veronica's lead. If Veronica wanted to ignore Duncan until they could try to talk to him privately, then that's what they would do.

The sound of the bell ringing pulled Logan out of his introspection. He quickly hit save and emailed the assignment to himself so that he could finish it at home later. He grabbed his things and headed to the quad for lunch.

Logan took a seat at the table that Veronica and Wallace typically occupied and waited for them. He had planned everything out. First, he would eat with Veronica and Wallace and they could make some plans to get back at Troy. Then, Logan planned to spend the second part of the lunch period catching up with Dick and the guys. Maybe he'd even have time to slip in a few nasty comments to the resident bitches for good measure. See Logan Echolls juggle… he laughed to himself as Wallace arrived and took a seat.

"How'd it go? Did you get her to go to class?" Wallace asked, concern etching his face.

"Yeah, and I have a few new people to add to my shit list. Madison, Ashley and Shelly are giving Veronica a hard time." Logan was sure most of the girls' spite was rooted in jealousy. All three of them had been desperate to get his attention for the past year and any time he and Lilly had broken up during the years before. Hell, Madison had even put the moves on him while she was with Dick. Logan was a lot of things, but he wasn't into hooking up with one of his best friends' girl.
"I know man, I've been hearing it, too. Girls are vicious, which is why I am eternally grateful that I only have a brother." Wallace professed, spinning around in his seat to eye the girls in question.

"Well, I plan to set them straight about Veronica." Logan shrugged with a cocky look on his face. "It should all die down soon enough."

"Dude, why are you sitting here?" Dick slapped him on the back.

_Fuck! I have got to get Dick to stop doing that._ "Hey, Dick. Have you met Wallace?" Logan managed, grimacing.

"Naw, how's it goin'?" Dick acknowledged Wallace and then turned back to Logan. Dick gestured to their usual table, "Dude, come on."

"I'll be over in a bit, thanks Dick." Logan smiled tightly at his friend.

"Okay… Maddie and I ordered Chinese." Dick smiled brightly as Madison wrapped her arm around Dick's waist.

"Hey, Logan. Why are you sitting here with him?" Madison's face looked pinched as she glared as Wallace.

"I dunno Maddie, I must have gotten lost." Logan deadpanned, raising his eyebrows at Wallace.

"Well, come on then." Madison stepped around Dick and reached out her hand to rub across Logan back. She pulled her hand back immediately when Veronica appeared between them, blocking Madison.

Veronica Mars to the rescue twice in one day. Now if she could just get Dick to stop slapping my back I'd be set.

Madison took a step back and Veronica sat down on the bench next to Logan, effectively cutting Madison off, while Dick continued to stand there awkwardly.

Veronica appeared to be oblivious to the fact that they were a spectacle. She pulled out the bag lunch she had packed that morning and divided the food between them.

Logan reached for the fruit salad container only to have Dick snatch it away. "What the fuck man?" Logan said, turning to grab the container back.

Dick held up the Tupperware container of fruit. "You're going to eat some white trash lunch that Ronnie made instead of eating with us?"

"Yes, Dick. That is exactly what I'm going to do." Logan held out his hand for the container, and, when Dick didn't place it in his hand, he stood up. Logan looked Dick directly in the eye and held his hand out again.

"Whatever dude," Dick said, tossing the bowl at Logan. "I guess Troy was right. You care more about pussy than about your friends."

"Don't say that!" Logan took a step toward Dick, his posture rigid and his face intense. "It isn't like that. I know I was a jackass to Veronica, but that ends now; actually it ended three days ago. You can either keep up with the times or go it alone!" Logan yelled at Dick as Wallace came to stand next to him. Logan took another step closer to Dick and lowered his voice, "Are you ready to take on Neptune alone, Dick? Because, if you haven't noticed, I'm all you've got. Duncan's been mentally
MIA for a year now and all of these other assholes couldn't give a rat's ass about you. I mean it, man."

Dick's eyes widened. He nodded in acknowledgement of Logan's threat.

"That's kinda a general rule." Logan said, now addressing the crowd on the quad at large. "If you have a problem with Veronica, you can say it to my face or shut the hell up." Logan turned his attention back to Dick as if daring him to say something.

"Boys, boys…" Veronica stood up, coming between Logan and Dick. "Logan?" She said softly, catching his attention with her warm hand on his forearm.

As soon as she touched him, he felt the tension release. Logan rolled his shoulders carefully and turned his attention fully to Veronica. "It's okay, Veronica."

Veronica turned to face Dick. "Thank you Dick… Madison. This has been fun. We're going to eat now so you can run along." Veronica smiled at Dick and resumed her seat, gently tugging Logan down next to her. Wallace followed their lead and turned his back on Dick, reaching for the bag of cookies Veronica had set out on the table.

Snickerdoodles! When did she slip those in the bag? Logan smiled.

Madison stalked away but Dick stood open-mouthed, staring unabashedly at the three of them.

"Well boys, do you want to hear how great PE was?" Veronica began as if she'd just arrived at the table. "I almost had to rescue my clothes from a toilet. Luckily, I caught the thieves before it went that far. Can you tell my clothes spent some time on the locker room floor?" She smiled sweetly at them in such a way that anyone passing by might think that the group was talking about a fun time.

Logan felt like they were putting on a show for an audience that was waiting with bated breath. Whenever he glanced around at the rest of the quad, people were staring at them and whispering. He was sure that eventually everyone would find something else to amuse themselves with, but for now it was getting pretty annoying.

Logan glanced back around and saw that Dick was still standing next to their table, staring at them. "Your clothes look fine Ronnie. Can you pass me a fork?" He asked. With that Dick finally started to walk away. Logan watched out of the corner of his eye as Dick turned back toward the unlikely trio several times on his way back to his own table, a look of bewilderment on his face. Logan continued his conversation, undaunted. "Computer Lab was uneventful and highly unproductive. I'm going to have to finish the assignment tonight. How 'bout you Wallace?"

"Trig was fine. Nothing exciting to report." Wallace added to the discussion. Logan noticed that after Dick's departure, the groups around the quad seemed to resume their own conversations.

"So Veronica, Wallace and I were talking…" Logan grinned mischievously at Veronica.

"Not talking… are you okay?" She asked with an expression of faux concern.

Wallace leaned in, "We want to mess with Troy."

"Of course you do. What did you have in mind?" Veronica asked apprehensively.

The boys shared their ideas about looking into Troy through the PI databases and Veronica smiled, "Well, I think that sounds like an excellent job for you, my tweedles. You can take point on operation 'mess with Troy' while I handle Luke's," Veronica pressed her lips into a tight line,
"hmm… predicament."

Before Logan or Wallace could respond, the quad went completely silent again. Logan saw Veronica's eyes go wide as she scooped up some pudding. He followed her eyes across the quad to where Duncan had appeared. His pants were dirty and his shirt looked torn. *What the hell?*

"I think it might be time for us to head to the library to print up that death certificate for the bank." Veronica looked at Logan as she spoke. "Unless you would prefer a very public confrontation with Duncan. Because he is headed our way."

"Shit! Yeah, let's go. He looks like a fucking mess." Logan said, grabbing the rest of their things. They had a lot to do before their test and trip to the bank, evading Duncan while they did it was just an added bonus.

The rest of the day flew by for Veronica. She had printed a barely acceptable fake death certificate in the library while she, Logan, and Wallace avoided the quad and any potential Duncan drama. Duncan had looked terrible, and, while she had really wanted to try to find out what had happened to him, she hadn't been able to shake any information loose during the last two periods of the day. On top of that, she wasn't feeling very confident about the death certificate she had printed. Anything more than a cursory inspection would expose it as a fake.

*If only I could shake Logan for an hour and sneak off to the bank alone, I'd be all set…* she thought with mixed emotions. While she really preferred to play the role of the grieving daughter alone, it was clear that Logan wasn't really feeling up to driving yet. If she was being honest with herself, she wasn't ready to leave him alone in his current state either. A quick check showed that he had bled through his shirt in a couple of places. Apparently Dick's customary greeting was pretty physical and had caused a few of the bigger wounds to re-open. She shook her head and laughed to herself, *Dick sure could be a prick.*

"What's so funny? Do you find my discomfort entertaining?" Logan teased. Despite the laughter in his voice, his stiff posture was evident in Veronica's peripheral vision.

"No, I was just thinking about Dick." Veronica saw Logan whip around and grimace as she slowed to turn into the bank's parking lot. His hands gripped the door and center console.

"Wow, this is getting old fast. I was actually feeling a lot better this morning, now I can't even do a dramatic turn to tease you about getting your mind out of the gutter."

"I don't find the fact that you're hurting funny. Speaking of which, I tossed some ibuprofen into our lunch; it should still be in my bag if you wanna check." Veronica pulled into the first available parking spot, turned off the truck, and turned to him. "And you know I meant Dick Jr., Logan."

"I guess that'll work if you really want to name it. But wouldn't Logan Jr. be more appropriate since I have a good friend named Dick?" His eyes glittered with amusement at his joke.

"Are you done?"

"Almost… let's see, you always did have a soft spot for Dick." Logan beamed at Veronica, obviously pleased with himself. "Okay, I'm done… for now. So what's next?"

"I'm pretty sure you're the one with the soft spot for Dick." Veronica gave Logan an annoyed look. "What happens next is I go into the bank and get into my mom's safe deposit box while you wait here patiently." Veronica reached for her bag. She took a minute to find the painkillers and extra bottle of water for Logan.
"I think it'll be more believable if I go with you. I can play the role of 'supportive boyfriend.'"

"I really don't think that's necessary." Veronica handed him the pills and water then turned to get out of the truck.

He quickly swallowed the pills and reached for the handle to get out of the truck. "Come on Veronica, 'supportive boyfriend' would never take no for an answer. Besides, this is for my own safety. It's hot out and you didn't even crack the windows."

"Fine, fine, you can come with me. I thought you hurt too much to drive, but you're okay play role of 'supportive friend?'" Veronica turned to glare at Logan, who shrugged a bit stiffly and looked disappointed. "Yeah, you've been recast, sorry." She threw over her shoulder as she continued on without him. Logan gave her a mischievous grin as he caught up with her near the entrance of the bank. She suspected he was up to something, but didn't want to waste time figuring out what it was.

Once inside, Veronica took a deep breath, readying herself for the bit of acting. As she rolled her shoulders back she felt Logan's fingers entwine with hers. She was about to argue with him when he turned her into his chest and nuzzled his face into her hair, as if to offer comfort, but instead he spoke quietly into her ear.

"Let me help you sell this. The teller is going to be distracted by you being upset and me being a bit hands-y. They won't even look at the paperwork. You can still cry on command, right?" His whispered words softly caressed her ear, sending spikes of warmth down to her toes.

What the hell was that? Unable to trust her voice, Veronica nodded, causing her cheek to brush against his; the bit of rough stubble abrading her sensitive skin. Veronica bit her lip hard and thought of Lilly, a sure-fire way to cause her eyes to tear up.

"You've got this." Logan breathed into her ear and she felt his lips make contact with her cheek in a soft sweep of skin against skin. Logan shifted Veronica slightly in front of him, keeping an arm wrapped around her waist, and rubbed small soothing circles on her hip with his thumb.

Veronica wondered if Logan had been able to tell that she was nervous about the death certificate receiving scrutiny or if he was just being a perv, or maybe both. Probably both; something to give him a hard time about later… With Logan draped over her and tears glistening in her eyes, Veronica approached the only available teller, a woman who looked to be in her early thirties.

"Hi. May I help you?" The woman asked pleasantly, though her eyes drifted to where Logan was gripping Veronica's waist, his fingers causing the fabric of her shirt to bunch and release. I hope the teller finds this as distracting as I do…

"Hi." Veronica leaned heavily against Logan and kept herself from making full eye contact. "My mom died last year and I just found this." Veronica held up the key and lifted the fake death certificate out of her bag, handing them both to the teller, and sniffling loudly.

"Are you okay, babe?" Logan said sweetly, pulling her closer, his eyes burning into hers.

"I just miss her." Veronica exhaled the words, turning her face into him. She felt a tear, which wasn't entirely fake, slide down her cheek.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, miss. Um… just follow me and we'll go down to the vault." The teller
said, her words sincere.

"Thank you, it's been a hard year." Logan said, pressing a kiss to the top of Veronica's head.

A few minutes later they were alone in the vault with Veronica's mother's box unlocked.

"That was completely unnecessary Logan." She said, narrowing her eyes at him.

"Unnecessary? I had that woman wrapped around my little finger." He held up his fifth digit as if it were a magic wand.

"And now she'll remember us..."

"Who cares? We'll take everything with us today, so what does it matter?"

Veronica looked around the room in a thinly veiled attempt to conjure up a reason it might matter. She came up short. "Fine, it probably doesn't but..."

"But nothing. That was fun, admit it." Logan grinned at her.

"You just wanted to grope me!"

"Trust me, if my goal had been to grope you I would have done a lot more than put my arm around you and whisper sweet nothings in your ear." He leered at her for a moment and then winked.

"Let's get this over with." Veronica turned away from Logan and his silliness. She pulled hard on the box handle, causing it to slide out with a screech of metal against metal.

Inside of the box was a manila envelope and some loose papers. Veronica handed the sealed envelope to Logan and quickly sorted through the loose papers. *A receipt from the Neptune Grand with Jake Kane's signature. Why would my mom have this?* Veronica continued to scan the paper and saw the date-time stamp. *October 3, 2003 4:15. What the hell?*

"We offer a wide selection of box sizes. I'm sure our bank can accommodate whatever your needs may be." A different bank employee led an older couple into the vault.

Veronica nodded to the couple. "Let's get out of here. I want to look through all of this in private." She said quietly to Logan, then folded the receipt with Jake Kane's name on it quickly and slipped it into her pocket. *Logan so does not need to see this.*

Keith was sitting at his desk, sorting through the paperwork on the bail jumper he had just brought in, when he heard the Mars Investigation's outer door open. *I was sure I locked that, which means...*

"Number one daughter, I have returned!" Keith shouted enthusiastically, jumping out of his office into the main room. He had hoped to startle Veronica but instead found himself the surprised party. "Hello daughter and... Logan."

Keith observed that they both looked more than a little surprised to see him, which he supposed made sense since he wasn't expected back until later that night. Keith watched Logan carefully as his features smoothed from surprised to neutral.

"Hi Mr. Mars." Logan said.

Keith extended his hand, "Hi Logan, it's been a long time."
FLASHBACK

"Keith, Keith! The phooone's iss ringing." Lianne's shrill but slurred voice brought him out of a deep sleep.

"Mmm, okay, okay." Keith wiped his face, trying to clear the sleep from his brain. "Hello?"

"Sheriff? It's Jake Kane, um… have you heard from Veronica?" Jake's voice sounded alert but nervous.

"Jake. Hold on." Keith rolled out of bed and ambled sleepily toward Veronica's room. Keith knew that something was wrong as soon as he saw Veronica's open bedroom door. He peeked in and could see her bed, still neatly made up with a small pile of stuffed animals. "Dammit," he said under his breath and brought the phone back to his ear. "She's not here Jake, and no we haven't heard from her. When was the last time you heard from them?" Keith asked, switching into Sheriff mode.

"We took pictures and loaded them into a limousine earlier this evening." Jake said and then his voice sounded distant "…Yes Celeste I'll ask… Sorry Keith, um… would it be possible for you to check to make sure they weren't involved in anything?" Jake asked hesitantly.

"As soon as we hang up I'll call in to the station and make sure there haven't been any incidents involving them. But Jake, if there were I'm positive I would already know about it." Keith said with confidence.

"Thank you, Keith. You'll let us know as soon as you know something?" Jake asked, the concern in his voice evident.

"Of course, of course. I'll talk to you soon Jake." Keith hung up the phone and strode purposefully back to the bedroom he shared with his wife.

"Lianne." He shook her still frame, "Lianne! Wake up! Veronica never came home. It's…” he looked at the bedside clock, "almost five in the morning."

Lianne rolled over and stared at Keith, her eyes glazed over. "I'm sure they're just having too much fun, they'll be home soon." She started to roll back over but Keith grabbed her shoulder, stopping her.

"You were supposed to wait up until she got home. Her curfew was 1:30am. What time did you come to bed?" Keith was trying his best to contain his anger at his wife, but it was clear that she had let her drinking get in the way of her parenting, yet again.

"I don't know… um… I fell asleep on the couch and when I woke up I didn't check the clock before I got into bed." She yawned broadly and Keith was assaulted with the smell of alcohol.

Several retorts were on the tip of his tongue, but he knew they wouldn't do any good. "Go back to sleep Lianne, I'll take care of it." He sighed, feeling defeated yet again. What happened to the beautiful, spunky mother of my child? When did I lose her?

There was nothing to be done about that right now. Keith quickly pulled on his uniform while he called Veronica's cell phone. The call went straight to voicemail, so he immediately called the station to make sure there weren't any reports that might have involved the kids. Deputy Sacks answered and assured Keith that there hadn't been any calls that night involving Veronica, Logan or the Kane kids. Feeling a little lighter, Keith jogged out to his squad car and pulled out his cell phone.

"Keith, tell me you have good news." Jake's voice was tense and strained.
"Well I don't have bad news, so as far as I'm concerned that is good news. I think our kids may have just gone on a little unapproved adventure." Keith could hear Jake's release of breath at his words.

"I'll take it. And honestly with Lilly and Logan involved I guess I'm not entirely surprised." Jake said, relief evident in his voice.

"Have you spoken with Logan's parents?" Keith asked the next logical question. It wouldn't be the first time he had found Veronica at Logan Echolls' house in the middle of the night. Usually those times coincided with finding Lianne passed out or he and Lianne fighting. Keith had learned that if Veronica didn't answer her phone, the first place to check was Logan's pool house. If she had arrived home to see her mom passed out on the couch, she might have decided to go to Logan's. Keith couldn't exactly blame her for seeking refuge with her friend.

"I called, but the maid said that Lynn and Aaron were in New York for some premiere and that she hadn't seen the kids at all this evening." Jake informed Keith.

"Okay. Do you know who rented the limousine? We may be able to find out where they are if we call into the rental agency." Keith was feeling more settled as he got to slip further into Sheriff/Investigator mode.

"I think Logan may have. I didn't think to check. There can't be that many rental agencies can there?"

"There are two that service Neptune but they could have hired one out of San Diego, I suppose. Logan's car is at your home, correct?" Keith asked.

"Um… yes, I believe it's still out in the driveway. Why?" Jake asked, confusion in his voice.

"He picked Veronica up earlier this evening, so I assume that they planned to eventually end up wherever they had transportation." Keith replied.

"Oh, of course, that makes sense." Jake laughed nervously.

"I'm going to head to your place, if that's okay Jake? I think it makes sense to use it as our base while I see what I can find out about the limousine."

"Yes, yes. Please. Thank you Keith." Jake said before hanging up.

A few minutes later, Keith arrived at the Kane estate. During the drive over, he had discovered that Logan had rented the limousine under a pseudonym, Philip Marlowe, which stunk of Veronica's influence. Logan had also provided the company with fake identification confirming the occupants would be over twenty-one. Luckily he had paid with his own credit card. *Amateur.* Keith chuckled to himself. He also knew that the limousine was due to arrive at the Kane's in the next ten or so minutes.

Jake and Celeste were waiting for him when Keith parked. Jake looked upset but under control; Celeste looked livid.

"This is all Lilly's fault. Look at what she's gotten Duncan into this time. And that Logan! Don't even get me started on Ver—" Celeste was deep into her snit when she realized Keith was walking up to them.

"Don't let me stop you Celeste. What has my daughter done?" Keith smiled, knowing at least part of Celeste's problem with Veronica was her resemblance to Lianne. Lianne and Jake had been high school sweet-hearts but that was twenty years ago. Keith was surprised that Celeste still seemed to
hold a grudge.

"Keith, I apologize. Nothing of course. Veronica is a lovely girl. I'm just upset." Celeste straightened her velour track jacket.

"Not to worry, this time I do have good news. I tracked down the rental agency and as it turns out they'll be arriving any moment." Keith smiled tightly at the Kanes.

"Keith, can I offer you some coffee while we wait?" Jake asked.

"Coffee sounds great, thank you." Keith moved to follow Jake inside but was surprised to find a maid waiting in the entry with a cup waiting for him. "Wow, well thank you." The woman nodded and stepped back out into the hall after handing him his cup. Service with a shadow rather than a smile in this house, I suppose.

Keith walked back out to the driveway, sipping on the hot coffee. They hadn't waited long before the limousine pulled up. Keith watched as his daughter's best friend—though he'd begun to question that title lately—stumbled out of the car with Duncan's help.

"What seems to be the problem, Officer?" Lilly slurred slightly while holding the train of her dress up.

"Lilly." Celeste gestured for Lilly to come to her. "Are you drunk?"

"Umm, not so much anymore." Lilly laughed, turning to look at Keith. Her eyes sparkled. Veronica and Logan climbed out of the limousine, both with sheepish expressions at Lilly's words.

"You are absolutely unbelievable. Why do you insist on humiliating me?" Celeste hissed.

Keith turned back to see Duncan moving to stand next to his sister.

"Um, two kids, both out all night, and one getting screamed at?" Lilly declared indignantly.

"I know you, Lilly. Any trouble this family has ever had, you've been at the root of it." Celeste sneered.

"Mom! It's my fault. It was my idea." Duncan said emphatically.

"You listen, both of you. Inside the house. Come on." Jake sounded exhausted and disappointed rather than mad.

With a defiant look, Lilly turned and strode confidently to an unsuspecting Logan, grabbed his face and gave him a long hard kiss. Logan's eyes swept over to Jake and Celeste, Keith thought he saw a look of resignation on Logan's face followed by a deliberate raise of his eyebrows. The gesture said it all, Logan wasn't surprised by Lilly's behavior, why were they?

Apparently having reached the end of her patience, Celeste turned and stomped back into the house. Keith could hear Jake sigh as Lilly finally broke the kiss and headed for the house. Logan wiped his mouth and turned to walk toward Keith's cruiser.

"Sorry, Dad." Veronica said, turning Keith's attention from the maelstrom of negative emotions coming from the Kane family.

"We'll talk at home." Keith called over his shoulder, "Jake, Celeste. Thanks for the coffee."
Keith saw Duncan turn and give Veronica a small wave and a smile. Keith found himself surprised that Duncan had agreed to whatever plan had gone down that night. Duncan had always seemed fairly levelheaded, but the more he thought about it, the more Keith realized that he hadn't spent much time with the boy. He was basing his opinion of his daughter's boyfriend mostly off of what Lianne had told him.

It was at that moment that the other boy in the foursome recaptured his attention; a boy who Keith had to admit he knew better than his own daughter's boyfriend.

"I'm so sorry Sheriff. This really is my fault. Please don't be too mad at Veronica." Logan said softly, waiting for Keith to let him into the back of the cruiser. It wasn't the first time Keith had let Logan into the back of this car.

Keith gave Logan his best 'Sheriff' stare and pointed to the cars parked in the driveway. "Your truck's here son; aren't you just going to head home?"

"I've been drinking sir…" Logan looked down at the ground. "Veronica made me promise not to drive if I've been drinking." Logan looked up at Keith, a sheepish grin on his face.

"That's my girl." Keith smiled brightly, clapping Logan on the shoulder. "Tell you what, you're coming home with us. You get to sit through my 'staying out all night without permission isn't okay' speech and then, after you kids have slept and had some food, I'll let Veronica bring you back to pick up your truck. That sound reasonable?"

Logan looked up at Keith with an expression that took Keith aback—respect. "Yeah, Sheriff, I think that's more than reasonable. As long as Ronnie doesn't cook the food, that would be considered cruel and unusual punishment, unless it's grilled cheese. Last time she tried to make breakfast the eggs were slimy." Logan frowned.

Keith couldn't help but smile. "I promise to do the cooking. And the lecturing." Keith reached for the door and Logan crawled in and patted the seat. Before Keith could say another word, Veronica slid into the back with Logan, letting him wrap his less-than-pristine tuxedo jacket around her shoulders.

Logan and Veronica both fell asleep on the drive back to the Mars home. Logan woke up as Keith cut the squad car's engine. When Keith walked around the car to let the teenagers out, he was surprised to see that Logan had gathered Veronica in his arms.

"She'll sleep through almost anything. Is it okay if we get the lecture with food a little later?" Logan asked in a soft whisper.

Keith, once again, thought that the title of best friend had been wrongly assigned to Lilly Kane. Perhaps he was looking at Veronica's most loyal friend. "I think that'll be just fine Logan. Why don't you take Veronica to her room and I'll find you some sweats and a blanket for the couch."

"Thanks Mr. Mars." Logan smiled down at Veronica, shifting her in his arms to get a better grip.

_Hmm… Duncan had better watch out._ Keith thought at the look he saw in Logan's eyes.

**END FLASHBACK**

While that morning after homecoming hadn't been the last time Keith had seen Logan, it was certainly the last time he'd seen that version of him. It was just before everything had changed. In the spirit of what Logan and Veronica used to be to one another, Keith decided to give the young man the benefit of the doubt.
Keith extended his hand, "Hi Logan, it's been a long time."

"Yes, sir it has." Keith noted that, although Logan's handshake was firm, his eyes kept darting to Veronica.

"So what are you two kids up to?" Keith asked, his spidey-senses tingling, no good if I had to guess.

"School project." Veronica lied smoothly, earning her a glare from Logan. "...and spending time with a friend." She added a bit begrudgingly.

"I'm glad to see you reconnecting with old friends sweetheart." Keith smiled at Veronica, "though I'm not going to lie, this isn't one of the friends I expected to see you reconnecting with." Before Keith could gauge Logan's reaction, the door to MI opened, revealing Rebecca James.

"Hi!" Rebecca said brightly, striding toward the group.

"Hey." Keith smiled at the first woman to make him feel good in quite a while.

Veronica and Logan both turned to face Rebecca. Neither looked surprised. Of course, that phone call yesterday... smarty-pants daughter over there must have '*69-ed'. Why doesn't Logan look surprised, though?

"Hi." Rebecca said again.

"I thought, uh..." Keith said nervously.

"I'm guessing I'm early, right?" Rebecca said.

"Actually, I think I'm the one who's late, right?" Veronica looked to Keith.

"No, no, it's fine. It's fine. No one's late or early." Keith could feel a trickle of sweat slide behind his ear, down what was left of his hairline.

During the awkward exchange, Rebecca had moved around to stand next to Keith "I'm sorry. I'm just—I was anxious. Hi." Rebecca turned into Keith a bit.

"Hi." Keith grinned at her and leaned down to give her a chaste kiss. He turned to see a bemused expression on Veronica's face and a sly thumbs-up from Logan. That kid always was entertaining—but entertaining. Keith cleared his throat, "Uh, Veronica, Rebecca wanted to stop by and uh..."

"And, uh, just say hello. Outside of school. I'm sure this is a little weird for you so..." Rebecca's face turned a shade brighter as she turned to face Veronica's companion. "Logan, I thought... um... I didn't realize you and Veronica were... friends."

Logan nodded, his cheeks were slightly pinker than before and his expression a little sheepish.

Good to know the school was aware of the little war that has been going on between my daughter and one of her former best friends. And now said former friend looks... embarrassed about it? Keith made a mental note to talk to Veronica about this later.

Veronica ignored Rebecca's comment about Logan, "Well, this," Veronica waved her hand indicating the current conversation, "is a little weird, but... you two dating isn't. Um, I'm fine. No worries."
"Well, I thought, um…” Keith stuttered a bit.

Rebecca nodded, "And… and I agree."

"That if you had the chance to talk…things would seem a little less awkward. " Keith finished.

"And are you starting to see the catch-twenty-two inherent in the plan?" Veronica said, eliciting a snort from Logan.

"As a matter of fact, I am." Rebecca smiled awkwardly. "Okay, well, um, is there anything I can do that would…make things easier for you?"

"Can you get me out of fifth period Bio?" Veronica asked.

"I'd really like my own parking space." Logan chimed in.

"I don't think I can do that." Rebecca laughed at them.

"I've got it!" Veronica declared with a playful grin. "Admit I'm not socially isolated. See this," Veronica indicated Logan who took her cue and did a little model turn, "this is a person with whom I am being social."

"And you spent all day Sunday with me and Wallace. That was pretty social." Logan supplied helpfully. Keith turned toward the teenaged boy with renewed interest just in time to see Logan's bravado fade as he mouthed 'sorry' to a glaring Veronica.

"Well we should probably get going." Rebecca said to Keith.

"Right, yeah. I'll just grab my coat." Keith headed back into his office. Why didn't she mention that Logan was with her yesterday?

Keith knew he was missing something, but without time and privacy to ferret out more information, he was in the dark.

As Logan had expected, Veronica turned and fixed a glare on him the second her father and Ms. James were out of earshot.

"Good job Logan; I wasn't exactly planning to share how much time we spent together this weekend with my dad." Veronica scowled at Logan, who had the decency to look shamefaced.

"I'm sorry. It just came out. You know, we had the banter thing going and…” Logan blew out a breath and Veronica's expression softened a little. "Is your dad going to be mad?" Logan asked.

"I don't think so." Veronica looked up at him with a gamine grin and a little laugh, "Be prepared, though. He'll probably use his interrogation techniques on you next time." Something about the way her eyes sparkled made Logan think she wasn't kidding.

"Soooo," Logan decided a change of subject was needed; the thought of being interrogated by Mr. Mars was a pretty frightening prospect. "Your dad and Becky? Not weird at all, huh?"

Veronica's eyes narrowed and Logan was sure he could see a vein pulsing on her forehead. "Of course not." She turned away to move back behind the desk. "Let's take a closer look at everything from the safe deposit box." Veronica held her hand out to Logan.

Logan reached into Veronica's messenger bag and pulled out the manila envelope and loose papers. Logan handed the papers to Veronica while he started fiddling with the clasp and tape on the large envelope.
Veronica shuffled through the papers and then moved over to the scanner. She had scanned several of the sheets before Logan had finally spotted a letter opener on the desk. He carefully slipped the opener under the loose edge he had created. Logan slipped his hand in and felt the distinct texture of glossy photo paper. He turned the envelope and slid the images out onto the desk.

"Fuck…" Logan hissed at the sight of several pictures of Veronica with the distinctive lines of a gun scope centered over her face. "Veronica you need to look at these." His voice broke over the words as his fists clinched.

Veronica turned to look at the stack of photos on the desk and began flipping through them. Each new photo had the same crosshairs over Veronica's face. Logan took note of Veronica's tight grimace and narrowed eyes.

"Who would send your mom pictures like these?" Logan questioned.

Logan noticed Veronica hesitate before she turned to meet his eyes. "I don't know, but I'm going to find out."

Logan slipped his arm around Veronica's shoulders and pulled her to him. Even if it was a bit irrational, he wanted to feel with his own hands that she was okay. "We're going to find out."

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Chapter End Notes

A/N2: Credit goes to Bondopoulos for the fantastic line: "Come on Veronica, 'supportive boyfriend' would never take no for an answer. Besides, this is for my own safety. It's hot out and you didn't even crack the windows." I'm still over here laughing!

A/N3: Good catch Jeanie205! I've fixed that little 'hairline'
You Lured Me Away

Chapter Notes

A/N: I'm so grateful to BryroseA and Bondopoulos. You're both fantastic and I'm having so much fun working with you! Thank you reviews/commenters – I love reading your thoughts and (as I think you'll see) I do consider what you have to say :) See the end notes for a link to a missing scene.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 10 – You Lured Me Away

Despite the craziness of the last few days, Tuesday dawned bright. Logan had texted Veronica around midnight, which led to them exchanging messages throughout most of the night. She'd been annoyed by the first few texts—she hadn't been asleep but she's wanted to ponder the implications of the previous days events in peaceful solitude—but by their fifth exchange Veronica had decided she was happy to have the distraction. Despite parts of her world being shifted on their axis and her exhaustion from their late-night correspondence, Veronica woke up feeling like her life almost made sense again. When she reached over to silence her phone, she realized that it was an incoming text that had awakened her.

To Veronica Mars from Logan Echolls, 7:15am:
Getting coffee, b there n 20

To Logan Echolls from Veronica Mars, 7:16am:
Frap x shot x caramel

To Veronica Mars from Logan Echolls, 7:17am:
Duh

Well, this feels normal... except it's last year's normal. Veronica blew out a harsh breath and rolled out of bed, heading for the shower. The water was warm and relaxing even with her thoughts stuck on yesterday's discovery. All this time, I'd been thinking Mom bolted because she couldn't handle losing everything. Maybe she just couldn't handle losing me.

It was a funny thing, caring for people, Veronica thought as she reached for the shampoo. She wanted to hate her mother, to cast her as the villain. But the discovery of the photos painted a somewhat different picture. She had to admit that she might have to reevaluate her position on her mother, which seemed to be an all too familiar theme in her life lately. She felt similarly about Logan's motives. Part of her really did want to be upset with him for pushing her to talk about the night of Shelly's party and for his highhanded actions at the bank. But, on the other hand, it was nice to feel like someone cared. And after months of feeling like she could only count on her father, having someone else in her corner was both reassuring and a bit unsettling. Back when they had been friends before, Logan was always affectionate and thoughtful. There had even been a moment where she thought their relationship might be moving toward more than just friends, but Lilly had set her straight.
"Lilly, what do you think of Logan?" Veronica asked her best friend. Lilly was picking at the remains of the protein bar she had eaten rather than the grilled cheese Veronica had made earlier.

"He's hot Veronica Mars! And a bad boy." Lilly turned and winked at Veronica, "Just my type. Why?"

"Oh, no reason. He just seems different lately is all," she finished lamely. Veronica wanted to ask Lilly about the way Logan had been looking at her. The first time she had noticed his eyes tracking her was that day at the pool when he'd thrown them both in, his eyes dark with an intensity she'd never seen before. She had seen it again today while she was cooking. Veronica found that being the object of his scrutiny was equally unnerving and exciting.

Lilly stared at Veronica with narrowed eyes, "Does Veronica Mars have a crush?" Lilly flopped onto the bed and tickled her friend.

"Uncle, Lilly! Uncle!" Veronica cried in surrender.

"You don't want him Ronica. He'll expect things and he's more of a love 'em and leave 'em kind of guy. You are more of a hearts and roses kind of girl, darling—at least you will be at first." Lilly grinned broadly and bounced out of the room.

"I guess you're right." Veronica said sadly to the now empty room. Lilly was rarely able to stay in any one place for long. Veronica, more than used to entertaining herself at the Kane house while Lilly jumped between activities, pulled out the book she'd been reading and made herself at home.

It was at least thirty minutes before Lilly returned, collapsing back down next to Veronica. Lilly looked disheveled and pleased with herself; her makeup was a mess.

"Lilly, you look like the cat that ate the canary. What have you been up to?"

"Just testing out a theory, Veronica Mars." Lilly said, obviously dying to tell her best friend all the details. Veronica decided that this was one of those times when she wouldn't take the bait.

"Oh Lilly, I don't have time for your drama today." Veronica replied, attempting to sound uninterested.

Later, Duncan had filled her in on Lilly and Logan's impromptu make out session. Within a week Logan and Lilly were officially an item, and Logan was looking at Lilly the way he had been looking at Veronica.

END FLASHBACK

When Logan and Lilly first started dating, Veronica assumed that her friendship with Logan would change a great deal. But even through the ups and downs of his relationship with Lilly, he and Veronica had stayed close. Their friendship had survived her breakup with Duncan and even Lilly's death. It wasn't until her dad had accused Jake Kane of being involved in Lilly's murder that things had fallen apart. It seemed like the common denominator in all the chaos was the Kanes. The thought of the family she used to be close to pulled Veronica back to the present where she was daydreaming away her hot water. She focused her attention back on her shower and contemplating the photographs that she had found in the safe deposit box. Never say Veronica Mars can't multitask.

Veronica was fairly certain that the Kanes were somehow involved with the photos she had found at the bank, but she needed proof. She had a few ideas, but was fairly certain that sharing them with
Logan would not end well. *Our friendship didn't survive the first round of the Lilly Kane murder investigation; I can't imagine it would endure a second round.* This realization hurt. She would have to keep the connection to the Kanes to herself, something she suspected Logan wasn't going to make easy. Logan had been pretty upset when he had seen the photos. Based on his reaction, she didn't think there was a chance that he would just let it go.

Veronica shut off the water and quickly made her way back to her room. *No need to have another incident like yesterday morning.* She thought, slipping into a jean skirt and t-shirt. Veronica had just finished doing her makeup when she heard a knock at the door. She hopped up and almost skipped to the door. *What am I doing? I'm this excited to see Logan? No, it must be the Frappuccino.*

Veronica nodded to herself as she swung the door open with a dramatic bow, "Good sir, you come baring caffeine and sug—" She choked on her words as she realized it wasn't Logan at the door. It was Duncan…

The line at the coffee shop was ridiculous. Logan glanced at his phone and saw that he had been in Java the Hut for over twenty minutes and he had just placed his order.

**To Nancy Drew from Logan Echolls, 7:24am:**

sry b there n 10

Logan tapped his foot against a chair and fiddled with his phone while he waited for the barista to make his drinks. *So much for having time to talk before we have to run out the door…* 

disappointment spread through him. He really wanted to find out what Veronica's plan was regarding the photos. They were scary as hell. Logan had seen the leaked tapes of Lilly's crime scene; they had been the root of his nightmares for the past year. But last night the dream had changed. Instead of Lilly lying dead by a pool it had been Veronica. Logan was so affected by the memory that he jumped slightly when the server called his name. He shuddered and left a tip before collecting the drinks.

A few minutes later he pulled into the small parking lot at the Sunset Cliffs and immediately noticed a familiar silver Mercedes SUV. *What is Duncan doing here?* Feeling alarmed, Logan left the drinks in the car and ran to Veronica's apartment.

"Duncan! Let go… what's wrong with you?!" Veronica's voice carried out of the apartment's open door.

Logan rushed in and saw Duncan Kane's hands wrapped around Veronica's small arms.

"How long Veronica? Was it the whole time we were together? Do you think I'm stupid?" Duncan punctuated each question with a hard shake.

"Dude, get off her!" Logan yelled. He gripped Duncan's shoulder with one hand and pried the hand closest to him off of Veronica. Duncan let go of her altogether and swung his fist at Logan. But Duncan was too slow; Logan easily blocked the punch, leaving Duncan off balance. Logan took advantage of the situation and shoved Duncan to the ground, "What the fuck, Duncan?"

Duncan's eyes were flat and angry. "I know! I've known all along!"

Logan turned to look at Veronica but kept his body between her and Duncan. "What is he talking about?"

Veronica rubbed her arm where Duncan had grabbed her. She looked rattled and pissed. "I have no
idea. I thought it was you so I opened the door. When I did, he grabbed me and started yelling."

Logan turned back to Duncan. "What are you talking about? And where do you get off doing that to Ronnie?"

Logan turned away again. He looked at Veronica's arms, which were mostly visible in the t-shirt she was wearing. Purple fingertip bruises were blooming across both biceps and one forearm. Logan's breath hissed. "God Veronica, are you all right?"

"I'm fine. My arms hurt a little, but that's all." She continued to rub where the bruises were forming.

Logan reached into his pocket for his cell phone and noticed that Duncan had wrapped his arms around his knees and was rocking slowly in place. "Ronnie, where is your dad?" Logan asked as he scrolled through his contact list.

"Um… I don't know. He must have left early this morning since Backup isn't here." Veronica shrugged.

Duncan's lucky Backup wasn't here, though I wish he had been. Logan found the number he was looking for and hit send. After two rings the line picked up, "Kane residence."

"This is Logan Echolls, I need to speak to either Mr. or Mrs. Kane. It's…" Logan looked down at Duncan, "well, it's urgent."

A few minutes later Logan heard Jake's concerned voice. "Logan, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm all right, but Duncan he, um… he…" Logan looked to Veronica, trying to find the correct words. She shrugged, but the look in her eyes and the bruises on her arms made him determined. "Mr. Kane, Duncan attacked Veronica."

"WHAT!? Is she okay? Where are you?" Logan noted the change in Jake's voice from concern to panic.

"She's okay; bruised, but okay. Duncan is like… he's like that day in your study." Logan sighed and heard Jake's harsh intake of breath.

"Where are you? I'll come get him right away."

Logan quickly explained to Jake where Veronica's apartment was and then hung up.

"You've seen Duncan like this before?" Veronica's small hand grabbed Logan's forearm, turning him toward her.

"Yeah, last year. A couple of days after you guys broke up. He was furious and then…" Logan pointed at Duncan rocking on the floor, "like this."

"What do we do?" She asked, fear lacing her words. It hadn't gone unnoticed by Logan that she had kept him between her and Duncan.

"Nothing, Jake will be here soon. Let me look at your bruises." Logan gently took Veronica's arm in his hands and ran his fingers along the bruises. She flinched in pain when he brushed across the mark left by Duncan's thumb. "Ice helps, but don't take aspirin. It'll make the bruises bigger." Logan crossed the small space to the kitchen to find an ice pack. "The coffees are out in the truck if you want to go grab them?" He suggested, not wanting to leave her alone with Duncan to grab them himself.
Duncan continued to rock and make soft sounds of discomfort while Logan and Veronica waited for Jake to arrive. Logan had found two bags of frozen peas, which he helped Veronica keep on the bruises while they drank their coffees.

Thirty minutes later, Jake arrived with two other men that Logan didn't recognize. "I've called the school and explained to them why you're both late this morning. I would appreciate your discretion." Jake stared at Duncan while the two men lifted him up and took him out of the apartment. Jake followed behind them, stopping to look back just as he moved through the doorway. "I'm so sorry Veronica." And Jake was gone.

"Well that was fun." Veronica deadpanned. She took the other bag of peas from Logan and carried them back to the kitchen. "I'm going to put on a different shirt."

While Veronica was changing, Logan busied himself cleaning up the mess that had been made in the apartment during the scuffle. He righted the potted plant that had been knocked over. He couldn't get all the dirt up but figured it could be vacuumed later.

"I know you can still see some of the bruises on my forearm but…" Veronica's voice came from just in front of him.

Logan stood up and inspected the shirt. Veronica had put on a loose three-quarter sleeve top that was a little sheer. You couldn't see the bruises easily, but it was still light enough to not be too hot in the lingering fall heat. "I don't think anyone will notice." He smiled softly, hoping he sounded reassuring. "You ready to go? We won't make much of first period, but we should be there in time for second."

"Oh goody… this day just keeps getting better and better."

Squeaking into the classroom just as the second bell rang, Dick dove into the first open seat that he saw without checking his surroundings. Mrs. Murphy had a habit of sending students straight to the office if they weren't in their seats by the time the tardy bell rang. And Dick was in no mood to see the pity on the face of whoever was charged with contacting his parents.

Dick moved to put his feet on the legs of the chair in front of him before he realized that it was occupied by one Veronica Mars. All right man, you've got this. You don't have to be nice to her, but you can't treat her like you have the last year. Dick gave himself a little pep talk.

Mrs. Murphy started talking about some old book that Dick couldn't have cared less about, so he decided to do something he rarely did; he thought about the events of the past few days. Normally he probably would have just fallen asleep, but so many strange things had happened that he decided the situation warranted some of his brainpower. Despite what most people thought, Dick wasn't stupid. He was indifferent; a coping mechanism that he had perfected during the many years of parental neglect he'd experienced. Indifference was his safety net; it kept him from disappointment. But, after Logan's ultimatum the day before, Dick knew that indifference and a carefree attitude wouldn't get him through whatever was happening to the social structure of Neptune High.

Dick wanted to know what had changed Logan's mind about Ronnie. In the weeks after Lilly's death, Logan had gone from never leaving Ronnie's side to shunning and tormenting her. Dick had been surprised at the time, because Logan and Ronnie had always been so close. Hell it was Ronnie who introduced me to Logan.

FLASHBACK
It was the first day of seventh grade and Dick was really nervous. He found an empty table in the quad and took a seat, unsure about what the new lunch hierarchy was going to be. He'd heard that some movie star's kid was in their class now, but so far he hadn't had any classes with him. Dick looked around, trying to spot any of his friends, when he felt a sharp little punch to his arm.

"Hey-ya Dick!" Veronica's cheerful voice rang out.

Dick turned to see the short blonde with a much taller brunette guy he'd never met. "Hey Ronnie, who's your new friend?"

"This, Dick Casablancas Jr., is Logan Echolls." Ronnie smiled brightly as she made the introduction. "Logan Echolls, this is Dick. He surfs, says 'dude', and is generally not a jerk."

"Hey man." Logan said, holding out his fist.

Dick bumped the new guy's fist. "Dude, you surf?"

"Yeah. You know the good spots here? I've been with Duncan, but he's more into ankle busters." Logan took a seat at the table.

"Yeah man, tell me Duncan isn't still ridin' that fish board?" Dick asked. He hadn't been surfing with Duncan in a while, but he knew that the Kane kid needed to grow some balls.

"Naw, not anymore." Logan laughed and turned to look at Ronnie. "Sorry, this must be boring for you."

"Not at all." Veronica smiled at them both. "I told you I'd introduce you to all the right people. I'm going to go buy an Skist. I'll be back." Veronica skipped a couple of steps and disappeared down a corridor.

END FLASHBACK

Well, if Logan wants us to be nice to Ronnie, I don't really see the problem. I always liked her before.

Mrs. Murphy finished speaking, and the sudden silence snapped him out of his trance. He realized that Veronica was staring at him.

"…Dick." Veronica waved her hand in front of his face. "Are you in there? We have to partner up." She was frowning at him.

"Um… right. What are we working on?" Dick fumbled with the papers on his desk and avoided eye contact with her.

Veronica laughed lightly, "We're supposed to discuss the major themes of the reading. Did you do the reading?"

Dick sat up and smiled broadly. "I read the Cliff's Notes. Does that count?"

Veronica smirked at him, "It's more than I'd hoped for."

Look at me being civil and not pissing Ronnie off. Solid B effort right there. Dick did his best to contribute the little that he actually remembered from his reading as Ronnie made a short list for them to turn in.

"Well, Dick, that experience didn't make me wish I was spelunking. See you around." Veronica
turned back around in her seat and grabbed her things just as the bell rang.

Dick slowly gathered his belongings and made his way out into the hall. He merged with the current of students and made his way toward his locker. Up ahead, Dick spotted Logan leaning against a locker watching Veronica swap out her books, so he moved out of the flow of traffic and watched them.

Logan reached his hand out to push some of Veronica's hair from her face and smiled brightly. She was shaking her head. Dick couldn't see the expression on her face, but he was pretty sure her body language was saying it all. Veronica had closed her locker and was now leaning against it, parallel to Logan. Then she pushed up on tiptoes to whisper something in his ear. Whatever she said caused Logan to erupt in laughter.

*What could it hurt to be nice to Ronnie?* Dick pushed off the wall and continued toward his locker.

Compared to the morning Veronica had had, school was a breeze. She and Logan had missed a review in Calculus, which she didn't consider a huge loss, and Jake Kane had called in an excuse for them so she didn't even have to worry about her dad finding out. English had been a bit surprising, though. Veronica had been there when Logan told Dick, in no uncertain terms, that being anything but polite was unacceptable, but she hadn't expected him to actually be nice. Apparently, neither had Logan, he'd laughed in surprise when Veronica had told him about English. And to top it all off, during PE no one had messed with her clothes.

*Will wonders never cease? Dick being nice and the bitch trio avoiding me like the plague? This is shaping up to be a decent day after all.* She smiled contentedly.

Veronica was leaving the locker room when she spotted Luke standing off to the side trying to get her attention. "Why Mr. Haldeman, what can I do for you this fine day?"

"Might be fine for you! I was threatened by three-hundred pound block of muscle!" Luke punched the bank of lockers.

"Wow, Luke, dramatic much? Come on I'm starving. We can talk about what to do next over lunch." Veronica moved to walk to the quad, and Luke followed quietly behind her.

"Supafly, you're attracting more of the 09er element to our scared table? I'm not sure I'm down with that." Wallace observed Luke with a sour expression as Veronica took a seat at her usual table.

"This one—," Veronica indicated Luke with a backwards pointed thumb, "is just here for a consult."

"And what about that one?" Wallace pointed to the other side of the quad where a tall blond with perfect surfer hair was headed their way.

"You have Logan to blame for that." Veronica's lips turned downward.

"Blame me for what? Have I committed evil?" Logan laughed, tossing down a few bags of Chinese takeout onto the table.

"Yes." Wallace and Veronica said in unison, pointing at Dick who was taking a seat at their table.

Logan quickly sidestepped to avoid a back slap from Dick. "Hey-ya Dick, joining us today?"

"If it's okay with you, Ronnie, and… Waldo?"
"Wallace." Wallace glared at Dick.

"Right, Wallace." Dick smiled guilelessly, offering Wallace a fist. Wallace stared at Dick's fist for a few seconds and then lightly bumped it with his own.


Luke scanned the occupants of the table nervously. "Maybe we could talk in private?"

"No need. Logan and Wallace already know, and I have a hard time believing that Dick isn't at least somewhat aware of what you've gotten yourself into." Veronica glanced at Dick who nodded.

"Dude, Luke, it's not exactly a secret." Dick turned back to Logan, "Can I steal an egg roll?"

"Not if you want to keep your namesake, Dick." Veronica watched as Dick quickly snatched his hands away from the bag of take-out and held them up in surrender.

"Now Luke, has Zigman given you a deadline?" Veronica asked while accepting the bag of eggrolls from a smirking Logan.

"He told me I had until tomorrow to give him the steroids and that the money wasn't enough." Luke looked down at his hands and sighed. "I know you said you wouldn't help me if I was giving him drugs, but I don't know what to do." Luke looked completely defeated.

"I have a few ideas regarding that. For now, I need you to concentrate on rounding up the money in case we can't find the piñata. Can you handle that Luke?" Veronica asked with a hint of sarcasm.

Luke nodded and stood up to leave. "Thanks Veronica," he said as he shuffled away.

"So V, you have any leads on the car or piñata?" Wallace asked.

"I've got a guy..." She answered evasively, earning her glares from both Wallace and Logan. Veronica decided to enact the next part of her plan for Luke before either of them could ask more questions. "I'll be right back, boys."

She found Troy kneeling at his locker. "Time for a chat?" She asked, bending down into Troy's eye line.

"Well, you'd think that if hell froze over maybe it'd be on the news." Troy smirked at Veronica.

"I just wanna hear more about the steroids you bought last weekend. Remember? When your dad's car was stolen."

"You mean the weekend that you were supposed to be my date for homecoming? Sure I remember that." Troy tapped his index finger against his chin. "And you must mean the steroids that Luke bought. Wow, you suck at this Nancy Drew stuff. You should get a new hobby."

"So, you knew he was doing it." Veronica pushed.

"I had no idea what Luke was up to until after the fact. He told me the next day." Troy's voice softened and he leaned closer to Veronica. "I'm the victim here; first my girl ditches me for some jackass, and then my car gets stolen." Troy reached out and grabbed Veronica's arm almost exactly where Duncan had earlier that morning, causing her to wince. "And now I'm going to be sent to some Catholic boarding school."

"Troy, let go of me." Veronica hissed through the pain as Troy tightened his hold on her arm.
"Hey, Veronica. This guy bothering you?" Logan called playfully from down the hall. As he approached them, Veronica watched Logan's expression morph into a deep scowl. Logan reached out and smacked Troy's hand away from Veronica and shoved him into the lockers. "No touching." Logan wagged his finger in Troy's face and moved Veronica behind him.

"Are we done here officers?" Troy asked snidely as he pushed away from the locker, rubbing his shoulder.

Logan flicked his hand at Troy, dismissing him, and turned to face Veronica, "Did he hurt you?"

"I'm fine," Veronica reached for Logan's arm and tugged it gently, "Let's go finish lunch."

Logan nodded and placed his hand at the small of Veronica's back to guide her through the doors and back out to the quad.

Veronica thought about her earlier encounter with Duncan and then her confrontation with Troy and a shudder surged through her body. She hoped Logan couldn't feel it.

What is the deal with people thinking it's okay to manhandle me? I need to practice drawing Mr. Sparky faster.

Veronica resumed her seat between Wallace and Logan and noticed that Dick had returned to his usual place at the 09er table. She shrugged at the change and started rummaging through the remaining containers of food. Spotting crispy shrimp she looked up at Logan, "Why would you order shrimp? What if you accidentally ate some?"

"I know you really like it. And I knew it was there so I was careful." He smiled shyly at her.

Veronica started to lean over to give him a side hug and then, remembering where she was and that his back was still tender, whispered in his ear instead. "Thank you. Not just for this, but earlier with Duncan and Troy, too." She shifted back to her seat and smiled.

Wallace looked back and forth between the two. "Is everything okay? You're both acting a little weird."

"It's been a pretty strange day, Papa Bear." Veronica said, earning a glare from Wallace.

"Hey!" Dick plopped back down at the table and continued in a hushed voice, "have you heard the rumors about Duncan?"

I guess now is as good a time as any to fill Wallace in on this morning.

Wallace leaned in conspiratorially, "Yeah man, I've been hearing some pretty strange stuff."

The truth is actually weirder than any of the rumors they've heard. Veronica looked to Logan, who shrugged questioningly at her. Veronica shook her head and let the boys have their little tête-à-tête while she and Logan continued to eat.

"So it turns out Duncan got messed up yesterday and went all Fight Club on Lilly's grave." Dick shared. Veronica saw Logan shiver a bit at the mention of Lilly, but no one else seemed to notice.

Well, that explains why Duncan looked like he'd been a fight yesterday at lunch. Veronica thought to herself.

"I heard something else…" Dick looked over at Logan and Veronica, "Sean said that he saw Duncan's SUV at your place this morning Ronnie. That true?"
Just great. Douchebag Sean would pick this morning to be on my side of town. Veronica nodded and looked to Logan. After a moment of silent communication, Logan shared a very abbreviated version of the morning's events. Veronica could tell from Wallace's narrow-eyed expression that he wasn't pleased to be hearing about this from Dick. The bell rang as Logan finished telling Wallace about Jake taking Duncan away.

Wallace fist bumped Logan, "Thanks for having her back man, she's pesky but at this rate we may need a third or fourth ally just to keep up with the threats."

Logan chuckled, "I may have a third I could offer up, but she won't like it." He smirked and nodded toward Dick as they all exited the quad.

"Don't even think about it." Veronica hip checked Logan into Wallace and took off for her locker.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hope you all enjoyed a little more Veronica this time around. Big thanks go to Bondopoulos for all the work she put into that first section from Veronica's perspective and the Flashback with Lilly. I had been really struggling getting it out and she busted her bum making it so much better than what I originally had.

Here is the link to the missing scene. This is the conversation at Veronica's locker between her and Logan from Veronica's POV.

http://kmd0107.tumblr.com/post/114989730809/sunday-more-than-a-snippet-drabbet-snibble
And The Feelin' That I'm Under

Chapter Notes

A/N: Pop back to Chapter 10 for the link to a missing scene/POV or you can just head over to my tumblir (KMD0107) to see it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 11 – And The Feelin' That I'm Under

Wallace climbed into the back seat of Logan's 'douchemobile' and wondered what he had gotten himself into, both literally and figuratively. The truck may have been hideous, but the back seat didn't lack for space. *Bet that's why he went with the Nissan instead of one of those snooty German cars. Plenty of room to spread out...* Wallace scrunched up his face when he realized the implications of this, *Ugh, why did I have to think that?* Wallace quickly inspected the seat to make sure that there wasn't anything he didn't want to touch.

"Just had her detailed." Logan winked at Wallace in the rearview mirror.

"What are you talking about?" Veronica asked, as she slid into the front passenger seat.

"Nothing, just guy talk." Logan replied with a smarmy smile that reminded Wallace a bit of Aaron Echolls.

"You've got your dad's charm." Wallace blurted out unintentionally.

Logan's eyes narrowed momentarily, and then his face smoothed back out into its usual, arrogant countenance. The transformation was something that Wallace had observed more than once in the last few days. He was fairly sure that if he hadn't been watching closely he might have missed it.

"I'd like to think I take more after my mother in that regard." Logan made eye contact with Wallace through the rearview mirror again and Wallace would swear that Logan's eyes actually twinkled. *Smize*, the word from America's Next Top Model popped into Wallace's head. He shuddered at the memory of a girl he once dated forcing him to watch Tyra Banks' tutorial on 'smiling with your eyes'.

"Knock it off Logan, and pay attention to the road. We are well aware that you think you're pretty." Veronica teased.

Logan rapidly tapped his fingers against the steering wheel. "*No think* about it. I *am* pretty... pretty hot, pretty talented with my hands, and there's this thing I do with my tongue that I've been told is pretty—"

"All right! Cool it, Casanova. I'd like to maintain *some* mystery between us. And you know I meant the adjective not the adverb. But if we're going there, how about pretty annoying and egotistical?" Veronica snarked.

"You two are..." Wallace just shook his head, at a loss.
"Pretty entertaining?"

"Entertaining is one word for it." Wallace laughed. Suddenly Logan's words came back to him. "Come to think of it, I wouldn't mind learning about that tongue thing though. Got a big date with Georgia comin' up. Share the knowledge, Echolls. Ya know, now that we're pals and all."

"Later, Fennel." Logan winked into the rearview mirror. "I don't wanna upset 'virgin ears' over here." He swept his arm around to point his thumb at Veronica.

Veronica scoffed loudly. Wallace saw Logan's eyes grow wide and his mouth clamp shut as he nervously ducked his head to avoid catching Wallace's eyes in the mirror again.

Wallace's thoughts turned to his and Logan's conversation from Sunday. Veronica with no memory after a party where people had the date-rape drug. Rape... Wallace hadn't thought the word in reference to Veronica, even after hearing Logan's story about the party at Shelly Pomroy's last year but—was that what happened?

They pulled into a spot on the street in front of Mars Investigations. Wallace jumped out of the truck quickly, not wanting Veronica to read his thoughts, as she was so often able to do. He started making his way up to the Mars Investigations office with Logan and Veronica trailing behind.

The plan this afternoon was for Veronica to do a little research before some 'clandestine' meeting that she had. She refused to elaborate about it to either of her friends. Meanwhile, Wallace and Logan would commence with operation 'put the screws to Troy'.

Wallace waited for Veronica to unlock the door and then headed straight for her computer. "All right, V. Where should we start?"

"Well, my dear Wallace, that is elementary!" Veronica quipped in a British accent. "Start at the beginning—the credit report." She smiled tightly and moved the mouse over the bookmark bar, clicking on the appropriate link.

Out of the corner of his eye, Wallace saw Logan throw himself down on the old couch and begin pulling things out of his backpack. Logan's expression was back to narrowed eyes and a tense jaw.

Wallace had noticed that something hadn't been quite right with them all day. And that story about Duncan at lunch had been very vague. He was used to V being a bit closed off and understood why she wouldn't want to share private details in such a public place, but both Logan and Veronica had been acting strangely all afternoon. As Veronica leaned over Wallace to input her password, he accidentally bumped her arm and she practically jumped out of her skin. It was the final straw.

"Okay you two. Spill. V, why are you so jumpy? And Logan, every time you think no one's looking, you look homicidal. Fill a brotha in."

While they waited for the credit report to be generated, Veronica disclosed a few more of the details of what had happened with Duncan that morning.

"So neither of you have a clue what he was ranting about?" Wallace asked in disbelief. Could they both really be that clueless?

"No, he wasn't making any sense." Veronica said, rolling her shoulders. Wallace noticed that Logan didn't look as innocent. He gave Logan an incredulous look.

"Fine, I might have an inkling." Logan sighed heavily, "And Veronica is just in denial that her precious golden-boy Duncan could think such a thing."
"Oh come on Logan. You can't possibly believe that he thinks you and I were screwing around behind his back? You were totally hung up on Lilly and I was in 'puppy love' with Duncan." Veronica turned back to the computer with a dismissive wave of her hand.

Wallace could tell from the look on Logan's face that Veronica was dead wrong. The accusation of cheating may not have been true, but if Logan's expression meant anything, Duncan may have had reason to believe that there was something between Logan and Veronica. Wallace glared at Logan, waiting from him to come clean. It wasn't until Veronica handed Logan a print out of Troy's credit report that Logan caved.

"Veronica, um…Ronnie." Veronica looked up at Logan. "Um… it's possible that Lilly might have told Duncan that…" Logan cleared his throat a few times before continuing. "She might have told Duncan that I had feelings for you. You know, back then." He stated quickly, his bouncing heel practically jamming through the floorboards with nervous energy.

Wallace held his breath while Veronica stared at Logan for a few long seconds and then started laughing. Logan looked to Wallace, but all Wallace could do was shrug. He had no idea what was going through Veronica's head in even the most normal of times. Veronica had thrown herself on the couch next to Logan, giggling.

"What is so funny about that, Veronica? You think my having feelings for you is funny?" Logan asked, a thread of anger tingeing his words.

"No, I don't find your feelings funny. I find the idea that you had those kind of feelings for me funny. Especially after you and Lilly got together. I mean, come on! As if you," she pointed at Logan, "or anyone else, for that matter, could ever see me as anything other than a friend when Lilly was around. I had to date her brother because he was the only man on the planet that didn't want Lilly," Veronica continued laughing to herself and patted Logan on the hand with an indulgent smile.

Wallace found himself frowning at Veronica's assessment of her attractions. And Logan looked lost at sea, or some other cliché. Wallace felt his mouth drop open. Oh my god, Richie Rich totally had a thing for V!

He started to point at Logan but was cut off by Logan curtly shaking his head and mouthing a curt 'no'. Okay, I'll save that little observation for later. But Wallace was definitely not going to let Logan escape the conversation forever, if for no other reason than to make sure that things with Duncan were under control. And as for Veronica…well, he'd bring it up with Logan too. Wallace just needed to get Logan away from V long enough to have said talk. With the subjects they had to discuss having V overhear them would not end well for either of them.

"So…" Wallace tried to change the subject, "V, give me that report and let Logan and I get to work picking apart your ex." Wallace forced a smile and hoped that Veronica bought it.

"Right! I'll just be in my dad's office. I have a few phone calls to make. You two play nice." She giggled a few more times while she made her way into the interior office and closed the door.

"Logan?" Wallace tried to get Logan's attention as he came around the desk to join him on the couch. "Logan?" He tried again when Logan didn't respond.

"I don't want to talk about it." Logan said sullenly.

"Okay, I thought you wanted to talk about how we were going to mess with Troy, but if not I'll work on it by myself." Wallace started flipping through the pages that Veronica had printed out.

Logan didn't respond but joined Wallace in searching through the pages of transactions. After a few minutes of silent paper shuffling, Logan finally spoke. "What if we cancelled all his credit cards?"
Wallace was getting ready to respond when Veronica's head popped out the door, "Stay away from felony offences please. You don't want to do anything that can be traced back to you." Then she shut the door again.

"Okay so we shouldn't cancel the cards…” Logan pulled out his wallet and started staring at his various cards. He looked back up at Wallace, his eyes were twinkling again and he was smiling like the Cheshire Cat. "What if we ordered him new cards?"

Wallace looked at him in confusion, "Wouldn't opening new accounts be bad too?"

"No, not new credit card accounts. I mean literally new cards. Have you seen all those advertisements for customized cards?"

Wallace shook his head—scoffing at the idea that he would actually have a credit card.

"Anyway, I get them all the time. Get your favorite sports team or even your own picture. We could request new cards with obnoxious stuff on them. Like Hello Kitty." Logan was getting excited now. "All we have to do is call and tell them the card won't swipe any more and have them send the new cards, the information you need for that is pretty minimal. Social Security Number and mother's maiden name, if it's like most of my cards. We have all that information right here," Logan tapped the credit report in front of him.

Wallace found Logan's excitement contagious. They split up the list of Troy's cards, looked up the card image options, and took turns calling to request the cards. In just under thirty-six hours, Troy would be the proud recipient of cards ranging from Hello Kitty to the Little Mermaid.

"What else can we do? That should be embarrassing when he has to use them in front of other people, but what can we do to disrupt his day?" Wallace asked to the room.

Veronica's head popped back in, her phone still pressed to her ear, "Um… I happen to know from experience that having your car malfunction is a huge disruption." She smiled and ducked back into the office.

"How does she do that?" Logan asked, smiling at the now closed door.

"Got me, man. Lucky for us, Troy took his dad's car when they went to Mexico. That leaves his own precious BMW fair game for us. What kind of stuff did you guys do to Veronica's car?" Wallace asked, not even thinking of how the question might affect Logan.

Logan choked, "Shit! I don't want to think about that." Logan slumped into the couch.

"Sorry man, but really, I know about all of the flat tires, was there anything else?" Wallace asked in a hushed voice.

"I think Enbom loosened the wires to her tail lights so she'd get pulled over." Logan looked uncomfortable.

"Come on man, you all were constantly dogging her. What else?" Wallace pushed.

"I'm serious, I only ever let the air out of her tires. And I made sure she knew it was me. And of course there was the crowbar incident… but again, I wanted her to know it was me." He grimaced at Wallace. "The others didn't give me the details of their plans." Logan exhaled sharply and bent down, hiding his face between his knees. "God I'm such a prick."

Veronica chose that moment to join them again. She sat down next to Logan. "I've come to think of
it as 'Psychotic Jackass-ery'." She said, gently rubbing a few circles on his lower back. "And remember I've got a soft spot for pricks." Veronica said, very seriously.

Logan chuckled lightly and leaned into her shoulder, "Yeah, I might have started a rumor to that effect. Sorry about that."

"Well, then I guess at least one thing you said about me in the last year was true." She winked. "Come on, tell me about what you two have been doing." She rubbed one more circle across Logan's lower back and leaned her head on his shoulder briefly.

Wallace found himself fascinated watching them. All joking aside, there was a familiarity between Veronica and Logan that was different than his own relationship with his BFF. He was close to Veronica, but with Logan it felt different, charged.

Wallace shook his head and quickly filled Veronica in on what they had accomplished and their plans to mess with Troy's car enough to hopefully get him pulled over or at least inconvenienced.

"Well my little Padawan, stronger in the force it appears you are becoming." Veronica said in a passable imitation of Master Yoda.

"I'm pretty sure revenge is more of a Sith thing, V." Wallace laughed.

"I'll gladly be the Darth Vader to your Galactic Emperor any day," Logan said with a smirk and those smiling eyes of his.

"Who does that make me?" Wallace was almost afraid to ask.

"Darth Mal?" Veronica asked Logan.

"Naw… Wally here is more…"

"If you say Jar Jar Binks I'ma shank your ass."

At Veronica's request, Logan dropped Wallace off first before heading to her apartment.

"Logan, what are you doing for dinner tonight?" Veronica asked him.

"Um… probably just some takeout. My mom had to head back to LA.; Aaron 'needed her'." Logan said with a hint of bitterness. Even though his mother drank a lot, he did value the time he got to spend with her when Aaron wasn't home.

"Have dinner with us then. I'm not even sure that my dad will be back in time to eat. We can just order extra and he can have it whenever he shows up. We can do some homework or whatever until I have to head to my meeting…" Veronica's voice trailed off. Logan turned to look at her and saw something soft in her gaze. He didn't think it was pity, but he couldn't quite place it.

"Mars, I don't need a babysitter. I can eat dinner by myself." Logan said a little more harshly than he really intended.

Veronica exhaled loudly from the passenger's seat, "You're such a jackass; did it not occur to you that maybe I don't want to eat dinner by myself after this morning. You can't just let a girl keep her dignity?" She teased.

Logan couldn't help but laugh, despite the fact that he didn't believe her. Hell, this girl had been through some real shit and had done it alone. He really didn't think she was in need of his company.
but… he couldn't deny that the idea of having dinner with her sounded much better than sitting at
home alone. Even if it did just delay going back to the empty house. Logan knew the house didn't
have to be empty; he could have invited over any of his many 09er buddies. But after spending so
much time over the last few days with Veronica, and even Wallace, it just didn't appeal.

"Fine, you win. I'll eat dinner with you—I guess." He smiled at her.

Logan quickly parked the Xterra in the small parking lot and followed Veronica to her apartment. As
they approached the door, Logan was sure that he could hear noises coming from inside. "Your dad
must be home Ronnie, maybe I shouldn't stay?"

"Dad's car wasn't in the lot… and you're staying regardless." She declared while changing the angle
of her head, presumably to try to see through the blinds. Veronica reached for the door and turned
the unlocked knob. She looked back at Logan, who could only shrug. If it wasn't her dad, he didn't
have a clue who else it could be.

Logan watched Veronica pull out her Taser and reach for the knob, her back rigid and shoulders
tense as she pushed the door open. He quickly dropped his bag in case he needed to be able to move
easily. He stepped over the threshold immediately behind Veronica and was surprised to see Rebecca
James bustling around the Mars' kitchen wearing an apron.

"All right. Where is your sifter?" Ms. James spoke to the room.

"I don't think we have one." Veronica replied.

"Oh, hi! Um…" Ms. James pulled herself up from where she had been digging through the
cupboard, only to be knocked back by Backup jumping on her. Logan was surprised to see her
laugh, collapse to the floor, and start petting Backup.

"You didn't give Backup human food, did you?" Veronica demanded curtly.

"Oh no, no, no. I just found his happy spot, that's all. So, um, another case of bad timing. Your dad
went out for groceries, because I'm making dinner for both of you tonight." Ms. James looked over
and saw Logan. "There is plenty for you, too, Logan. So, uh, how was your day?" Ms. James asked,
smiling and looking a bit nervous.

"Fine. You know, the usual. Got accosted in my own home—missed first period. You must have
heard." Veronica said coldly, plastering on one of her fake smiles.

"Ronnie, play nice." Logan said so quietly that only she could hear him.

"Oh, right. Well… I was sorry to hear about Duncan." Ms. James was looking more uncomfortable
by the minute.

"Thanks, we just hope he's okay." Logan responded. "How was your day Becky?" He asked with
just a hint of a smile, trying to get the conversation back on track. Logan wasn't a fan of Ms. James,
but the antagonism rolling off of Veronica was never pleasant to be on the receiving end of and
Logan had no desire to get taken down in the fallout if she went postal.

"It was excellent, thank you Logan." Ms. James looked back at Veronica, "I know you guys like
Italian food so I am making fettuccine. And for desert… guess."

"No idea." Veronica said sharply. Logan moved behind Veronica and started massaging her tight
shoulders, hoping to get her to relax a little. Veronica sighed heavily and leaned into his touch so he
continued despite a confused look from Ms. James.
Ms. James recovered quickly and smiled brightly again, "Waffles and ice cream. That's your favorite, right? I put this sauce on top of vanilla ice cream; it's on the burner. Well, you'll see. I promise it's really good."

"That sounds really good, doesn't it Ronnie?" Logan asked, squeezing Veronica's shoulders a bit when she didn't respond.

"Oh, yeah, that sounds good Ms. James." Veronica replied, sounding subdued and far away.

"Where'd you go just now?" Logan whispered in her ear.

Veronica just shook her head and replied softly, "Later."

Logan was startled by the sound of shattering ceramic.

"Oh!" Ms. James cried and swiftly bent down to start picking up the broken pieces of the bowl she had dropped. "Oh, God, I'm so sorry. It just slipped out of my hands."

"It's all right. Logan can you grab the broom?" Veronica asked as she bent over to help Ms. James, a dazed look still on her face.

Logan was wandering aimlessly, trying to figure out where a broom would be, when he heard the door open and spotted Mr. Mars carrying a full bag of groceries.

"Hey, how's it going in here?" Mr. Mars asked the two women bent over on the floor then looked up, "Logan, you look lost." Keith chuckled.

"A broom?" Logan replied.

"Look at this. I'm a klutz." Ms. James tittered nervously, indicating the mess on the floor.

"Ah, it was ancient anyway. Don't even worry about it. Broom's in the closet there." Keith pointed to a door down the hall.

Logan quickly grabbed the broom and handed it to Veronica. She looked completely neutral, which Logan knew was a bad sign; Veronica was often at her most dangerous when she appeared calm.

Veronica started to speak, "I really appreciate you doing this…"

"Yeah, Becky, we do. It smells good, do you need any help?" Logan quickly cut Veronica off. He suspected she was getting ready to beg out of this dinner, but he knew she would have to deal with Rebecca James and her father sooner or later, and the adolescent in Logan was dying to watch it all unfold. Besides, it was nice to watch her squirm after she had laughed off his confession about having had feelings for her.

Rebecca tried to hide her disbelief, "Really? Um…sure Logan. If you could grab a bowl to replace the one I broke, I'll start making the salad."

"That's very nice of you Logan." Surprise laced Keith's words too.

"Wow everyone, don't try to hide your surprise that I know how to be a good guest." Logan announced sarcastically to the adults. Veronica harrumphed at his comment.

Rebecca and Keith had the courtesy to look embarrassed. "Veronica, why don't you help me bring the rest of the groceries and some files in from the car?"
Veronica put the broom away after dumping the remains of the bowl into the trash. "Sure Dad." She glared at Logan as she passed him. Logan couldn't help but laugh as he ducked down to grab another bowl.

"What's so funny?" Rebecca asked, after the Marses left the apartment.

"Well, Becky, in case your keen senses missed it, Veronica was getting ready to say we couldn't stay for dinner, and I ruined her escape plans. Now she is not very happy with me." He continued to chuckle to himself.

Rebecca gave him a wry smile, "Logan, the only person who ever called me Becky was my dad. Maybe outside of school you could just call me Rebecca?"

Logan was surprised by Rebecca's admission and by her use of the past tense. He knew he probably shouldn't ask but, hell, he was Logan Echolls—master of psychotic jackass-ery—and he liked to push buttons. "Past tense, Rebecca? Don't speak to dear old dad anymore?"

"No Logan. I haven't spoken to my father since I left for college." She said evenly, not looking up from her food preparations. "He was… not a nice man." She glanced briefly at Logan where he was leaning against the counter, and then resumed chopping the tomato she'd set on the cutting board.

Logan shoved his hands in his pockets and shifted his weight uncomfortably. Either Rebecca was telling the truth and had just shared something personal with Logan, or she was lying to try to form a fake connection with him. From his experience, the latter seemed more likely. Logan rolled his shoulders and deliberately smoothed out his features into what he liked to think of as 'indifferent pomposity'.

"Need help with anything else?" Logan asked as nonchalantly as possible.

The door swung open signaling Veronica and Mr. Mars' return. Veronica's arms were full of extendable file folders and Mr. Mars was holding two bags of groceries.

"Maybe you can set out plates when I finish up here." She indicated the vegetables she was still cutting for the salad, since the counter space was also the eating area.

Logan nodded, his customary smirk firmly in place, as he headed to the living room to contemplate how all four of them were going to be able to sit at the small island.

Much to Veronica's surprise, the dinner Ms. James made was pretty tasty. But eating waffles and ice cream—her mother's signature dessert—with her dad's girlfriend was just not going to happen. As subtly as possible, Veronica gave Logan a look that indicated he'd best keep his big mouth shut, a message she emphasized by placing her hand on his knee.

"Dinner was really good, Ms. James. And we're really sorry to dine and dash but we," Veronica indicated herself and Logan, punctuating her statement with a firm squeeze to Logan's knee, "have some things to work on before it gets too late. So we can't stay for dessert."

"Really?" Ms. James said with disappointment.

"Why not?" Keith looked back and forth between Veronica and Logan. Veronica was sure he was looking for a crack in the facade. She hoped that Logan could hold his own.

"I…" Veronica looked back at Logan, "We… told a friend we'd meet him at the Sac-N-Pac. It's a for school project."
"Oh, well, I-I'll ask first next time. Make sure you're available for the full dine-in experience." Ms. James replied.

"Thanks for cooking. I may have to pop up and steal some dessert when I drop Veronica off later." Logan gave Veronica a smirk that she knew meant he wasn't letting her get away with anything, despite her tightening grip on his knee.

"Which won't be too late." Keith narrowed his eyes first at Logan and then Veronica. She ignored her father as she jumped off the stool, grabbed her bag, and dragged Logan off of his stool toward the door.

"Have a good night." Veronica called as she pulled the door closed behind them.

Veronica waited until she was almost to the parking lot to give Logan a piece of her mind. "What the hell was that? Did you just want to watch me be tortured?" Veronica growled as she dug in her bag for her keys.

"So what if I did? And what is your problem—you went all quiet when she first mentioned making waffles and ice cream, which I know you love. Is this meeting so urgent that we couldn't stay for dessert?" Logan asked spinning his key ring around his finger.

Veronica gave up her search for her keys and looked up at Logan. "My mom and I used to make them together, okay?" Veronica felt her tear ducts begin to burn at Logan's look of understanding. "I haven't had it since she left." She resumed digging in her bag for her car keys while blinking rapidly to hold back the tears she didn't want Logan to see. *God, what is wrong with me? Veronica Mars doesn't cry.*

As she pulled the keys out of her bag, Logan snatched them right out of her hand. "I told your dad I would be bringing you home later." He smiled cautiously.

"Fine!" Veronica growled, frustration over-taking the ache in her chest, and stomped around to the passenger's side of the Xterra. "But you take me where I tell you and then you pick me up when I tell you to, got it?"

Logan nodded, a grin now plastered on his face.

"Drop me off at the Sac-n-Pac." She commanded.

"You know, you should be thanking me Mars." Logan stated as he pulled out into the early-evening traffic.

"Is that so? How do you figure?" Veronica responded snidely.

"If we had taken off earlier for this quote 'school project', your dad would have expected you back much sooner. And I had already deduced from our earlier conversation about dinner that this very important meeting wouldn't be taking place until late. See... I totally saved your ass there." He flashed Veronica a smile that she was sure caused most girls to melt. She wasn't most girls. Well, fine, maybe it spoke to her marshmallow core but she'd never let him know that.

"All you did was force me to sit through an awkward, though admittedly tasty, dinner." Veronica smirked, but couldn't resist licking her lips at the memory of the creamy alfredo sauce. It really had been very good.

"Whatever, Mars. You loved every bite of that dinner. I was sitting next to you and heard every one of your cute little 'mmm's. You're not fooling anyone." Logan reached over and squeezed Veronica's
cheek like an annoying aunt would.

"Like you didn't enjoy it, too." She replied weakly as they pulled into the Sac-n-Pac parking lot.

"True, but I wasn't the one trying to get out of the dinner. Though I was the one who Rebecca tried to bond with." Logan said with apprehension, putting the truck in park.

Veronica turned in her seat to look at him, "What do you mean?"

"While you were grabbing the groceries, she told me her dad 'wasn't a nice person'." Logan replied mockingly.

Veronica wasn't sure what to make of that, so she just nodded. "You need to go; my source isn't going to be very…tolerant of your presence. I'll text you when I'm ready to be picked up, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm outta here. How long do you think?" Logan asked, waving his hand in a 'come-on' gesture.

"Two hours give or take."

Logan nodded and put the truck in reverse. Veronica hopped out, slammed the door, and gave him a small finger wave. She waited until the she could no longer see the yellow monstrosity before texting Weevil.

To Weevil from Veronica Mars, 6:53pm:
Rdy when u r

Less than a minute later Veronica heard the roar of a motorcycle approaching. Eli 'Weevil' Navarro, the leader of the PCHers, pulled up in front of her.

"You were waiting for my call weren't you? Admit it!" Veronica gushed, playfully slapping Weevil on the shoulder.

"Blanca." He held out a helmet to Veronica in greeting, giving no further comment.

She accepted it, strapped it on her head, and climbed onto the back of the motorcycle. A few minutes later Weevil pulled over in a rundown, but quiet 90902 neighborhood.

"Here's how it is chica. The car—it came though and is already gone." Weevil explained, pulling his helmet off after dismounting his motorcycle.

"But it was stolen early Sunday morning…" Veronica said, thinking out loud.

"Yeah, even Angel thought that was pretty quick. But the 'ahem', paperwork was all in order, if you get what I'm sayin'." Weevil puckered his lips with raised eyebrows.

She got it. It was looking less and less like a random boost. "Did you ask about the piñata?"

"One of the guys, Mario, he took it for his daughter's birthday."

"Please tell me you know where Mario lives, because we need to get that piñata right away." Veronica told Weevil, her heart racing.

"Baby, I'll buy you a piñata." Weevil said waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

"Will you buy me a piñata full of steroids?" Veronica said in her most sugary-sweet voice, fluttering
her eyelashes.

Weevil smiled darkly and laughed, "That's their house, right there with the balloons." Weevil pointed to a mailbox a few houses down.

Veronica sighed in relief and took off toward the house, Weevil on her heels. She followed the sounds of the party to the backyard where a little girl was swinging at the piñata she was seeking. "Shit." She said under her breath.

The little girl continued to swing at the piñata and Veronica ran toward them, "Stop, stop!" She called as the piñata blew open, releasing a rain of candy. Veronica quickly backtracked when she realized the children's prize wasn't performance-enhancing drugs. "Sorry, sorry." She mumbled.

"Está loca." Veronica heard one of the mothers say as she retreated to the edge of the yard where Weevil stood.

"Well?" Weevil asked her.

"It was full of candy..." Veronica responded, accepting the helmet he offered her once again.

"What does that mean blondie?" He pushed again.

"I'm not sure yet. Can you drop me back at the Sac-n-Pac?" Veronica asked, no longer paying attention to Weevil. Her mind was cranking away, trying to figure out what this new piece of information meant. She absentmindedly climbed onto the back of the motorcycle and held onto the gang leader while she filtered through everything she had learned.

None of this makes sense. Veronica decided as Weevil pulled back into the Sac-n-Pac parking lot. She climbed off and removed the helmet as well as the heavy leather duster she had been wearing. "Thanks Weevil, I'll be in touch."

"What the hell, V?" Weevil grabbed Veronica's arm as she handed him the helmet, scowling angrily at the bruises that had been exposed as she pulled off her jacket.

"Hazard of the job." Veronica replied flippantly.

"If you say so." Weevil shook his head and sped away.

Veronica pulled out her phone and saw that it had barely been an hour.

To Logan Echolls from Veronica Mars, 8:02pm:
Come get me?

To Veronica Mars from Logan Echolls, 8:02pm:
On my way

He had replied almost instantly, and less than five minutes later Logan pulled into the parking lot.

"You couldn't have gotten here this fast from your house." Veronica accused.

"That is true." Logan smiled at her, offering nothing further.

Touché, Echolls. I didn't tell you what I was doing so you won't tell me. Fine. Veronica sat quietly as Logan pulled out of the lot and turned the opposite direction of her apartment.

"Where are we going?"

"Ice cream? Wow Echolls, you know the way to a girl's heart." Veronica said, clutching her chest dramatically to mask her genuine excitement.

"No," he responded immediately. "I know the way to your heart."

Veronica found herself speechless. *Calm down Mars, you know all about misinterpreting his flirtations. He's just teasing.* Veronica was quiet for the rest of the drive, afraid she might say something she would regret.

Logan parked and she followed him into the small ice cream parlor.

"What'll it be Ronnie? Rocky Road? Or have you developed new tastes?" Logan wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her close to the viewing window. He pointed at what had been one of Veronica's absolute favorite flavors for years.

She actually hadn't had Rocky Road in a while and decided that if there was ever a time to be nostalgic, then having ice cream with Logan was it. "The old standby it is."

Logan pushed her away toward the tables and ordered for both of them. He joined Veronica at a small table by the window a few minutes later. "Okay, how did it go?" He asked calmly, but Veronica could see how tense he really was.

"Well, the piñata was a dead end." She said simply. She hesitated, curious to see if he would push for more, hoping he would.

"What does that mean? Did you find the actual piñata?" He asked.

Veronica could feel a small adrenaline rush at sharing what she had worked out. "I did. Well, my source did. The car was chopped. And not in the regular way..." She smiled excitedly. "One of the guys on the crew took the piñata for his kid's birthday. But when I got there..." She paused.

Logan looked at her expectantly. His expression eager, eyes bright and twinkling with shared excitement. "Well..." He prompted impatiently.

"Nothing but candy! No drugs—they thought I was crazy." Logan looked at her speculatively, "No, really, one of the moms called me crazy." Veronica couldn't help but grin wickedly.

Logan laughed loudly, earning startled looks from the handful of other patrons. "So where does that leave Luke?" He asked a little more quietly.

"Well, now it's time to move on to Plan C." Veronica responded confidently.

"Jesus Veronica, what were plans A and B?" Logan asked loudly, gaining a few more glares.

She laughed. "Well A was pretty easy. Get the drugs 'slash'," She slashed the hand holding a spoon full of ice cream through the air, "money back from either Troy or Duncan. Plan B was to find the car and get them back that way—which was obviously a bust. And now Plan C..." Veronica rubbed her hands together manically before her face drooped a bit, "Okay, I haven't completely worked out Plan C. But..."

Logan interrupted her, holding his hand up, "I have every faith that you'll figure something out. But I want you to promise me something." He reached out to grasp the hand that wasn't occupied with a
spoonful of ice cream.

Veronica could tell he was waiting for her acquiescence, so she nodded tentatively.

"I want you to promise to tell me what's going on and let me help. I don't want you talking to that Zigman guy alone." Veronica was ready to interrupt him, her mouth opening on the words. "Wait," Logan stopped her, "I'm not saying you can't…well, that you can't do anything—I know better than that—what I'm saying is include me."

Veronica had to admit he had a point. Approaching Zigman could be dangerous and having backup—the human kind who could dial a phone—might come in handy. "All right Logan, you have a deal. I promise to include you in my plans for this. No approaching scary drug dealers without informing you first." She squeezed his hand firmly. Logan quickly raised it to his mouth for a chaste kiss before placing it back on the table with a smile.

Veronica and Logan spent the rest of their time together chatting about a few pending class assignments and their plans for lunch the next day. Veronica climbed back into the Xterra, happily sated after ice cream and the excitement of the case. All too soon, Logan was dropping her back off at home. She said her goodbyes and headed inside.

Keith was sitting in his favorite chair watching a sports recap and sipping on a soda. "Hey honey, how'd the project go?" He didn't look away from the TV.

"Oh you know, there's always someone who doesn't do their part." She chuckled to herself. "We'll be meeting again to try to finish it up later in the week." Veronica told him, providing herself cover if she needed to be out late another night.

After begging off watching TV with her dad, Veronica quickly went through her bedtime routine before pulling an envelope out from between her headboard and mattress. She flipped, yet again, through the images that someone had used to blackmail her mother.

As Veronica stared at the images, the memory of her mom pulling her out of school a few days before she left played back in her mind.

*Three days later she was gone. At the time, I thought it was just one more item on the growing list of odd things my mom did. I chalked her nerves up to the vodka. But now, I think she really was scared.*

The time had come to try to find her mom.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: As always many thanks to my betas Bondopoulos and BryroseA! Welcome to all the new followers/subscribers and thank you to all of you who have been coming along for this ride. Hope you enjoyed this chapter and feel free to let me know what you thought in a review/comment or PM. I love hearing what you think!
Chapter 12 – Put Up Your Dukes

Veronica woke in a cold sweat, her arms flailing as if to ward off an attack. It felt as though someone had been holding her feet to prevent her from getting away. She pushed herself up to sitting and looked down to find that it was just the sheet wrapped around her legs. Backup whined from the other side of her bedroom door, so after catching her breath, Veronica fumbled her way out of her small bed and let the dog into the room on her way to the kitchen. Still a little shaky from the dream she bumped into the doorframe with her bruised arm and swallowed a hiss of pain, not wanting to wake up her father.

In the kitchen, Veronica swallowed down a full glass of water, hoping it would ground her. After a few more steadying breaths, she quickly refilled the glass and took it back to her bedroom with her. Sitting down on the bed, she patted the mattress next to her to signal Backup to follow suit. He did, giving her a tentative lick on the cheek before snuggling up against her side.

"I know boy, I'm not too happy about it either." She whispered into his scruff.

"Duder!" Veronica startled at the sound of Jeff Bridges as "The Dude". What on earth? Veronica reached for her phone and saw that it was an incoming text message from Logan. Apparently he had given himself a custom ringtone.

To Veronica Mars from Logan Echolls, 2:02am:
U awake? Can't sleep

To Logan Echolls from Veronica Mars, 2:03am:
I'm awake

Duncan woke up Wednesday morning dry mouthed and fuzzy. I know this feeling. He thought, as he slowly opened his eyes and took in his surroundings. Good, my room at home. Duncan let out a relieved sigh. He sat up slowly and reached for the glass of water that he knew would be waiting for him on his nightstand next to a pile of colorful pills on a tiny silver tray.

Duncan took several long gulps of water before picking up the pills and heading to his en suite bathroom. One for me, one for the sewer. He thought as he tossed the antidepressant into the toilet and swallowed the first of several medications that he took for his epilepsy. He continued this ritual until all of the mood-altering drugs were dissolving in the bowl and he had taken only those that his doctor had insisted were essential.

"Essential my ass." Duncan murmured, flipping off the toilet as the discarded pills swirled down. As yesterday had proven, even being sure he took the essentials didn't guarantee that he wouldn't still have attacks.

Duncan searched his memories of the previous day. He clearly remembered deciding to confront Veronica about her and Logan's behavior these past few days. Doesn't she know how she's hurting
me? It had been one thing for her to go out with Troy, but Logan—Duncan felt a growl ripple deep in his throat—it was the ultimate betrayal and completely unacceptable.

While the drive to Veronica's apartment was distinct in his memory, everything went blank after he'd arrived at her door. Duncan groaned at the tightness of his muscles and the emptiness of his memories. He needed time to collect his thoughts and instinctively reached out to start the shower water.

Peeling off his clothes, Duncan paused. He knew that the key to remembering more was to start with what he did know. It was obvious that he had been brought home. And despite his muscles being tight, which was pretty typical after one of his 'episodes', he didn't feel injured—well not any more injured than he had been the previous morning. Attacking the planters that stood on either side of Lilly's headstone had left Duncan with a few cuts and bruises on his shins. The large ceramic pots had torn up his pants and his skin as he'd kicked and stomped them into small pieces and destroyed all the plants. Duncan was quite certain that if he went to Lilly's grave right now new planters would be in place full of blooming flowers. Something I can destroy again if need be, he thought blandly as he stepped into the shower.

Duncan had a morning ritual. One he would never tell anyone about because it didn't hurt anyone but himself. He couldn't shake it—didn't want to, if he were honest with himself. Even after a year of knowing that Veronica was...he shook the thought from his head and began the routine. He brought to mind the image of his angelically perfect Veronica, her sun-kissed skin contrasting against white sheets and her hair fanned out like a halo.

Logan wasn't used to feeling so out of control. One moment his life was all action and heroism, then the next he was sitting through a boring class. The contrast left him jittery and restless. As soon as they had arrived at Journalism, Veronica had headed straight for a computer and a quick inspection of the room had shown that Duncan was absent. Leaving Logan unsure what to do with himself—the schoolwork sure wasn't going to hold his attention—so he sat at his desk and let his mind wander.

He was still a little upset that Veronica wouldn't tell him how she'd found the piñata. Logan's first instinct had been to tail her the day before, but even he had to admit that his truck was too conspicuous for that kind of work. Instead he had waited at Dog Beach, hoping that everything would be okay.

The time alone had given him a chance to mentally consider something that had been on his mind for days; the differences between the Veronica he'd grown up with and the new Veronica who had emerged this past year. Logan knew that, even before Lilly's death, Veronica had never been the sweet open book that Duncan saw her as. Veronica's home life wasn't as bad as Logan's, but it hadn't been a cakewalk either. Her father worked long hours and her mother was as bad of an alcoholic as his own. Secrets and lies were things they were both intimately familiar with.

Although Logan was fairly certain that Lilly had been aware of both Lynn and Lianne's addictions, she had never brought it up to him or Veronica as far as he knew. Lilly had never been one to offer anything in the way of emotional support. And then there was Duncan, who he highly doubted knew anything. Duncan had always been too wrapped up in himself to notice, and Logan certainly hadn't offered to share those details of his life. The only person he had ever spoken about it with was Veronica; it was a secret they shared. Logan let his gaze wander to where Veronica sat at one of the computers, her eyebrows drawn as she concentrated on the screen.

Logan had spent most of yesterday evening mulling over all of the new information that he had gathered recently about his long-time friends.
Duncan and his family were keeping whatever was going on with his 'attacks' a secret. Logan was surprised that there was so much about Duncan that he'd never known. But he didn't blame the Kanes for wanting to keep their secrets from going public. Logan had plenty of secrets of his own that he preferred to keep private—abuse at Aaron's hands topping that list. He had never expected for Veronica to find out, but in some ways it was a relief that she knew the truth. At the very least, it did cut down on the lies between the two of them. And it was another secret they could share. Veronica's head turned and met Logan's gaze, the left side of her mouth pulled up in a half smile as she turned back to the screen.

This new Veronica was much more adept at telling lies than the old Veronica had been, but both Veronicas were practiced at keeping secrets. And he somehow sensed that she had many secrets, both from the past and present. Despite Logan understanding Veronica's desire for privacy, there was one secret in particular that he was determined to uncover, what had happened the night of Shelly's party. In fact, he was surprised that Wallace hadn't pushed him about it yet, not that there had been much time…

"Remember. Start with light, easy questions first. Let your subject get comfortable." Ms. Dent's voice drew Logan out of his thoughts and he looked up at his interview partner, some pimply sophomore whose name he hadn't bothered to learn.

"So…Kid, you do anything fun this weekend?" Logan asked, without interest, picking at a loose thread on the seam of his jeans. Rather than listen to the kid's animated response, Logan turned his focus to Veronica. She was sitting across from Ashley Banks, wearing her 'I'd rather be snowboarding in hell' face.

"So, Ms. Mars. How do you respond to the rumors that you were caught naked with Logan Echolls this past weekend?" Ashley asked smugly, glancing at Logan as she said his name. Logan could almost feel the steam coming out of his ears. That bitch, I warned them. Logan was in the process of standing up when Veronica held up a single finger in his direction.

"Ms. Banks. Have you decided which parent you're going to live with after the divorce? And, if I may, a follow up: can you believe your father's choice in mistresses?" Veronica replied, her voice dripping with faux-professionalism.

"That's my girl!" Logan thought with a barely concealed snort.

Logan walked over to where Veronica and Ashley were sitting. "Trade me partners, Ashley." He commanded without looking away from Veronica.

"Fine, you can deal with the bitch." Ashley hissed under her breath as she stood up from her seat.

Logan turned to face Ashley, "Run along." He smirked and shooed her away.

"Veronica. Logan. I need to speak with you after class, please." Ms. Dent called out, having caught the interaction.

Logan nodded at Ms. Dent and sat with Veronica. He proceeded to crack his knuckles and flex his fingers. "Feel like helping me crack some skulls Mars?" He asked. Logan had been feeling the urge to take out some physical aggression since Troy had taken Veronica's clothes on the night of Homecoming, but his injuries from dear old dad had caused him to restrain himself both with Troy and Duncan during the last two days. Today was different. His back didn't hurt, his bruises were more or less gone, and he was spoiling for a fight. Too bad Ashley's a girl…
Veronica reached for Logan's hands, stilling them. "My Taser is all charged up." She flashed her teeth menacingly, her eyes twinkling with anticipation. "I sure wish Duncan were here today; I'd really like to give him a taste of Mr. Sparky."

*Looks like I'm not the only one with some pent up aggression...* Logan held Veronica's gaze and in that moment he felt in sync with her; like it was them against the world.

"There's something else I want to do, too." Veronica's eyes were practically glowing, "I'm going to look into, what do you call her? Counselor Becky." Veronica poorly mimicked Logan's deeper voice.

Logan felt his bubble of euphoria pop. He nodded hesitantly, "I'm not a fan either and you know I don't really give a shit about your dad..." Logan swallowed at the hard look that appeared on Veronica's face. He quickly raised his hands in surrender. "That came out wrong. What I'm trying to say—is—are you sure you want to do that? Don't you think your dad will be pissed?" Logan asked wishing they were still caught in the perfect moment.

Veronica waved him off as if his concern was silly. *Okay Ronnie, you know your dad better than I do.* He thought to himself. "We'd better at least pretend we're doing the assignment." Logan nudged Veronica with his foot to get her attention back.

"Right. Mr. Echolls, who would your fists of fury like to pummel this afternoon?" She asked, leaning forward in a reporter-like manner with a little smirk.

At the end of journalism, Veronica waited with Logan while Ms. Dent finished up with another student. Once the student was out of earshot, Ms. Dent crossed her arms and made eyes contact with them both in turn.

"You two look ready for a fight."

"I get that a lot. I guess it's just my usual expression." Veronica snarked.

"I'm always ready for a fight." Logan bumped his fists together dramatically.

Ms. Dent released a heavy sigh, "How do you think Ashley's going to sleep tonight?"

"I didn't tell her anything she didn't already know—deep down." Veronica swallowed as Logan shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Maybe. But sometimes the lies we let ourselves believe are for our own good." Ms. Dent stood and moved toward the door, dismissing them. "You coming?" She asked when Veronica hesitated.

"Uh, in a minute. Research." Veronica responded, turning back toward the computers. Logan looked into her eyes for a long moment before he nodded and followed Ms. Dent out of the room. His hand trailed behind him as he gave her a spirit-fingers wave.

Veronica shook her head and turned back to the computers. *Poor Ms. Dent. She can't see the big picture yet. Love is an investment. Information is insurance. With someone whose heart has already been crushed—like my dad—I say you can't be too careful.*

Veronica pulled up the Prying Eyez website and logged on to start compiling a background file on Rebecca James. She also pulled up a site on chlorine content in public swimming pools, her cover research, for when Ms. Dent returned.
Veronica had completed both tasks by the time the lunch bell rang. She quickly printed everything she needed and headed for her locker. Logan had brought her coffee again that morning and had insisted on driving them to school, so Veronica was left to wait for Logan at the Xterra when classes let out for the day.

Surprisingly, lunch and the rest of the day had passed without any additional drama. Things had been surprisingly calm ever since Logan's lunchtime declaration on Monday. Veronica would have been worried that it was just the calm before the storm had she not heard some rumors that the 09ers were just waiting Logan out. According to the locker room gossip, Logan was known to be fickle, and he would tire of Veronica soon enough.

That sounds more like the Neptune High I know and love to hate. The normalcy of it all is almost comforting. I think I would be more worried if there wasn't some rumor floating around about Logan and me. But they're wrong. Veronica knew Logan in a way that none of them did. He wasn't fickle. She remembered the way he'd treated Lilly despite all she had put him through. His cruelty toward Veronica had been a hiccup, a lashing out during a time of vulnerability. Hadn't it? A very long hiccup...

Suddenly insecure, Veronica turned to look back at the school, hating feeling so uncertain of herself. Where is he? It's been close to ten minutes since the bell rang. Veronica noted, looking at her watch again. She impatiently pulled out her cell phone and did a lap around Logan's truck while she texted him.

To Logan Echolls from Veronica Mars, 3:07pm:
U still giving me a ride home?

There was no response, but as Veronica rounded the back of his car, she heard a series of cheers from the other end of the parking lot. She walked in the direction of the noise and, when she reached a crowd, pushed her way through to see what was happening. She found herself shoulder to shoulder—well, shoulder to elbow if she was honest—with Dick, who was watching intently as Logan and Troy circled one another. Logan's lip was trickling a little stream of blood and Troy's shirt was torn and splattered with blood from what looked like a broken nose.

"Dick, what the hell is going on?" Veronica asked, as Logan landed a solid hit to Troy's stomach. Troy gasped for air several times before shifting to try to kick Logan.

"Troy caught Logan messing with his tail lights, or so he said." Dick shrugged, clearly not caring if it was true or not.

Veronica started to step toward the bleeding boys, but Dick placed a restraining hand on her shoulder. "Let them get it out. They've both been dancing around this for a while." Dick looked down at Veronica and smirked, "In fact, it all started around the time that Troy showed an interest in you, Ronnikins. I think you should take note that that was before you and Logan over there, made up. Just a little food for thought." Dick winked but didn't loosen his grip on Veronica's shoulder.

Veronica bared her teeth at Dick in a facsimile of a smile. "Let go of me Dick, or you and my Taser are going to get real friendly." Veronica sparked the Taser as she pulled it out of her bag. Dick immediately released her and she stepped into the circle between Logan and Troy. "All right boys, let's break it up."

Logan was standing directly behind Veronica. She felt his hand make contact with her waist and an unexpected wave of warmth ran up her back.

"Come on Ronnie, don't you think Troy would like a taste of Mr. Sparky?"
Troy gave them a bloody grin. "Fuck you Echolls." Troy turned his wild eyes on Veronica, "Veronica Mars—none of my credit cards are working, you wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

Before Veronica could respond Dick quickly stepped forward and leaned into Logan, "Clemmons just came out the door." Dick tilted his head toward the school.

Veronica stretched to see, but was far too short. Logan's hand tightened on her waist for a moment before disappearing. The loss of warmth from his hand left her feeling oddly disappointed. But before she could think about it further, Logan had grabbed her free hand and was dragging her away.

"Let's get out of here, neither of us can afford to get suspended. Your dad would kill me." Logan's words came out harshly with each breath. Guess Troy must have landed a few body shots, too. And she didn't even want to think what Aaron would do to Logan if he got suspended for fighting.

They quickly made their way back to the Xterra. Logan tossed Veronica the keys and they pulled out of the parking lot before any of the teachers made it to them. Veronica followed every traffic law as she made her way to the Echolls estate.

"What the hell was that all about?" She asked as she pulled up to the house.

"He might have caught me messing with his car…" Logan said, fidgeting with the buttons on his over-shirt.

"Smooth move." Veronica smirked at Logan and hopped out of the truck. "Come on Rocky, let's get you cleaned up."

Veronica strode into the house toward Logan's room where she now knew he kept a fully equipped first-aid kit.

Logan sat down on the edge of the tub and held his hands out to Veronica. "You want to hear what I learned from my little 'scuffle'?" Logan asked with a broad smile.

"Sure, lay it on me." Veronica responded, dabbing antiseptic on the split knuckles.

"I learned that Troy is not the soft 09er he has been pretending to be. You saw him; I got in some good hits. Most guys would have gone down after that. But we were at a stalemate. He handled himself entirely too well." Logan described Troy with a degree of admiration, as if he were a worthy opponent. It was a first.

"What do you think that means? You think he's been in fights before? Plenty of guys get in fights at school Logan." Veronica reached for Logan's other hand.

"No Veronica, you don't get it. He didn't fight like someone who's taken some kickboxing classes or brawled in the schoolyard a bit. He fought dirty and well. I'd bet good money he has been in fights that had nothing to do with school. I mean really what do we know about this guy?"

Veronica continued cleaning up Logan's busted up knuckles while she contemplated that. What do we know about Troy? While he and I dated he rarely talked about himself…

"Not much." Logan answered his own question. "Duncan told me he's known Troy for a couple of years but only from a few summer vacation encounters. And he said they've moved around a lot. Maybe all the moving was because of Troy and not really because of his dad's job?"

Veronica nodded and continued to think about Logan's assessment and what it also implied about
Logan as she reached for the antibiotic cream. *What if Troy did have experience fighting? What could that mean? What did guys fight seriously about? And often? Gangs...money...drugs? Could Troy have drug connections that would make him interested in performance-enhancing drugs?* Veronica let the thought tumble around her brain a bit while she set aside the cream and bandaged Logan's hands. *Logan's experience hits a little closer to home,* she thought sadly.

"Well?" Logan finally said after several minutes of uncharacteristic silence.

"Well—I think we may finally have a break thanks to your testosterone-addled brain." She smirked at him. "I didn't think Troy was worth a thought as a suspect, but this changes things. I think it's time we did a deeper background check on Troy; maybe we'll find something to support this theory of yours."

Logan took a few ibuprofen before following Veronica back to his truck. He skipped down the stairs and raced ahead of Veronica to get the door. He was feeling positively buoyant. They finally had a new lead and he was responsible for it. Veronica held out the keys, which he snatched eagerly as she walked past.

"Someone is in a good mood." Veronica teased over her shoulder.

Logan stretched his body and considered the comment. He was in a good mood. The fight had caused a pretty massive release of endorphins without much physical damage. That, coupled with the fact that he was actually contributing to the case, had Logan feeling pretty damn fantastic.

He took a few big steps to catch up to Veronica. Wrapping his arms around her waist from behind, he spun them in a circle, causing them both to shriek and laugh. Logan set her down near the passenger door, winked, and jogged around the truck to get in the driver's seat.

Veronica was a little red-faced and still laughing when Logan pulled out of the driveway. "To your dad's office?" He asked excitedly.

"Yes. Let's see if you're right about Troy having a shady past." Veronica gave Logan a bemused smile.

By the time Logan parked in front of Mars Investigations, the rush from the endorphins and adrenaline had started to recede. But even the dull edge of pain couldn't completely shove down Logan's high. He was really starting to see why Veronica liked this investigating thing so much.

"Does it always feel this good?" He asked Veronica as they made their way up to the office building.

"What? Finding a clue?" She tilted her head as she unlocked the door to the stairwell and let them in. "Not always. But sometimes. I think the fighting might be boosting your response a bit." She responded, throwing him a playful smile over her shoulder.

Logan returned her smile and let his eyes drift down her bare legs as she climbed the stairs in front of him. He was reminded of Saturday when she had teased him about saying he loved looking at her legs. He had been high on painkillers otherwise he was pretty sure he never would have said it out loud, but that didn't make it any less true.

"You coming?" Veronica asked staring at him from the top of the stairs.

Logan's mouth went dry. "Yeah, got distracted." Logan quickly jogged up the rest of the stairs and followed her into the office.
Logan paced around the room while Veronica settled in at her desk and started making inquiries online. She stepped away after making a series of notes and pulled two files out of her messenger bag and handed them to Logan.

"This is the original file I made when I was trying to locate Troy's dad's car. There wasn't anything about Troy associated with it beyond him being one of the insured drivers on their policy. And this one is the credit report we pulled for you and Wallace. Why don't you look through them one more time and see if you spot anything while I make some phone calls." Veronica indicated the couch.

"You just want me to stop pacing." Logan smirked as he accepted the file.

"Yes. Now stop distracting me so I can get us this information."

Logan tried as best he could to not fidget, but it was almost impossible to hold both his hands and his feet still at the same time. He hadn't ever been comfortable with long periods of quiet. He got enough of it at home. He gave up and started twirling a pen, figuring that would be the least distracting thing he could do. It took all his will power not to click the pen between twirls. He glanced up at the clock and chuckled when he realized that only ten minutes had passed.

"Well, I've got everything on Troy I can get today and I've sent in the request for more information regarding what looks like an arrest on the East Coast. But we probably won't hear back from them until tomorrow at the earliest." Veronica yawned and leaned back in her chair.

"I didn't find anything useful in this." Logan waved the sheets of paper and gave her an appraising glance. "So what now? You look like you could use a nap. Look, I'm sorry if I woke you up this morning. I couldn't sleep and it was just too quiet." Logan closed the file and dropped it onto the couch next to him.

"No, you didn't wake me up, I swear. I wish you had." Veronica yawned again.

"Rough night?" Logan prompted, hoping she would elaborate.

"I guess it's to be expected after the day I had. Duncan's attack kind of caught me off guard. And then the whole thing with Troy…" she trailed off. "Well let's just say it wasn't conducive to a restful night's sleep."

"You know you can call me at any time right? You shouldn't feel scared in your own bed."

Veronica's mouth started to open with her response, but Keith walked in the door.

"I wasn't expecting you this afternoon, kid." Keith smiled at his daughter before his gaze landed on her companion. "Logan, we meet again. You've been hanging around a lot." Keith commented with raised eyebrows and turned back to Veronica.

"As it happens, Logan was just leaving to go pick up Wallace." Veronica answered evasively, shooting Logan a look.

"Oh, right, Fennel. Yeah, should I pick you up here or are we meeting…?" Logan wasn't sure what he should ask. He had no desire to incur the wrath of Veronica or her father.

"I'll meet you and Wallace back at the apartment in," she glanced at the clock, "an hour. And can you grab these things?" She handed him a short list.

"All right, see you then. Bye Mr. Mars."
"Bye Logan." Keith continued to look at him with suspicion.

Logan jogged down the stairs and almost immediately regretted it as a few aches from the fight earlier made themselves known. He slowed his pace and then stretched a little before getting in the truck and heading back to the school. If his timing was right, Wallace should be done with his basketball clinic around the time Logan arrived on campus.

Wallace was waiting out front when Logan pulled up to the curb. Logan could see the confusion on Wallace's face, so he rolled down the passenger window. "Wallace, Veronica sent me to get you. She asked us to run an errand for her before we all meet up later so she'd have time to discuss 'some things' with her dad." Logan frowned, wondering how that conversation was going.

Wallace opened the door and tossed his bag in the back. "At least I get shotgun this time." Wallace mumbled.

"About yesterday," Logan turned to face Wallace for a moment and indicated his back seat, "I was just trying to get a rise out of you. I really did have my baby here detailed recently, but it's not like I'd leave condoms or whatever just laying around back there."

"Right, but many a fine lady has graced your backseat, am I right?" Wallace said in a tone that Logan thought toed the line between mild disapproval and awe.

"Depends on your definition of fine. But yeah I guess so." Logan replied noncommittally. He thought about Caitlin; she wasn't what he would call fine by any definition of the word. She had been convenient and someone he knew he wouldn't get attached to. Logan turned back in his seat and pulled away from the curb. "The Fennel charm keeping your backseat busy?"

Wallace laughed loudly, "That would require having a backseat, so no." Wallace continued to laugh to himself then pointed to Logan's bandaged hands. "Hey man, I heard there was a fight after school but didn't get many details. Looks like you were there."

"Yeah, I was there. I was carrying out our plan. You know, messing with his taillights. Or at least I was trying. The stupid asshole apparently decided to ditch the end of class and caught me. We might have had some words." Logan explained.

"Some words? Looks like you had more than words. How's Troy look?" Wallace asked, his curiosity obvious from his tone.

"Honestly, not as bad as I would have expected." Logan stretched his fingers on the steering wheel. "He was surprisingly resilient. Which was disappointing until it turned into our next lead in the case." Logan launched into his theory about Troy's colorful past. "Veronica ran a full background check. We should know more soon."

"Wow, Troy seems like such a pretty boy. Course, so do you." Wallace examined Logan for a moment.

"Oh Wallace, you think I'm pretty, too." Logan quipped, remembering the banter they had all shared the day before. The more time Logan spent with Wallace the more he understood why Veronica kept him around. He was a nice guy but he was also quick with his wit and not lacking for intelligence either. "Fennel, how come we weren't friends sooner?" Logan asked, not realizing the can of worms he had opened until it was too late.

Wallace stared at Logan incredulously, his mouth open as if he were trying to find the words to speak but couldn't.
Logan pulled into the first open parking space of the superstore Veronica had indicated on her shopping list. Once the truck was in park Logan tried to get his bearings back.

"Yeah, that was a stupid question." Logan finally replied. "Obviously you wouldn't have wanted to hang around with people who would treat Veronica like we did—like I did." Logan sighed dejectedly.

"Look Logan. I get it. Well, not how you all treated V, but…" Wallace seemed to be searching for words again. "Veronica told me about when you guys were in seventh grade. About all the time before Lilly died." Wallace shook his head. "I don't get what happened between you two, but I'm not stupid—you obviously care about her. And I care a hell of a lot about her too." Wallace looked at Logan thoughtfully for a moment. "Maybe not the same way you care about her, but it still gives us some common ground. And, as much as I hate to admit it, you're not terrible company." Wallace pushed the door open and got out of the Xterra, leaving Logan to absorb all the information Wallace had just laid out.

Veronica talks about me? With Wallace? After yesterday's forced confession, Logan knew that Wallace had pieced together that his feelings for Veronica might be more than he had previously admitted to. But that didn't matter; Veronica's reaction made it clear that she certainly didn't share those feelings. The bond he felt growing between them was probably because all the time they spent together lately had dredged up old memories and emotions.

A quick rap on the window grabbed Logan's attention. *I have got to stop getting so distracted,* he thought idly. Wallace was waiting by the door tapping his non-existent watch. Logan quickly got out of the truck.

"What are we doing here?" Wallace asked as they walked though the parking lot.

"It's the place Veronica said to go to pick up all of this stuff." Logan explained, handing Wallace her shopping list.

"Pre-paid disposable cell phones and minute cards? What are these for?" Wallace continued to stare at the list.

"Veronica wants to try to make contact with her mom. She's going to send these to people she thinks her mom could be staying with."

"Oh. Why now?" Wallace's brow furrowed.

Logan held back his desire to tell Wallace about what they had found at the bank. "You'll have to ask Veronica." Logan shook his head. "I don't think she's sleeping very well, you know, after everything that happened this week. And this stuff with her mom, it's pretty fucked-up." Logan hoped that conveyed his concern without betraying the newly formed trust Veronica was putting in him.

Logan watched several expressions shift across Wallace's face before he nodded, "I'm going to call my mom and tell her I'm staying at your place tonight. Will your parents be around?"

"Naw, they're both out of town."

"Good, we can both stay until Mr. Mars kicks us out. And from past experience he'll probably just go to bed and give us shit in the morning." Wallace stopped abruptly, "Hmmm, but that was just with me, I'm not so sure how he'd feel about you spending the night."

"What, you don't think The Sheriff trusts me?" Logan batted his eyelashes at Wallace.
Wallace shook his head and grinned at Logan. "Nope. So, now that we've got a plan for tonight, and you and I are tight and all, we can move on to other important matters." Wallace said, briefly gripping Logan's shoulder as they entered the discount superstore.

Logan threw Wallace a puzzled glance. "Oh yeah? What's so important, *chum*?"

"The time has come for us to discuss Shelly's party again."

"Here?" Logan asked, throwing his arms wide to indicate the candy aisle.

"Unfortunately."

Wallace nodded. "No way are we talking about it at school and getting time away from V isn't always easy. So unless you want to ditch V and have our own sleep over…" Wallace trailed off.

"Can we paint our nails and talk about boys?"

Logan snarked. "I see your point. Where should we start?"

Wallace was quiet for several minutes as they started grabbing items from Veronica's list. Logan was tossing the last of the disposable phones in the cart when Wallace finally spoke. "I think we can safely say that we know she was drugged, right?"

"Yeah, Veronica has never been much of a drinker. And even when she did, it was rarely at those kind of parties."

"So the logical place to start would be with who brought the drugs," Wallace said confidently.

FLASHBACK

Logan had forced Duncan to get dressed the moment he'd arrived at the Kane's. "We're going out!"

Logan had, of course, always planned on going to Shelly's party that night, but his plans had been sealed when his dad had arrived home early from filming. *No way in hell am I staying home with Aaron.*

The previous weekend he'd gone to Mexico with Sean and Luke and the trio had picked up some liquid-X. It had been burning a hole in Logan's pocket ever since. But the less than inspiring guest list at this party, combined with Aaron's unexpected homecoming, had Logan thinking he'd save it for another time. *Wouldn't do to return home high. I like to live on the edge, but that's just suicide.*

With Duncan by his side, Logan walked through the party and then settled by the outdoor bar. Logan really hoped that some hot and easy freshmen were hiding somewhere nearby. He was getting ready to take a shot when he felt Duncan bump his shoulder.

"Logan, you don't need both those doses, do you? Care to share?" Duncan whispered into Logan's ear. "I could use a little something to take the edge off."

Logan was startled. It took a moment for Duncan's words to register, and then Logan smirked. "Of course DK. Enjoy." He passed his friend a small vial and slapped him on the back. "Remember, if you're going to take that try to keep the booze to a minimum or you'll just pass out instead of rolling. And you'll fuck anything on this stuff, so if you're gonna hookup you might want to save it for another time." Duncan pocketed the vial as Logan passed along his sage advice.

Logan tossed back the shot of tequila he'd been holding and poured himself another. *Guess this confirms that tonight is a booze night only; no getting high.* He and Lilly had made both of the mistakes that he'd warned Duncan about. The first time they had both been so nervous that they drank too much and just passed out in the pool house, and the second time they had tried to have sex
but had waited until they were rolling to start. Logan wasn't small and Lilly, while adventurous, required a lot of foreplay. The drugs had taken away both their inhibitions and their ability to recognize the difference between pain and pleasure. They had both walked funny for several days after that one. Logan laughed morosely at the memory and lined up a row of shots for himself. He couldn't wait to get blissfully wasted. *Time to forget.*

**END FLASHBACK**

*Hmmmm…Do I tell Wallace that I was one of the people with the X or not…?*

"I might have an idea of who it could be, but they'll never talk to you. Why don't you let me do a little investigating of that on my own?" Logan could feel his heart rate increase and his palms became clammy at the lie.

He didn't want to lie to Wallace, but, until Logan knew for certain that the two doses he'd brought to the party were not used on Veronica, he didn't think he could bear to tell anyone. Logan was reasonably confident that Duncan had consumed the dose Logan had given him. Now he just needed to remember what happened to the other dose.

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**Chapter End Notes**

A/N: Huge thanks to Bondopoulos and BryroseA! I could not do this without the two of you : ) We hit 100 followers for this story on FF and I am just beyond amazed! Thank you to all of you for reading.
Veronica arrived back at the apartment feeling out of sorts. The conversation with her dad about 'Becky' had not gone as she had expected it to. *Logan was right, Dad was pissed…* The fact that she had misread the situation was bad enough. The fact that Logan seemed to be more tapped into her father's psyche than she was made everything even worse. Keith's words still stung.

*Protect me? I'm an adult, Veronica!*

After everything they had been through, of course she wanted to protect her father. How could he not understand that? The conversation had just gone downhill from there, and before she had even realized what she was doing she had confronted him about not trying to find her mother.

*Well, maybe I don't care to find her. Have you ever considered that?*

Veronica's eyes had filled with tears at Keith's confession. She could feel them building again just thinking about it, and made her way to the bathroom to see how much repair would be needed to her make up. Logan and Wallace would arrive soon, and it wouldn't do for them to see how upset she was.

"Pull it together, Veronica!" She said to her reflection, rubbing at her cheeks. She grabbed a Q-tip and concealer and began hiding the evidence of her weakness.

Just as she finished, a knock came from the living room. *Must be the boys.* She thought, mentally preparing herself now that the physical evidence was hidden by makeup. By the time she reached the front door, her emotional walls were firmly back in place. It was a good thing. They would need to stay that way if she was going to get through this.

Veronica opened the door wide to find both Wallace and Logan looking just as worse for the wear as she felt. Logan's face was a bit puffy and discolored from his earlier fight, while Wallace just looked exhausted. *Join the club.* She thought. She welcomed them in while working hard to maintain what she hoped was a neutral façade.

Veronica headed to the kitchen while the boys got settled in the living room. She returned with three caffeinated sodas and a plate piled high with the cookies she had made while waiting for her dad to return home after his date on Monday. The boys both smiled at her offering.

"Thank god, V. I thought I was going to fall down dead." Wallace reached for a cookie and toed a plastic shopping bag towards her with his foot. "Everything you asked for," he mumbled through a mouthful of snickerdoodle.

Veronica reached for the bag and started pulling out the disposable cellphones. "Where's the receipt?" She asked, not seeing it in the bag.
"Don't worry about it." Logan replied, staring very intently at his soda.

"Wallace, there's a stack of handwritten notes and envelopes on the desk in my room; can you grab them?"

Once Wallace left the room she turned to Logan. "I'm not going to let you pay for this Logan. This is about finding my…Lianne." She finished awkwardly.

Veronica pulled out a small pocketknife and began cutting the plastic packaging open and activating each phone with the pre-paid cards the boys had also picked up.

Veronica felt a wave of goose bumps climb up her arm as Logan's hand slipped into hers. "Let me do this," he said, barely above a whisper. "I was so horrible to you. Let me do this small thing. I have so much to make up for."

"I don't want your money, Logan; you can't buy my forgiveness. This is not how I want you to make it up to me."

"No. No Veronica, this isn't about the money. I don't care about that and I know you don't either. I know your forgiveness can't be bought. This is about me being here for you." His hand squeezed hers. "Save your money for when you find her." His hand slipped back out of hers and he resumed staring at his soda.

Veronica wanted to keep arguing, but Wallace returned with the stack of papers and envelopes. Logan reached around to the side of the couch and placed a roll of bubble wrap onto the coffee table.

"That wasn't on the list." Veronica said.

"No, but you don't want the phones to get damaged during shipping." Logan replied with a small smile.

"So V, why now? Hasn't your mom been gone like seven months?" Wallace asked, sorting through the letters.

"Don't mix those up." Veronica grabbed the letters. "Each one is different so I can try to figure out which one she gets. And yeah, she's been gone seven months—almost eight. But people are rarely able to cut all their ties, no matter how much they want to. If she's out there and these untraceable, disposable cell phones I'm sending to her closest friends and family reach her, maybe she'll realize it's safe for her to call me."

"Like a message in a bottle?" Logan asked.

"Safe?" Wallace sounded alarmed. "Why wouldn't it be safe?"

Logan watched Veronica expectantly, but remained silent.

"Umm…" Veronica faltered, "Of course everything's safe. She just thinks…things were rough when she left and she might feel…differently." Veronica stumbled over her words. "Anyway, I recently uncovered some new information and I really need to talk to her."

Logan stood abruptly and stalked down the hall toward the bathroom.

"What was that all about?" Wallace asked, staring after Logan.

"Haven't a clue." Veronica pulled her ponytail tighter, searching for a new subject. "How was that
"Yeah, I guess so. The trainer was kind of an ass, but I guess what he was telling us makes sense." Wallace's brows were drawn; it didn't look like Veronica's attempt to redirect the conversation had been successful.

Logan stomped back into the room looking, if possible, more pissed than when he had left. Veronica looked on in horror as he threw a stack of 8x10 photographs on the coffee table in front of Wallace. "Look Veronica, I respect you not wanting to tell your dad, but Wallace should know. I don't care if you're mad at me."

"What the hell, V?!!" Wallace practically shrieked, reaching for the topmost photo.

"I'm going to take Backup for a walk while you explain this to your BFF." Logan whistled to Backup as he grabbed the dog's leash.

Veronica cringed as Logan slammed the door on his way out. So much for all the fun we were having earlier.

Logan walked so briskly down the sidewalk that Backup had to trot to keep up with him. It was working though; the pace helped Logan to rein-in his anger. Of course he knew that she hadn't told Wallace, but Logan had assumed that she would explain the situation while they were putting together the packages for her mother. Hearing her brush off a death threat was too much. The very idea of someone hurting Veronica…

Logan growled in frustration, a sentiment that was echoed by Backup. "I know boy. What are we going to do about her?" He chose to interpret Backup's loud huff as a sign of solidarity.

Between what had happened with the dreams, Duncan, Troy, and her mother, Logan was worried about Veronica. And while he knew she would be pissed if she knew he and Wallace were planning to stay over because of that concern, he didn't care. Even as mad as Logan was he knew he couldn't put his own anger before her well being anymore.

After walking a twenty-minute loop around Veronica's neighborhood, Logan returned to her apartment feeling a little calmer and slightly guilty. Not guilty enough to regret his actions, but enough that he planned to apologize to Veronica. He paused outside the apartment door and took a few deep breaths before letting himself and Backup back in.

"Look Veronica—"

"Logan I'm sor—"

Logan chuckled slightly and encouraged Veronica to continue.

"Wallace helped me to see…” She placed her hands on her hips and glared at Wallace, "the error of my ways. I should have just been honest with him from the get-go."

"I'm pretty sure you were going to say 'sorry'." Logan couldn't help but smirk.

Veronica exhaled loudly, "Fine. I'm sorry."

"Thank you. I'm sorry, too." Logan could tell Veronica was getting ready to respond and quickly cut her off, "I'm not saying I would change what I did, but I'm sorry for the way I did it. Wallace, I'm sorry I dropped it on you like that, man."
Wallace reached out his fist, which Logan bumped back. *Guy apologies are so much easier than chick ones.*

Logan thought idly.

"We finished stuffing the envelopes while you were out walking. I'm going to drop them in the mail in the morning." Veronica indicated the now bulging stack of manila envelopes. "Ready for some homework?"

"Yeah, and how about I order some take-out?" Logan volunteered.

"You've paid the last few times. Why don't you let me get it this time?" Veronica said, reaching for her purse.

"Ah, but I won't be paying. Aaron will." Logan grinned.

"Well, in that case, lobster and caviar?" Veronica quipped in her 'Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous' voice.

Logan laughed out loud. "Only if you feel like taking a field trip to the hospital."

"Oh come on, caviar isn't shellfish. You can leave the lobster for Wallace and me."

"I was thinking more like pizza." Wallace interjected.

They all came to an agreement on toppings and Logan called in the order.

A few hours later, Logan found himself in an unfamiliar situation. All of his homework was complete, including his contribution to a group project that wasn't due for several weeks. It was a first for him. If he kept this up, he might actually make better than decent grades this semester.

"Do we want to watch a movie or do you both need to head home?" Veronica asked, closing her book.

"I told my mom I might not be home tonight." Wallace sheepishly looked down at his lap.

*Wallace has no game face.* Logan thought as Veronica raised a suspicious eyebrow at them. Of course Logan knew that Wallace had made plans to stay over. They had both decided that it was probably a good night to be fully available, in case Veronica needed them, whether for comfort or protection. And now that it didn't look like Keith would be home anytime soon, Logan was even more confident that his and Wallace's plan had been a good one.

"Are you two up to something?" Veronica asked, her brows narrowed and her eyes gleamed in a way that usually meant that she was onto a clue.

"What makes you think that?" Logan responded. He turned to look back at the TV, hoping that she would interpret his response as indifference rather than evasion.

"Hmmm…in that case, why don't we pick out a movie to watch and have some popcorn?" A quick glance showed Logan that, while Veronica's expression hadn't changed, it seemed she had decided to let the subject go.
Veronica could hear her parents arguing again. She tried to ignore their raised voices as she slipped into the white eyelet dress that Lilly had begged her not to buy. But the dress made her feel confident…like herself. She inspected her loose curls in the mirror one last time before grabbing her purse and heading down the stairs…

She stumbled on the last stair and caught herself on a poolside lounger. The white chaise looked so comfortable, maybe if she could lie down for just a few minutes she wouldn't feel so dizzy anymore. Veronica looked up at the starry sky but instead of the stars being in the sky they hovered just a few feet above her. Then faces, blank faces and cheering. No, no, no, no. She closed her eyes tightly.

A bed appeared with crisp white sheets and a satiny cranberry comforter. Veronica found herself laying on it while looking up into a face; all she could pick out were the shape of eyes and mouth and brown tousled hair. She tried to concentrate more, but the face was too out of focus. The more she tried to blink away the blurriness, the fuzzier the face became. She wished she were Dorothy, only three heel-clicks from home. I want to go home.

"Veronica, wake up. Please wake up." The voice came from the specter but its lips didn't move. She felt a hand grip her shoulder and shake her body.

Veronica opened her eyes and screamed; jolted out of her nightmare to find the shadowy figure still leaning over her. "It's just a dream, it's just a dream, wake up, wake up now." She chanted, pressed against the wall while curled into the fetal position.

When her bedside light turned on, spots blurred her vision.

"You're okay Veronica, it was just a dream." A soothing voice came from the nightmare apparition.

Veronica shut her eyes tightly. "NO! Please wake up, please wake up."

"Ronnie, look at me, it's Logan. Please open your eyes, it's Logan."

Logan, I missed you most of all…I want to go home.

Veronica slowly opened her eyes and looked at the boy standing now several feet away from her bed. In the soft light of the bedside lamp, he still looked like the phantom from her dream but the voice— "Logan?"

Logan stared at a wide-eyed, panting Veronica. She looked like she'd seen a ghost, or worse.

"Veronica? Are you okay?" God what a stupid question, of course she's not okay. Look at her you idiot! "Um…can I?" He gestured toward the bed, hoping she would grant him permission to come closer, to offer her comfort.

Still breathing heavily, Veronica nodded but remained pushed up against the wall.

Logan made his way closer to her and then sat on the edge of the bed, his movements slow and deliberate.

"Do you wanna talk about it?" She gave him a panicked look and shook her head, but her breathing seemed a little bit more under control.
Logan could hear the shuffling of feet coming down the hall before he saw Wallace's face appear in the doorway.

"What's wrong?" Wallace asked groggily.

"A dream. Veronica, can I get you anything?" Logan asked, trying to elicit any response from her. Logan looked back at Wallace, who shrugged but his face was drawn in concern.

"Water." She croaked out. Before Logan could do or say anything, Wallace headed to the kitchen.

Logan cautiously scooted closer toward Veronica. She was still huddled against the wall, the comforter pulled tightly against her. "Ronnie?" He carefully reached out to touch her hand where it peeked above the edge of the blanket. This time she didn't flinch when he touched her.

Carefully, Logan pulled Veronica closer to him until she was tight against his side. Logan leaned his cheek against the top of her head and rubbed gentle circles on her back, much like she had done for him the day before. Wallace quietly padded back into the room and handed Veronica the glass of water.

Logan watched with concern as she drained the glass and handed it back to Wallace, "More?" Wallace inquired. Veronica nodded her head.

After Wallace headed back to refill the glass, Logan turned Veronica to face him. "Do you want to try to go back to sleep?"

She silently shook her head and looked into her lap.

"How about a movie? Come out in the living room with us. I'll put on the South Park movie." Logan offered her a small smile, hoping she would accept the offer.

She gripped his hand tightly and started to get up from the bed, so Logan followed her lead. She led him to the couch and wrapped his arm around her then curled into his side, just like they used to do.

Logan was worried that she still hadn't really spoken, but did acknowledge that she looked improved. Her breathing was much more normal and her expression was no longer terrified.

Wallace set the glass of water on the coffee table and waited.

"Can you put in the South Park movie? And maybe grab the comforter off Ronnie's bed?" Logan asked barely above a whisper.

"Yeah man. You want anything else V?" Wallace asked before heading to the pile of DVDs.

Veronica shook her head and pressed in closer to Logan. Logan shifted her small body into his lap and wrapped his arms around her when she didn't resist.

"It's okay Veronica, it was just a dream. You're okay." Logan whispered the words against her temple.

"It wasn't you. Promise me it wasn't you…" Her words came out cracked, harsh, and barely audible.

"What?" Logan asked, not understanding what she wanted and feeling her body softening in his arms.

"…who hurt me." The words came out on a sigh.
"I promise." He hoped he wasn't lying.

Keith unlocked the door as quietly as possible. It wasn't quite six and he hoped that he'd arrived home before Veronica woke up for the day. Not that he felt like he had to explain himself to his seventeen-year-old daughter but…

Keith froze in place. Not only had he been caught doing the walk of shame, but he was caught by Logan. And Logan was holding Veronica in his lap with the comforter from her bed wrapped around them. Keith was getting ready to blow his top, but stopped short when Logan held a finger to his lips then pointed at Wallace in the reclining chair.

Okay, this is not what it looks like, so maybe I'll skip the verbal threat. But I'm still going to show Logan my extensive collection of firearms. Keith chuckled to himself as he imagined scaring the teenage boy shitless.

Keith watched as Logan carefully shifted Veronica out of his lap and onto the couch. He then stood up and made his way over to Keith. "Nightmares." Logan said very quietly as it if explained everything away.

Keith was now more confused than ever. Veronica doesn't have nightmares, does she? Keith made his way into the kitchen and started prepping a pot of coffee. I've been gone a lot lately and doing late night surveillance, did I not realize she isn't okay? Keith thought over the last few months as he scooped fresh grounds into the basket. Veronica had always seemed fine—maybe a little more tired and less enthusiastic than she had been before Lilly died—but then they had all changed so much since Lilly's death, himself included.

Keith gestured for Logan to take a seat at the island. "What are you and Wallace doing here, Logan?" Keith whispered and watched Logan's face intently, ready to spot a lie.

"Homework. Wallace and I fell asleep watching a movie after we were done." Logan fiddled with his shirtsleeves. It wasn't necessarily a tell, but Keith was sure the boy was nervous and possibly not sharing the whole truth.

"And how does that explain my daughter asleep in your lap?" Keith asked, slipping into Sheriff/interrogator mode.

"I think maybe you should talk to her about that." Logan answered evasively.

"But I'm asking you, Logan."

"She was calling out in her sleep." Logan replied softly.

Keith saw movement behind Logan and turned his attention to Wallace who was stretching his way out of the reclining chair. Wallace walked into the kitchen, "Mr. Mars. Logan." Logan nodded in acknowledgement.

"Does your mother know you're here, Wallace?" Keith asked.

"Yeah, she knows." Wallace's response earned Logan a glare.
Keith was right, Logan hadn't outright lied to him but he hadn't been completely honest either.

"Sorry if it wasn't okay. But I'm glad we were here, Veronica was—"

"Veronica was what?" Came a feminine voice from the living room.

Keith watched as both Logan and Wallace's eyes widened and fear settled into their features. Keith couldn't help but laugh at the two. They were afraid of his tiny action-figure daughter.

Logan pulled it together first, jumping off the bar stool and walking over to Veronica. "You were an excellent study partner. And you snore." He teased her, much to Keith's surprise.

"I do not!" Veronica exclaimed, sitting up. The moment her eyes met Keith's; he knew she hadn't realized he was home yet. "Hi Daddy, you remember Logan and Wallace. Who I believe were just heading home."

"Right. Logan can you give me a ride?" Wallace asked walking over to grab his backpack.

"Sure man." Logan turned to Veronica, "Coffee?"

"Not today. I think I have some catching up to do with the big guy." She pointed at Keith.

Keith watched as Logan reached his hand out to touch her face, hesitated, and then squeezed her shoulder instead. "Okay, I'll see you at school then."

The two boys hurried out the door, both avoiding eye contact with Keith. Teenage boys would never cease to entertain him; except when their hands were on his daughter.

"Well daughter mine, it would appear Rebecca was wrong about you being socially isolated. In fact, I'm starting to wish you were a little more isolated." Keith glared down at Veronica. "And whatever happened to Troy, your boyfriend? I can't imagine he'd be too pleased about you sleeping in Logan's lap. I know I'm not."

"First, Troy was not my boyfriend. We were 'dating'." Veronica held up quote fingers. "Something we are no longer doing."

"Hmm…really? Because I stopped by the office on my way home and there were a bunch of faxes from law enforcement agencies back east with Troy's name on them." Keith pulled out a manila file folder and set it on the counter. "Looks like it's everything you may or may not want to know about Troy. Though, now that I've read it, I have to say I'm not disappointed to hear that you two are no longer 'dating'."

"That good, huh?" Much to Keith's surprise, a smile spread across Veronica's face.

"You just doing background checks for fun or should I be putting one of these together on Logan? You know, as repayment for the one on Rebecca. I was gonna check out Troy, but it seems you beat me to it," Keith enjoyed the startled look on Veronica face and let out a tired laugh. "I'll be nice to your boyfriend if you be nice to my girlfriend."

"I don't have a boyfriend." Veronica replied flippantly.

"Veronica? Don't think I've forgotten about Wallace and Logan, especially Logan, staying over. I think we may need some Daddy-Daughter time this afternoon."

"I think I could live with that." Veronica smiled and started walking back toward her bedroom.
Pleased with the results of his request for time with Veronica, Keith made his way toward his own bedroom. Before entering he turned to Veronica. "Good morning."

"Good night." Veronica replied, smirk set firmly on her face. "Don't think I've forgotten you didn't come home last night."

Dick leaned back on the tabletop in the quad, his feet planted on the bench below with Madison sitting between his knees. He pretended to listen to Madison complain about something-or-other while he watched the parking lot, eager for some morning drama.

Logan's yellow truck zoomed into the lot and took its usual spot. Dick was surprised when Wallace jumped out of Logan's passenger seat carrying a bag of Mickey-D's and a coffee; Dick had expected to see Ronnie. But Logan seemed quite at ease with Veronica's little friend, speaking in that animated way of his, all big gestures and confidence. It was a trait that Dick was jealous of, though he would never admit it.

As Logan and Wallace made their way from the parking lot, a tiny blonde intercepted them. Even though he couldn't see her face, Dick knew she had to be Ronnie. Dick watched in awe as Logan smiled openly at something Ronnie said. He hadn't seen Logan look that relaxed and happy-go-lucky since Lilly died. Now that he thought about it, Dick didn't think he had seen either Logan or Veronica that happy since before the Fab Four couples had fallen apart. And then everything had gone completely to shit during a trip to Tijuana.

**FLASHBACK**

It had been one of the least exciting trips to TJ that Dick could remember. Logan was all emo about Lilly, or maybe it was about Ronnie telling Lilly about Yolanda. *Dude, chicks are so much work... And the Beav was being a whiney bitch about missing some stupid nerd thing. Whatever.*

Dick tried to get the others off the couch. "Can we at least go out to the bars? I want to find a nice señorita to show me a good time."

"I'm not going anywhere; just let me bond with José here." Logan was curled around the bottle of tequila on the couch. He hadn't moved from that spot since earlier that evening when he'd returned from his drive back to Neptune to talk to Lilly. Logan hadn't told Dick what had happened, but he could tell it hadn't gone well.

"Fine, fine...Halo?" The other two boys nodded sullenly in agreement.

They were all startled by Elvis Costello singing, *Veronica, Veronica, saying you can call me anything you like, but my name is Veronica.*

"It's Ronnie, can you answer it? I can't deal with her right now." Logan sighed heavily, handing his phone to Dick. "And tell her that if Lilly wants to talk to me she can fucking call me herself."

"Dude, I'm not getting into the middle if this shit. Just let it go to voicemail." Dick said.

"Just answer it!" Logan's voice had an edge that brooked no argument. Dick figured it was easier to just talk to Ronnie for a few minutes.
"Hey Ronnster!" Dick answered cheerily. He could hear sniffling and heavy breathing coming over the line.

"Dick?" Veronica said thickly.

"Yeah, it's me. Ronnie, are you okay? You sound weird." Dick watched as Logan's eyes turned dark and intense like they did when he was about to spring into action. Dick put his hand up indicating that Logan should just wait.

"Lilly…Lilly…she's…Dick, I need to talk to Logan. Please put him on."

"What about Lilly? We're trying to have a Lilly-free weekend here. We'll be back tomorrow, well actually today…hey man…" Logan grabbed the phone out of Dick's hand.

"What's going on Veronica? What about Lilly?" Logan asked, anger tingeing his words. Even from a few feet away Dick could hear the anguished cry through the phone. "Veronica you're scaring me, what the HELL is going on?" Logan asked, instantly sober, his anger replaced with concern.

Dick couldn't hear what Veronica said next but at her words the phone slipped out of Logan's hand and Dick barely caught it.

"Ronnie, what did you just say? Logan just went…like…blank or something." All he could hear on the other end were loud sobs and then the sounds of the phone moving around.

"Logan? Logan are you there?" A deep voice asked.

"No, well yes, but this isn't him. This is Dick. I mean I'm Dick…Casablancas…um…who is this? Is Ronnie okay? Cause Logan doesn't look okay." Dick was very confused about what was going on.

"Yes, yes, I know you Dick, this is Sheriff Mars. Veronica is…hmm…well...Where are you boys?"

"OH! Hi, Sheriff Mars. Logan, Beaver and I are in TJ. Please tell me what's going on." Pleading was something that was very out of character for Dick, but the sight of his best friend with tears streaming down his cheeks was too much for Dick to deal with.

"Dick, I need you to get the three of you back to Neptune. I'm really sorry to have to tell you but Lilly Kane was found murdered earlier this evening. We need you to get Logan back here."

Dick felt like he had been kicked in the nuts. No wonder Logan was such a mess. He tried to put everything together in his head and found that he couldn't. Instead he focused on the Sheriff's request. "I haven't been drinking so I can drive us back right now. But dude, I mean Sheriff, Logan's parents are out of town and I can't bring him back to our place…my stepmom... Where should I take him? Not to the Kanes' right?"

"No, not the Kanes' Dick. Bring him to my house. Veronica and her mother will be there."

"Okay, Sheriff, you can count on me!" Dick spoke with as much bravado as he could muster.

"I hope so Dick, I hope so." And the line went dead.

Dick tapped Beaver and dragged him into the hall away from Logan. "Beav, Lilly's dead, someone killed her. We've got to take Logan to the Sheriff's house. Help me get all our shit; we need to go now, and Logan won't be much help." Beaver nodded and started gathering all of their things.

Dick was carrying several bags out to the truck when Beaver jogged up to him. "Dick you don't
think Logan could have..." His words trailed off.

"Killed Lilly? No way little bro. Did you see him when Veronica told him? No way Logan did this."
Dick shook his head unable to imagine Logan doing anything to physically harm Lilly.

"But he was there." Beaver hissed.

"Well we're the only ones who know that and I'm not going to tell a soul. And neither will you."
Dick slapped Beaver on the back and finished loading their bags.

A few hours later they were parked in front of Veronica's little house on the edge of the 09er zip code. Dick barely had the Xterra in park before Logan ran into the Mars' home. By the time Dick got out to follow his friend, Logan had already reached the top of the stairs and disappeared into a room just off the staircase.

A hand gently touched Dick's shoulder, "Do you have his things, dear?" Lianne Mars asked.

"Um...yeah, I do." Dick stammered.

"Just bring them inside. Are you and your brother okay? You're welcome to stay, too." She offered him a small, crooked smile.

Dick just shook his head. A few minutes later he'd taken all of Logan's stuff into the Mars' small living room and headed to his own home. Not sure what he was feeling, if anything at all.

END FLASHBACK

"Dick? Dick, seriously, I'm trying to talk to you. Are you even paying attention?" Madison shrieked, pulling Dick out of the memory.

"Um...distracted. What's up?" He asked, shaking out his arms to release the tension of the memory.

"I asked if you knew why Logan was trying to mess with Troy's car?" Madison sneered, irritation oozing from her.

*Great, looks like the Dickster won't be getting any this weekend.* Dick thought, less disappointed then he knew he should be.

"Maybe 'cause Troy fucked around with Ronnie?" Dick offered.

"Yuck! That stupid, pasty bitch. I don't understand why Logan is hanging out with her and her little side-kick all of a sudden anyways."

"You'd better not let him hear you talk about Ronnie like that, Maddie." But, not surprisingly, Madison's attention sidetracked when Troy walked up.

"Can you believe this shit!?" Troy exclaimed, tossing a stack of credit cards on the table. All of which were pink and had some kind of girly shit on them.

Maybe if Dick were a better man he would have held back his laughter, but this was perfect. Dick grabbed his cell phone, snapped a picture of Troy's angry face, then hopped off the table. "Dude, you fuck with Ronnie you get..." he held up his fingers like bullhorns, "Hello Kitty and the Little Mermaid! Did she change all of your cards?" Dick continued to laugh, not waiting for Troy's response before walking away from the table.

Dick didn't know if it had been Ronnie or Logan who had messed with Troy, and he didn't
particularly care. As juvenile as the prank was, it had been a long time since Dick had seen anything as funny as how angry Troy was at that very moment. Dick headed to his locker whistling a little tune and thinking about his weekend plans, which he was pretty sure would not include Madison.

The tale, and pictures, of Troy's tantrum on the quad about his displeasure with his new credit cards reached Veronica as she headed to her last class of the day. It was all anyone was talking about. Veronica took it in stride, grateful that her own day had been incredibly uneventful. She'd gone to class, taken notes, eaten lunch, and repeated. The only standout for her was that Logan and Wallace seemed to have become closer. They even seemed to have their own inside jokes that Veronica wasn't in on. While she did find it somewhat annoying, she had to admit that she liked Logan and Wallace as friends. It was a refreshing turn of events that she wouldn't have anticipated in a million years.

Veronica was antsy to get home so she could finally delve into all the information that had come back about Troy. She had planned to bring the file with her to school, but when she had come back out from the shower, the folder was gone. In its place was a note from her dad. 'You get this back after Daddy-Daughter time'. She might have been irritated if she hadn't been secretly looking forward to some time with her dad. Okay, I'm still a little irritated.

Veronica's foot anxiously bounced while she waited for sixth period to end. Mr. Rooks was droning on about something that might have interested her on an average day, but not so much today. Veronica stared out the window, happy for the distraction of swiftly moving, fluffy clouds. Their presence probably meant that there would be rain, or at least a cool wind, coming through Neptune.

The bell ringing and Wallace tapping her on the shoulder shattered Veronica's daydream about the clouds. "Come on Supafly, let's blow this popsicle stand."

Veronica gathered her things and walked through the crowded hall where Logan joined them. The threesome walked side-by-side.

"What's on the agenda?" Logan asked.

"My dad confiscated the Troy file until after he and I have some Daddy-Daughter time. So that comes first. I'm going to ask my dad's opinion on whatever is in that file since I'll have his undivided attention. Based on what Dad hinted at this morning, I think we are really going to have something to work with. Then I'll call you guys and we can decide what we want to do next." Veronica started pushing through people to reach her locker.

"Well, I'm out. Coach has us doing more conditioning and I have tests in French and Trig tomorrow." Wallace grumbled.

"How long do you think you'll be with your dad? Maybe we can grab dinner? My parents are still up in LA so I'm all by my lonesome." Logan stuck out his lower lip, pouting.

Veronica bit her own lip to keep from reaching out and grabbing Logan's… There is something seriously off with my impulse control. "I'm guessing we'll have least two hours before he'll need to head back to work. He also has surveillance planned for tonight so we should have plenty of time to look over the file and get dinner."

"Great, call me when you're done with your dad." Logan squeezed Veronica's shoulder and turned
"How did it go with your dad?" Logan asked later that day as he walked in to the apartment.

"Better than expected. He wasn't very happy about you staying here, but when I pointed out that Wallace has stayed over plenty of times he cooled off. Though he's never found me asleep in Wallace's lap so you know that didn't earn his good will." Veronica rambled.

"But here I stand. So I guess I haven't been banned?"

"No, not banned, though if you, or Wallace, are going to be staying over I have to call first. Apparently, he gets to have grown-up sleepovers but I can't have platonic friend ones without informing him first." Veronica's face turned a bit green.

"He just loves and worries about you. It's nice. I used to be jealous that you had parents who cared. Of course now…I obviously prefer mine; whom I haven't spoken with since Monday." Logan said sarcastically.

"When do they get back?"

"Sunday night or maybe Monday morning. That's according to the maid gossip I overheard." Logan did not appreciate having to learn that kind of information from the help and it hurt that even his mother couldn't be bothered to send him a text.

Veronica shook her head and indicated that Logan should take a seat on the couch. "Well, I can't change your parents, but I may know a way you could suck up to mine."

"Oh yeah? Maybe make up for your dad thinking I'm trying to take advantage of his sweet innocent, Snow White of a daughter."

Veronica snorted, "I think these days he calls me his action-figure daughter. And yes. His birthday is this weekend and I want to try and make up for the whole 'background check on Ms. James' debacle. So this could be a two birds one stone sort of situation."

"Your dad like Santana?" Logan asked, remembering the tickets with VIP passes sitting on his mother's desk that would almost certainly go unused.

"Um…yeah. Who doesn't?" Veronica asked, incredulous.

"You know, I just might have the stones you're looking for." Logan winked at Veronica.

"God Logan, really? I am not interested in your stones. Santana's stones on the other hand…"

Veronica smiled manically.

"Stop, you'll hurt my feelings." Logan glared at her. "Let me text my mom and make sure they aren't planning to use the tickets. If not, I have two VIP passes for Santana at the Hollywood Bowl for Saturday."

Logan pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and quickly sent a message to his mom. "So did your
dad turn over the file?"

Veronica's eyes twinkled. Her smile had that dangerous edge to it that Logan now associated with her detective mode. It did strange things to his blood pressure.

"He did indeed. How do you feel about taking a little road trip?"

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Chapter 12 brought this story to over 100 reviews and follows on FF! It also received the more reviews than any of the previous chapters! Thank you so much everyone :)

To the two best betas a girl could have - Bondopoulos and BryroseA - you two are amazing! And huge thanks to all of you reading and reviewing; I love reading your thoughts. I've gotten a few questions that I thought I'd go ahead and answer here.

Lot's of people have been wondering if Mac is going to be joining the story. The answer is Yes! We don't meet her in canon until the Purity Test in Like a Virgin. She will definitely show up then and maybe sooner.

There's a little confusion about how Veronica got drugged at Shelly's party since I'm diverging from canon on some things related to this. Here is what we know so far: Veronica woke up at the party the next day and didn't remember anything after having a drink shortly after arriving at the party (we don't know where she got the drink yet). Logan had liquid-X at the party and gave one of his doses to Duncan (as opposed to canon where Logan 'drugged' Duncan). Logan doesn't remember who he gave his other dose to, just that he didn't take it and he didn't have it after the party. We also know that Duncan rescued Veronica from the salt lick and left her in a guest room. So that's a little recap of where we are on that mystery. And for those of you who don't read AO3/or don't read my comment replies: I did give one little reveal – I've changed the timeline a bit and the majority of the Shelly party reveal will take place earlier than it did in canon.
For The Good Things I Did

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 14 – For The Good Things I Did

Logan felt his stomach rumble as he changed lanes to exit the freeway.

"And you give me a hard time about always being hungry? Listen to you!" Veronica giggled in a sweet and innocent way that Logan hadn't heard since before Lilly's death.

"Hey Mars, some of us spent all day worried that their friend's over-protective father was going to kill us. Contrary to popular belief, threat of death isn't conducive to a healthy appetite. " He'd never admit it, but Logan had spent more than a little time that day distractedly thinking about how good it felt to have Veronica asleep in his arms the night before. Eating hadn't been a high priority.

"Oh, he's not going to kill you. But I believe he may have mentioned that the two of you need to have a little discussion. Honestly, I'm surprised he's waited this long. I'm pretty sure he's been wanting to play the scary, gun-toting father card since he first saw us together on Monday," Veronica teased as they pulled into the parking lot of the USA Border Grille and Diner.

"Are you ready to spill the beans yet? You don't expect me to actually believe that you wanted to come all this way to eat dinner at some trashy, roadside diner, do you? I'd have gladly paid for Luigi's back in Neptune." Logan said, parking the Xterra.

"Grabbing dinner here was just an excuse to get inside. We're really here to find the steroids. Let's go in and get some food and I'll fill you in on what I think happened."

Logan followed her into the diner. During the drive down, Veronica had detailed Troy's more recent exploits, and the existence of a girlfriend who seemed to always be involved. Veronica had some basic intel about the girlfriend as well as her contact information.

Logan couldn't wait to share this new development with Wallace; he was pretty sure he had an idea of how to use it to make a nice final parting gift for Troy.

At Veronica's request, a tired looking hostess sat them in a booth at the back of the restaurant, which happened to be conveniently located near the bathrooms.

"So, we find ourselves at the diner where it all supposedly started…" Veronica said dramatically. "I called Luke while I was with my dad. It turns out that, at one point in the evening, Troy was in the bathroom for quite a while. Luke said he didn't think much of it at the time since they were all exhausted and kind of messed up. But I'm fairly certain Troy went to the car, grabbed the drugs, met with someone from Angel Navarro's crew to get the car chopped, and then stashed the drugs back here in the diner." Veronica said casually while checking out the menu. "Do you think the patty melt is safe?"

"Um…probably? So you really think the drugs are still here? Wouldn't he have come back for them by now?" Logan couldn't understand why Troy would risk someone discovering them hidden here.

"Maybe, but I doubt it. I don't think he would risk anyone finding him in possession of them. No, I think his plan is to come back here on his way out of town. After we order, I want you to go search
After the waitress who'd seated them returned to take their order, Logan headed to the men's room. *If I were Troy, where would I stash a bag of steroids?* Logan asked himself as he spun in a circle in the middle of the dingy room. He checked the tank of each of the toilets, the bottom of the trashcan, and inside the small cabinet below the sinks. All the bending over gave him a slight crick in his neck. He was about to give up, but took a second to roll his shoulders and neck out while making one last-ditch effort to discover where Troy would hide drugs. When his head rolled back, his eyes caught on the ceiling. He paused; it was a dropped ceiling with t-bar panels...the perfect place to hide something. Logan climbed onto the counter and gingerly checked the panels that he could easily reach. The third one he tried felt heavier than the others.

"Jackpot!" Logan couldn't help but yell out, as his fingers closed around the bag of vials. Logan hadn't taken anything that resembled a bag into the bathroom, so he pulled off his jacket and carefully slipped the bag of drugs into it. Jacket full of drugs in hand, Logan couldn't help but smile as he headed back out into the diner.

Helping Veronica on a case was exhilarating; a much better high than he'd had in months. Logan slid back into the cheesy red sparkle-vinyl booth to find that their food had arrived.

"If that smile is any indication, I'd say you have good news." Veronica said around a mouth full of french fries.

"That I do-oo." Before he could elaborate, Logan startled at his phone vibrating in his pocket.

*From Mom to Logan Echolls, 8:15pm:*  
Have fun sweetie, take the driver and use the apartment

*From Mom to Logan Echolls, 8:16pm:*  
We're heading to Aspen for the weekend

*Well that is promising...*

"More good news! My mom says we can have the tickets. We can also use the LA apartment and the driver. Or, better yet, your dad and Counselor Becky can while you and I throw a party at my place. My parents will be in Aspen all weekend." Logan grinned with excitement. A party was just what they all needed after the stress of this week.

"That's great." Veronica replied without enthusiasm.

"What's wrong, Ronnie? I thought you'd be happy. Your dad's bribe is in place and we can all unwind."

"Um…I don't really go to parties anymore..." Veronica picked at the last of the food on her plate.

*Of course...I'm an idiot.* "Forget the party. What if you and I do something else? Just the two of us. You know, a bonding experience to keep us working on rebuilding our friendship."

"Something? That sounds ominous. What did you have in mind?" Veronica looked at him skeptically.
"Surfing! Remember that time I talked you into going with us? We had a lot of fun and you were pretty good by the end of the day."

Logan watched a frown flicker across Veronica's face but it was quickly replaced with a shy smile. "I'll admit I did have fun that day." She licked her lips, and Logan was thrown back into a memory of that day.

FLASHBACK

Logan watched as Veronica surfaced after taking another hard fall off her board. He could see her problem, but finding the words to describe how to fix it was proving difficult. She was too stiff through her hips, but every time he'd tried to tell her that she'd had become more static.

"Veronica, try letting the wave tell you how to move. You're so tense you're losing balance." Logan tried again, earning him a glare from Duncan. The younger Kane had tried giving Veronica instructions as well, but Duncan was a terrible teacher and Veronica had gotten frustrated with him quickly. He always used too much terminology. He kept saying things like pitch and angle—like surfing was a geometry lesson.

"Logan, I'm just not getting it!" Veronica snapped, frustration and disappointment written all over her face.

"It's okay Veronica. No one will judge you for heading back to shore to lay out with Lilly." Duncan pointed to Lilly who was waving her hands and pointing to the extra towel lying next to her.

Logan frowned; he knew Veronica could do this. Hell, she was already standing up on waves her first time out. She had a great natural balance, but she just wasn't feeling it.

Logan stared at her appraisingly for a few moments. She's not feeling it…He knew what to do.

"Ronnie, paddle up here between Duncan and me." Logan instructed, gesturing to the space between them. "Okay, disconnect and give your leash to Duncan."

Veronica threw him a skeptical look but complied.

"Great, now come get on my board." Logan said, scooting back a bit so the board would remain balanced when she climbed on. He'd expected her to resist, but without even a sideways glance she slid into the water and swam over to him.

"I know I keep telling you to feel it, but what if I help you to feel it?" Logan said, pulling her up onto the board with him. It wasn't ideal; his board wasn't meant for two, but Veronica was so small that he was pretty sure it would work okay.

While they waited for the next set of waves, Logan tried to describe the somewhat loose feeling that was needed in order to stay on the board. When Veronica just continued to look confused, he reached up and started rubbing her shoulders. "Just relax; you'll get it. You're doing so well already," Logan whispered in her ear. "Ignore Duncan and Lilly. Duncan's upset that he's a shitty teacher and Lilly's just being a princess."

Veronica leaned into his touch and turned her head, "And what are you Logan?"

"I'm the guy about to show you how good it feels to ride a wave," he whispered into her ear glancing at Duncan, who was bright red and looked less than pleased. Whatever…you'd have her primly sitting on the shore—bored silly, Logan thought to himself as a perfect wave came into view.
"You ready, Ronnie?"

"Yes." She licked her lips nervously, her profile clear to Logan, as she watched the wave approach.

They paddled hard and Logan yelled, "Now!" Veronica popped up with him and he pulled her close to his body, bending his knees more than usual to allow her hips to align with his. He held his core strong and let his hips, knees, and ankles move and flex as the wave shifted them. Logan could feel Veronica's excited breath as her body relaxed against his. He took the opportunity to shift the board a bit back into the wave to prolong the ride. But, having never done this with another person, Logan over-corrected and they both plunged into the water. He reflexively wrapped his arms around Veronica and held her tight as the wave crested over them.

Logan kicked them back to the surface.

"Wow!" Veronica exclaimed, her voice full of excitement as she turned in the water to hug Logan.

Logan returned the hug enthusiastically, still feeling the rush. "Want to try again?" He asked.

"Yes. Hell yes!"

Logan helped her ride several move waves and then declared her a pro. Over the next hour, Veronica successfully rode several on her own before the waves flattened out with the changing of the tide.

ENDFLASH BACK

"It'll just be you and me. I promise to share my board with you again." Logan smirked at her.

"Maybe…" Veronica replied hesitantly.

"I'll even pick up the stuff for S'mores." Logan knew he had her when her expression softened and she nodded. "You, me, bonfire, S'mores. Hey, do you think Wallace would want to come? Then we could bring Backup, too." That earned him a full on smile.

"Yeah, Logan, I think that sounds great."

Duncan restlessly paced his bedroom late Friday morning. He'd been cooped up for two days already and was tired of being a prisoner in his own home. He was alone to the point that the only people he saw throughout the day were members of the house staff delivering his meals. Duncan still wasn't sure what had happened after he'd arrived at Veronica's on Tuesday morning, and, while he had access to his computer and video games, his parents had apparently shut off the Wi-Fi so he had no access to the internet or to people. It was becoming increasingly maddening. Frustrated and bored, Duncan slunk down on the floor and leaned back against the bed.

A firm knock sounded on his door. "Duncan, son. It's time to go see your doctor." Jake Kane's voice rang through Duncan's room before his face appeared in the crack of the door.

"About time." Duncan said, irritation clear in his voice.

"Well, your mother didn't want…you know what, it doesn't matter. I'm back and let's get you in to see Dr. Levine." Duncan could tell his father was trying to mask the awkward moment.

Apparently Mom preferred to keep me hidden away at home rather than take me to my doctor…
"Where did she tell the school I was this time?" Duncan asked casually.

"Boston..." Jake replied with a grimace.

"I don't get what the big deal is. Don't get me wrong, I'm not leaping at the prospect of telling people I'm epileptic, but it's not a rare condition. It can't be that big of a deal." Duncan recited the brief speech he had prepared the previous day.

"Your mother and I just don't want you to be denied any opportunities." Jake responded, with a sour look on his face. Duncan couldn't place it, but he thought that his father looked like he might be sick. "Come on Duncan, let's get going. I thought we'd grab some ice cream from Amy's on the way home."

"Okay." Duncan slowly stood from his place on the floor. "Amy's sounds good. We haven't done that in forever." Duncan followed his father out of his room. "Think I could get my cell phone back too?" He asked, trying to make sure his voice sounded relaxed and at ease.

"Hey. I got it all. Eight grand and a little slice of my soul." Luke said sadly, thrusting an envelope at Veronica as she came out of fourth period PE.

"All right, Luke. Let's get all this over with." Veronica grimaced as she accepted the envelope. She had no sympathy for Luke and his poor decision-making, but the situation gave her no pleasure either. "This afternoon I'll go speak with Zigman. I'll give him the money and make the appropriate arrangements. By tomorrow you should be in the clear," Veronica said to Luke as they walked out to her lunch table. She was pleased to already see to-go boxes waiting with an anxious Logan. Luke nodded nervously and veered off to sit at his usual table.

Veronica walked around the table and took a seat on the bench with Logan. She slid the envelope to him, as they had planned out the night before.

"I'm going to go lock this up. Egg rolls are right here." Logan indicated a carton he had kept separate from the others. "I'll see you in Rooks' class."

Veronica watched Logan get up and head for the parking lot. Neither of them wanted to have so much money at school, so Veronica had thought it was safest to transfer the money as quickly as possible. Logan would take the money back to his house during lunch and hide it with the drugs since the Echolls' estate had better security than Veronica's apartment and her dad's presence ruled out Mars Investigations. This way she and Logan could pick up both the money and the drugs after school without interference. Originally it had been Veronica's intention to destroy the drugs, but after some thought she had come up with a much better plan. And if things didn't go well with Zigman... better to give the scary drug dealer back his drugs rather than risk anyone getting hurt.

Wallace plopped down on the bench next to Veronica and started rooting around through the take-out boxes. "Logan strikes again? Where is he?" Wallace asked.

"He's dealing with the money," Veronica replied absently. She needed to stay focused despite how tired and stressed she was feeling. Veronica picked up an egg roll and took a few bites, but even the delicious food wasn't helping.

"V, what's up? I thought you'd be excited that this stuff with Luke is getting wrapped up. You found the bad guy and you're gonna nail 'im." Wallace's excitement was evident in his tone.

"I didn't sleep much again..." Veronica shuddered at the memory of the nightmare she'd had several times the previous night. "There's a case I've been putting off investigating and I think my
subconscious isn't very happy about it." Veronica slumped down, placing her forehead on her folded arms. "But I'm not ready."

Wallace ducked his head down so she could see his eyes. "When you're ready, I'm here for you. Remember that, V."

Veronica nodded, "I will. And don't think I haven't noticed—" she yawned into her arm, "—what you and Logan are up to." She let her eyes drift shut and hoped for a nap that would be dreamless.

After school let out, Logan took Veronica back to his place to collect the money and drugs, as well as a few pieces of surveillance equipment that she had borrowed from Mars Investigations. Logan had insisted that he be able to listen in while Veronica met with Zigman. After picking everything up and stopping to get Backup, the pair headed to the ZigZag club.

Logan did his best to pay attention to the road, but Veronica was fiddling with a microphone down her top and it was distracting him. "Veronica, if you don't want me to crash you need to stop flashing me your boobs," Logan said teasingly.

"Oh please, you've already seen the goods thanks to your lack of basic social skills. Or have you learned how to knock since the last time?" She scoffed at him.

"I've always known how to knock." He leered at her. "But I am a teenage boy after all and I want to see them again."

"Knock it off, Logan. Now is not the time; I need to get my game face on," she said very seriously.

Shit, she's right. What am I doing teasing her when she has to go deal with that Zigman guy? "Veronica, maybe I should be the one to talk to him? I don't like the idea of you being alone up there."

"It'll be fine. I'll have Backup with me and you'll be just outside in the car. You'll know if I get in over my head; we practiced the code words. It's going to be fine."

That was at least the tenth time today that she had said this was all going to "go fine." Logan was starting to wonder whom she was really trying to convince. He pulled into the first available parking spot, behind an orange Hummer with Z-Meister plates.

"Is this it?" Logan asked her.

Veronica glanced down at the printout she had, "Yep. Plate, make and model match. And everything you need to leave our little gift for border patrol is right here." Veronica handed him the printout before she hopped out of the truck.

Logan watched as she moved to get Backup out of the backseat. "Please be careful." He reminded her one last time before she shut the door.

Veronica smiled tightly. "I will." With that, she shut the door and headed into the building, leaving Logan alone and nervous.

Much to Logan's relief, he didn't have to wait long before he heard Veronica's voice over the small receiver.

"Is that Hummer downstairs with the Z-Meister plates yours?"
"Abso-damn-lutely." A male voice, that Logan assumed was Zigman's, replied.

"Wow! Cool, I guessed right." At Veronica's confirmation, Logan logged on to the OnStar website on his cellphone using Zigman's information.

"So, um...you here to get pumped?" Zigman asked, his tone much too friendly for Logan's liking.

"Not exactly. I'm here to settle Luke's account."

"Why don't we step in my office?" Zigman's tone instantly transformed from friendly to ice-cold, which Logan found unnerving. Backup must have agreed, because he let out a loud bark.

Startled by Backup's sudden reaction, Logan dropped his cell phone as he selected remote unlock from the menu. "Shit, shit." He groped around for his phone while Veronica continued to speak with Zigman, cursing himself for dropping it at such a crucial moment.

"That's okay. I'd rather talk out here." Veronica's peppy voice dismissed Zigman's request.

"Well, I wouldn't."

Logan's fingers wrapped around his cellphone as Backup's low, menacing growl came through the receiver. "Atta boy Backup, you show that steroid freak who's boss." Logan realized that he was speaking to an empty car and immediately felt silly. But a glance at his screen showed that the remote unlock had been activated.

"Whoa! He would." Veronica's said confidently, using one of the code words.

Logan hit Veronica's speed dial on his phone, and after a short delay heard his ringtone, Right Said Fred's 'I'm Too Sexy', play through the bug's receiver.

"Hold on a sec." Veronica said. The music stopped playing as she answered. "Yeah?"

"Okay Veronica, I think it's time to wrap this up, don't you?" Logan started to get out of the Xterra.

"Oh, hey Logan. Not much, you?" Veronica's voice came both across the receiver and through Logan's cell phone, causing an echo effect, before he shut his door.

"Did you have a problem getting a picture of him?" Logan asked as he opened the rear driver's side door of Zigman's truck and deposited the package of drugs under the driver's seat.

"No, not at all. Piece of cake." Veronica's relaxed tone was starting to grate on Logan.

"Come on Veronica, give him the money and get out of there." Logan jogged back to the Xterra.

"Yeah, thanks." The line went dead.

"Here's the eight grand you fronted Luke. You two are square now." Veronica said, her voice once again coming through the receiver.

"Well, I'm gonna take the eight grand, but you tell that little bitch I better not see him again, he let me down and if he breathes a word about any of this—"

"Yeah, yeah, you'll make him pay or some other cliché...Come on Backup. Toodles Z-meister."

Logan let out a long-held breath as Veronica exited the building and jogged to the Xterra.
"So, I think that went well," Veronica said brightly as she followed Backup into the front seat.

Logan just shook his head. "Being threatened by a giant meathead is your idea of that going well?"

"Okay, so I could have done without the threat. But look, we have his photo, his vehicle description, and you planted the drugs?" Veronica asked.

"Yep, just like you said."

"Now that he had the money, what do you think he's going to do?"

Realizing the simplicity of Veronica's plan, Logan replied. "Replace the drugs."

"Exactly, replace the drugs. And with the drugs under his seat plus whatever he's sure to pick up in TJ he'll be caught bringing a large volume of illegal drugs across an international border. To Mars Investigations! We have some faxing to do."

Shauna looked at her ringing phone. Unknown number. She was practically vibrating by the time she raised the phone to her ear.

"Hello!" She said brightly, expecting to hear Troy's voice.

"Hello, Miss Stark. This is the California Department of Public Health. I'm afraid that you have been listed as a recent sexual partner for an individual who tested positive for herpes."

"WHAT!?" Shauna screamed into the phone. *Mother-fucking Troy! He swore he wasn't sleeping with anyone else!*

"Yes Ma'am. We strongly recommend that you go see your personal physician or to a local clinic and get tested immediately."

"Aaarrggeee!" Shauna screamed into the phone and hung up. She immediately pulled up the number Troy had given her to use to contact him in case of an emergency.

Troy's in-case-of-emergencies-only phone started to ring from the passenger seat of his recently reclaimed BMW. He wasn't worried; Shauna was the only one with the number and she always got impatient. Troy answered the call.

"Can you feel the heat yet? I am getting so close, baby, your panties ought to burst into flames any minute now."

"You mother-fucker. You promised me!" Shauna yelled into the phone.

"Oh, whoa baby, what are you talking about?" Troy tried to regain control of the situation.

"I just got a call telling me I might have an STD from someone who listed me as a sexual partner in California!"

Troy wracked his brain. He hadn't slept with anyone in California. It wasn't that he hadn't planned to…but that was hardly the point. And he hadn't been to a doctor…

"Fucking Echolls and Mars! Baby, it's not true. I promise it's not true. I don't have an STD and I haven't slept with anyone out here." Troy tried to comfort his girlfriend but then he realized that if they had Shauna's contact info that meant… "Gotta go baby. I'll see you soon."
Troy hung up the phone and reached for the package sitting in the passenger's seat and ripped it open. Candy spilled out of the paper package along with a note card.

*Sorry we didn't get a chance to say goodbye. Just wanted to wish you good luck at your new school and leave you something to remember me by. It took me a while to figure out that it was you who took the steroids, but once I knew about your record it was easy. There was only one place you were alone, right? Hope you like the candy. Say hi to Shauna from Logan, Wallace, and me. She sounds like a keeper.*

"Wow V, you should have heard her. Girl blew her top!" Wallace exclaimed.

"I may have sent the new vehicle information to Troy's dad so…" Veronica smiled gleefully, "I don't think Troy is going to be having much fun any time in the near future. What do you say? Have we exacted enough revenge on our buddy Troy?" Veronica asked as she finished icing the last letter onto her dad's birthday cake.

"I would have enjoyed messing with him some more, but I think he's going to be living the words of house Stark, "Winter is coming". Logan laughed at his use of Shauna's last name, while Veronica and Wallace started at him. "*A Song of Ice and Fire*, the epic fantasy series?" Veronica and Wallace continued to stare blankly. "Seriously?" Logan huffed then turned his attention to Veronica's crooked cake. "It's leaning to the left." He said and swiped a bit of chocolate icing off her cheek.

Veronica tilted her head with pursed lips, "That seems to happen a lot when I bake." She straightened back up. "Got those tickets, Echolls?"

Logan smiled. She hadn't given him a chance to forget since he'd first mentioned the surprise for her father. He was a little sad that he didn't have a couple more tickets; it might have been fun to go… without Mr. Mars and Counselor Becky that is. "Don't worry your pretty little head about it; I've got 'em right here." He reached into his pocket and extracted the tickets and backstage passes, setting them on the counter.

"Damn! Santana at the Bowl? How'd you get these?" Wallace asked with wide eyes.

"My parents' publicist sends them stuff like this all the time."

"Remember when Lilly and I dragged you and Duncan to see Christina Aguilera?" Veronica asked cheerfully.

Logan made a face, "Yeah I remember."

**FLASHBACK**

All Logan had heard about for two weeks straight was how excited Veronica and Lilly were that his mom had been able to get them all highly coveted tickets to see Christina Aguilera at the Gibson Amphitheater in Los Angeles. According to the girls, it was sure to be the event of the century. Here he was, still the new guy in Neptune, and now he was going to have to live down going to a super girly concert. He was happy to have friends at his new school and was pretty sure that even this wouldn't hurt the reputation he'd been building over the last two months. And anyway, he was escorting the two hottest girls at Neptune Junior High. Even if it did hurt his rep, living in Neptune was so much better than living in Los Angeles had been. After the Kanes had moved, Logan had been pretty lonely, sure he had plenty of friends but none of them were Duncan. They didn't care about him, they had just been interested in who his parents were. While many of his classmates in Neptune were still mostly interested in him for his connection to his parents, he'd made some real
friends, like Veronica and Dick. The icing on the cake was that Aaron still spent most of his time in the city.

The tickets included backstage passes and Logan was actually looking forward to introducing the girls to Christina. *At least Christina's hot and pretty nice, so that part won't suck.* He'd met her at an event his parents had made him go to earlier that year and she had snuck him a glass of champagne.

Normally the Echolls' driver would have taken them up to LA, but with so many in their party, his mom had hired a limo. On the way, Lynn had declared that she wanted to take the girls shopping before the concert. Logan and Duncan were all too happy to duck out and spent the afternoon playing video games and eating junk food.

The girls returned wearing more makeup than usual and with bags full of clothes. "Your mom got us makeovers. What do you think?" Veronica asked, bouncing onto the couch next to Logan.

Logan leaned back and held his hands up like he was framing a scene. "Beautiful." He declared after a few moments of scrutinizing her.

"She looks *hot* Logan!" Lilly corrected him as she slid into a chair.

"She's that too, Lilly." Logan responded condescendingly to Lilly, winking at Veronica before offering her a controller for the PS2.

"Okay kids, we need to leave if you want to see any of the openers or spend time backstage." Lynn called from the doorway.

"Can we play when we get back?" Veronica asked, a shy smile on her face.

"Of course we can, Ronnie! We'll pull out the N64 and I'll let you kick my ass at Mario Kart." Logan hugged Veronica to his side as they all made their way out of the den.

"What, no GameCube?" Veronica asked sarcastically.

Logan chucked her under the chin, "Oh, I have one…but the Mario Kart experience on N64 is superior to that of the GameCube."

Lilly huffed dramatically, "Veronica Mars, video games are lame. Anyway, I have plans for us tonight." Lilly said so only they could hear.

"I promised my dad we would come straight back here after the concert. I don't want to get in trouble, Lilly," Veronica squeaked out.

"Knock it off, Lilly. Come on, ignore her. We can stay up all night playing video games if you want." Logan squeezed Veronica tighter for a moment and rolled his eyes at Lilly. There were plenty of times when Logan had appreciated Lilly's wild side. Before the Kanes had moved Logan had spent more than one of his parents' boring parties holed up in his room playing spin the bottle with Lilly's friends using pilfered bottles of champagne. But Veronica had never lived in LA and she certainly hadn't attended parties like the Kane siblings and Logan had. Parties where the parents were too busy networking and stroking each other's egos that they didn't notice their twelve-year-old kids were drunk and playing strip poker. No, Veronica had definitely never participated in anything like that.

*Lilly's crazy if she thinks Veronica would enjoy what she has in mind.* Logan knew Veronica wouldn't be comfortable sneaking out in LA, even if it was with Lilly. He knew his mom wouldn't say anything to the other parents if she caught them, but getting in trouble wasn't what concerned
him in regards to Veronica. She was sweet and inexperienced; there wasn't anywhere that Lilly would want to take her that didn't make Logan incredibly uncomfortable.

After the concert, Logan had ushered his friends backstage once again. They'd gotten to spend some time back there before the concert, and had even met Christina, but everyone knew the real fun happened at the after party. Logan watched excitedly as the group was ushered back into all the action. Veronica could hardly contain her elation when she noticed Christina's wardrobe hanging on a moveable rack in a corner.

"This is, without a doubt, absolutely the most amazing thing that has ever happened to me, Logan." Veronica raced over to where he was sitting on a couch, trying to act supremely nonchalant, and gave him a big hug before squealing again and running back over to the wardrobe rack. Logan was happy too, until he realized that Lilly wasn't with them.

Knowing that it was only a matter of time before Lilly got herself into serious trouble, and depending on what she was doing could mean he was in serious trouble too. Logan turned to Duncan, "Hey man, where's your sister?"

If Duncan was concerned he didn't show it. "I dunno, Logan. Lilly is Lilly. She'll come back when she's done." Duncan responded, indifferent.

"I haven't seen her in like fifteen minutes. Have you?"

Duncan's only response was a weak shrug.

"Stay here with Veronica, okay? I'm gonna do a lap," Logan called out to Duncan as he hopped off the couch. He knew all too well what could happen behind the scenes and backstage in LA; it made what happened at the society parties pale in comparison. Logan quickened his step, making his way through the maze of hallways, checking open rooms for Lilly.

It didn't take him long to find her; she was sandwiched between two back-up dancers with a drink in her hand. He walked determinedly up to her.

"Lilly, there you are. Come on, Veronica and Duncan are about ready to go." Logan said, offering Lilly his hand to get off the couch.

"You can't go Miss Lilly. We're having too much fun." One of the dancers drawled, wrapping his arm around Lilly.

"Hey, man!" The other dancer piped up placing his hand on Lilly's thigh.

"Hey yourself! Back off, twinkle toes. She's with me." Logan said pointedly, happy for the growth spurt he'd had last summer. Lilly took advantage of Logan's distractedness and pulled herself away from him before plopping down onto the dancer's lap.

"Calm down, Logan Echolls! I'm having fun! God, you're sounding more and more like Jake and Celeste all the time." Lilly slurred. "Go get Veronica and the dull donut and bring them back here to the party."

Logan, at a loss as to what to do, suddenly wished that his mom were there. There wasn't any use trying to argue with Lilly. He didn't want to make a scene, and he didn't want to leave Veronica and Duncan alone for too long, but there was no way he was bringing them into this scene. At the mention of his name, several of the female dancers in the room approached him. He hated this
feeling. Logan wanted to be a chick magnet in his own right, not based on Aaron and Lynn's reputation. He remained friendly, but not too friendly, as he took a seat nearby. He wanted to make sure that he could keep an eye on Lilly without hovering. Logan didn't want to push her to new levels of debauchery, but he also didn't want to end up with any new scars because of her. Several of the scantily-clad girls came to sit next to him; all asking questions about his parents and his life as an Echolls. At one point a few of them had even crawled on top of him. He laughed it off, not interested, but not wanting to call attention to himself. *Just a few more minutes.*

Logan decided enough was enough when Lilly gave the dancer she was sitting on a deep, open-mouthed kiss. The dancer eyed Logan as he returned the kiss and moved his hands down to squeeze Lilly's ass. Logan sighed in displeasure; Lilly had no idea what she was getting into with these guys. It was time to go.

"Lilly!" Logan warned, his eyes trained on her.

"Loooogaaaan!" Lilly countered petulantly before grabbing a joint out of the mouth of the dancer next to hers mouth and taking a long drag.

"Shit." Logan said under his breath, this was the opposite of what he was trying to accomplish. "That's it, Lilly. I mean it. We're leaving now." Logan dislodged his most recent hanger-on when he sprang from his seat to approach Lilly. When he reached down to pull her away, he saw the dancer's arms come around to hold her tighter. Suddenly an idea flashed into his mind. "You know she's only thirteen, right?"

Logan watched smugly as the guy pulled his arms up in surrender and gave Lilly a long look. "I didn't know, man." He said, pushing Lilly off of his lap.

"Sorry to cut the party short, boys." Lilly hiccuped. "I didn't realize my friend here was such a tight ass," Lilly giggled drunkenly, faux smile in place, before sashaying out of the room.

Once in the hall, she turned sulky, but Logan didn't care. Someone had to look out for her, and clearly she wasn't going to do it for herself. No way was he letting her take Veronica out after that little display.

A somewhat drunk and stoned Lilly pouted during the long ride back to the Echolls' LA house. Veronica and Duncan seemed too star-struck to notice or care about Lilly's change in mood, so Logan had made a point of joining in on the camaraderie in the car. Despite her noisy friends, by the time they'd navigated the concert and LA traffic back to the mansion, Lilly had fallen soundly asleep across the rear bench seat of the limo. Lynn and Aaron met them at the door and laughed at Veronica's animated description of everything that had happened that night. Logan found himself laughing too; Veronica's energy was infectious.

"Well Veronica, I don't think you're going to fall asleep anytime soon; you're on cloud nine." Lynn observed warmly.

"Probably not! Unlike Lilly, who is sound asleep in the car right now." Veronica pointed into the limo with a grin.

Logan watched with trepidation as Aaron first peeked in and then lifted a sleeping Lilly out of the limo and carried her up to the spare bedroom the girls were going to share for the night. Logan hoped Aaron wouldn't realize that Lilly was more than just tired.

"Well, what do you guys say to a little gaming before bed? I know Veronica is wide awake." Logan looked over at Duncan expectantly.
"Aw, count me out. I'm asleep on my feet after a night of keeping up with this one." Duncan gestured affectionately over at Veronica before turning and heading up to the other guest room.

"I'm game any time, Echolls. It's just as well that we wore out the lightweights. Now we can play without the Kane babies whining." Veronica gave Logan a playful body slam before she called out "Race you there!" and took off toward the game room. Logan laughed, he could easily overtake her, but it was more fun to let her win this one; he was going to blow her away at Mario Kart in a minute anyway.

After six cup tournaments and a tied score, Veronica and Logan had decided to end the night in a stalemate. Logan popped in Easy Rider and slid onto the couch next to her. Before the opening scene was complete, he felt Veronica growing heavy on his shoulder and turned to find her fast asleep. Not wanting to bother her, Logan slid over until her head was resting on his lap, covered her with the afghan from the back of the sofa, and continued to watch the movie while absent-mindedly playing with her hair. Sometime during the movie he'd fallen asleep himself.

END FLASHBACK

It would have been one of Logan's favorite memories if it weren't for the poorly timed picture he'd had no idea about at the time. Of course, someone had taken pictures of him backstage and sold them to the tabloids. And that someone had happened to snap said picture at the one moment when a barely-dressed dancer had hopped in Logan's lap and kissed him while holding a shot glass in her hand. If the photographer had waited just a few more seconds, they would have gotten a shot of Logan pushing the girl gently up and away from him before grabbing Lilly and dragging her out of the room. A photo from any other time that evening would have captured Logan acting like a normal twelve year old with his friends. But that wasn't the world that Logan lived in. The picture had shown up in the tabloids a few days later and Logan had a cigarette burn on the inside of his wrist to show for it.

"Oh come on, you had as much fun as Lilly and I did. You sang along to most of the songs," Veronica teased.

"Maybe not quite as much fun as Lilly did," Logan said under his breath. "But yes, every minute of that day spent with you was a lot of fun. Especially our duet of 'Genie in a Bottle' on the way home. Just remember that I volunteered to rub you the right way that day and you turned me down." Logan pouted teasingly. "An offer that still stands, I might add." He winked at Veronica.

Just then the door flew open, "Honey, I'm home!" Keith Mars burst into the room with a huge smile. All traces of the scary dad from the previous morning had vanished. "Wallace. Logan. It's a great day, isn't it?"

Wallace looked to Logan, confused. "I guess, Mr. Mars," Wallace replied.

"It definitely is. My best girl made me a cake and my other girl is taking me to dinner tonight. Doesn't get much better than that, boys," Keith said enthusiastically.

"Well Mr. Mars..." Logan started to speak.

"Dad, I have a better surprise than cake, courtesy of the Echolls' publicist." Veronica held up the two lanyards and presented them to her dad.

"Santana...you got me VIP tickets to see Santana? Veronica." His tone was scolding. "You shouldn't have spent your money on that."
"No, Mr. Mars, she didn't spend a dime. I knew my parents weren't going to use them and she—" at Veronica's encouraging look, he amended, "—we, thought you and Rebecca would enjoy them," Logan interjected.

"Ms. James, Logan. And you know what? You were absolutely right!"

Keith rushed forward and clapped Logan and Wallace on the shoulders briefly as he headed into the kitchen where he quickly spun Veronica before reaching into the refrigerator for a soda.

"My parents offered you the use of our apartment in LA as well as the driver if you want. You and Ms. James could make a whole day of it and stay up at the apartment after the concert." Logan passed along the offer from his parents.

"That is very generous, Logan," Keith replied with a somewhat sobered expression. "If I didn't know better I'd think you were trying to get on my good side."

"I would never do that, Sir."

"No, of course not. I'm not sure I can accept…"

"Of course you can, Dad. Traffic and parking will be a bear. This way you two can just have fun," Veronica said brightly.

Keith looked between Logan and Veronica a few times. "And what will you three be doing while I'm gone?"

"Logan volunteered to teach V and I how to surf." Wallace came to their rescue.

Logan tried to keep his cool. It wasn't as if they had any plans that Mr. Mars wouldn't be fine with, but the look the man gave him was enough to make Logan feel guilty even when he had no reason to be.

"Hmm…surfing. And tomorrow night?" Keith asked.

"Take-out and movies in the Echolls family screening room. We got advanced copies of the new Harry Potter and Anchorman." Logan smirked at Veronica and Wallace's dropped jaws.

"When were you going to tell us that, man?" Wallace punched him in the arm.

"It was going to be a surprise." Logan met Keith's scrutinizing gaze.

"Okay. I approve of those plans. And if these weren't VIP tickets I'd be joining you kids! The new Harry Potter…I thought that wasn't out until after Thanksgiving." Keith pulled out plates and a knife to serve them all a piece of lopsided cake.

Logan sat at the kitchen island watching the relaxed conversation and enjoying what must have been the most normal evening he'd had in more than a year.

After they had each enjoyed a piece of cake, Keith waved Logan over, "Logan, do you mind taking Backup for a quick walk with me?" He asked in a tone that left Logan feeling like it was not a question.

"Dad…" Veronica called.

"We're just going to walk Backup. I'm not even pulling out my gun collection." Keith turned to Logan, "Come on. You and I have something to discuss."
Logan followed Keith out of the apartment and down toward the beach. "Mr. Mars I know you were upset about the sleeping arrangements yesterday, but I swear—"

"It's okay Logan. I don't think you were trying to be…inappropriate with my daughter. I am, however, concerned about what led to it happening." Keith ran his hand over his balding head, "Look Logan, I know how close the two of you used to be. I also know how poorly you treated Veronica this past year."

"I can't begin to say how much I regret this past year." Logan said, shoving his hands into his pockets.

Keith turned and met Logan's eyes, "I believe that. What I want to know, Logan, is what happens next time?"

"Next time?" Logan asked confused as they stepped out onto the beach.

"Yes. I know you were hurting when Lilly was killed. And that my decision to go after Jake Kane… well, I'm not stupid, you all shunned Veronica for my decision." Keith bent to unhook Backup's leash and tossed his tennis ball. "But what happens next time she disagrees with you?"

Logan stood, speechless. He couldn't imagine anything that would cause him to turn on Veronica again. Lilly's death was a unique situation.

Backup returned with the ball and Keith reattached the leash, "I want you to think about that. Because I'm not sure I can watch her lose you again." Keith turned and started walking back to the apartment, leaving Logan slack jawed and speechless.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you to Bondopoulos and BryroseA for their Betamazingness (that's a word). A special shout out to Bondopoulos for her tremendous efforts on the flashbacks in this one. And to Marshmallowtasha for some really fun discussions on Duncan, Lilly and the gang in general, as well as some great editing suggestions and betaing :) You three are awesome!

To everyone reading/reviewing/commenting/following/faving etc…you all are awesome too! We have one more chapter after this and then we are headed into 'Return of the Kane' territory, which I am pretty excited about.
Chapter 15 – Turn Around, Look At Me

Logan woke before the sun came up to ensure that everything was ready for his busy day with Veronica and Wallace. The previous day he had requested that Mrs. Navarro make up a big picnic for the group so that they could all have breakfast and lunch at the beach.

True to form, Mrs. Navarro had gone all out. When he came downstairs he found a note from her sitting on the counter explaining everything that she had packed and put into coolers. She indicated that her nephew, who also worked on the Echolls estate as a gardener, would place everything in Logan's truck first thing in the morning.

Logan headed out to the garage and saw two coolers already in the back of the Xterra along with beach towels, an umbrella, a large blanket with stakes, and a few tools for making things like sandcastles. Logan chuckled at the sight. Sometimes Mrs. Navarro forgot how old he was, but he didn't mind. It was nice to feel like someone cared, and he was pretty sure that Veronica and Wallace would be into building some sandcastles. Maybe I can impress Veronica with my mad castle-making skills.

A quick inspection confirmed that Logan's favorite board hadn't been damaged the previous weekend when Aaron had knocked it to the ground. He was grateful as he quickly loaded it next to the two extra boards he'd already strapped to the roof of his truck. With everything ready, he hopped in and headed out to pick up Veronica and Wallace.

He arrived at Veronica's at 6:45am, just as streaks of pink and blue could be seen in the sky to the east. In addition to all of the food that Mrs. Navarro had put together, she had also set out three to-go mugs of coffee. Logan quickly had doctored them to suit his friends with the cream and sugar she'd left sitting by the mugs. I can't believe my parents ever considered firing her. She could rob us blind and still be worth every penny!

Logan practically skipped up to Veronica's door before deciding instead to send her a quick text. There was no reason to wake up Mr. Mars if Veronica had slept through her alarm. Sure enough, after a few seconds he got a response. Logan bounced lightly on the balls of his feet until Veronica opened the door. He thrust the to-go mug into her hand, turned her around and pushed her back into her house to go get dressed, guiding her down the hallway with his hands on her shoulders.

"Come on, Ronnie," he whispered with his lips against the shell of her ear. He enjoyed the shudder he felt go though her body at the contact. "We're burning daylight and I promised you a good time." He gave her a sporting smack on the ass and got comfortable in the reclining chair in the living room while he waited for her to change. He decided to text Wallace to prompt him to get up also so that there was a fighting chance he would actually be ready when Logan and Veronica arrived.

From Logan Echolls to Waldo, 6:53am:
At V's b 2 u soon
From Waldo to Logan Echolls, 6:55am:
I'm up…c u soon

Satisfied that they would be on the waves by 7:30, Logan settled back in the chair, idly petting Backup. He had to force himself to give Veronica a few more minutes before storming her room and dragging her to the truck. Just as he was about to take action, Veronica popped out of her room.

"Okay, Echolls, take me to the fun time!" Her demeanor had completely changed; her eyes were shining and she was practically bouncing on her toes—Logan couldn't have been happier.

He jumped up, took her hand, grabbed Backup, and ran for the door before Keith woke up.

Veronica had managed to catch a couple of waves; her body seemed to remember what to do after a few attempts, but her mind kept wandering. Rather than take another fall because of her distracted state, she straddled her board and let the ebb and flow of the water rock her while she tried to get a handle on her feelings.

"Ronnie, is everything okay? If you aren't having fun we don't have to keep surfing." Logan's voice broke Veronica's introspection, as he paddled up to her.

"No, I'm having a good time, really." Veronica rubbed her hand across her neck and collarbone. "It's just…I can't stop thinking about that first time when you talked me into surfing. Part of me feels like it just happened yesterday, but it also feels like a lifetime ago."

FLASHBACK

Veronica's heart was still beating fast from the rush of riding her last wave. Because she was starting to feel pretty tired and the waves were dying down, she'd known it would be her last ride of the day and had made the most of it. Logan had met her on the shore and hugged her tightly from behind while Meg Manning snapped a quick picture, promising to make copies of it for Veronica and Logan.

The boys were carrying all of their gear back up to Lilly's SUV so they could all go meet more of their friends at a bonfire further down the beach.

"Veronica Mars. I think we need to talk." Lilly said abruptly.

"Okay Lilly, about what?" Veronica snapped back. Lilly had been acting bitchier than usual and it had been wearing on Veronica's patience.

"Remember what I said about you being more hearts and roses?" Lilly asked with narrowed eyes.

"Yeah. I remember, Lilly. What about it?" Veronica knew that her newfound annoyance for Lilly was creeping into her tone as her adrenaline buzz wore off.

"Well, Duncan wants to give you hearts and roses. But, if you keep acting like that with Logan, he's never going to get up the balls to ask you out. The Spring Dance is in like two weeks. Don't you want to go with Duncan?"

"Sure I do, but you've been telling me he likes me for months now and he still hasn't made a move." Veronica sighed. She wasn't entirely sure that she even wanted to go out with Duncan, but he was sweet and cute and they did have fun together. Veronica hadn't ever really pictured herself dating...
Duncan until Lilly had started telling her how much he liked her and how great they'd be together.

"I'll talk to him. Give him a little nudge. In the meantime keep your paws off of Logan. He's only being flirty with you because he's trying to make me jealous. It's just upsetting the Donut, which is working against you." Lilly winked at Veronica, but despite her friend's playful tone, the hand on her hip and her tight smile made Veronica think that Lilly wasn't teasing.

"Really Lilly? Logan is not flirting with me. And he wouldn't use me to make you jealous; he loves you, you know that." Veronica blew out an exasperated breath. "Maybe you should try being nicer to him. If you keep breaking up with him, one of these times he's not going to come crawling back and you'll have to watch him be all schmoopy with someone like Caitlin Ford or Shelly Pomroy. That's not a sight I want to endure either, by the way."

"You're right, of course. And I do love him, despite my efforts not to. I'll talk to Donut for you if you talk to Logan for me." Veronica resisted the desire to roll her eyes. "Pretty please! He'll forgive me sooner if you butter him up for me." Lilly's smile made her eyes sparkle and Veronica found she still couldn't resist this version of her friend.

"Yes, Lilly. And don't push Duncan too hard. Maybe I'm not the kind of girl he wants date. I mean, he got upset when I couldn't go to his soccer game because I had one of my own at the same time." Veronica shrugged thinking about Duncan's strange reaction.

"He just wants to show off for you. I'm telling you, you should quit soccer and join pep squad with me. I know he'd love to watch you run around in our little outfits." Lilly leered at Veronica.

"Knock it off, Lilly. Veronica's soccer uniform is way hotter than the pep squad one," Logan said, wrapping his arm around Veronica and pulling her up to the car.

"Don't stop being yourself just to make her happy," Logan whispered softly in her ear.

END FLASHBACK

"We had fun that day, didn't we?" Logan asked.

"We did. Well, you and I did. Before the party that night, Lilly gave me my first lesson in Duncan 101." Veronica looked out at the approaching waves.

"Duncan 101?"

"Like, a list of things Duncan would and wouldn't like for me to do. Clothes he liked me in. How I should wear my hair...that sort of thing. I spent that whole summer letting Lilly dress me and tell me what to do and how to be for Duncan. I didn't even do summer club-soccer. And I had been really looking forward to that..." Veronica shook her head. "I didn't even realize how different I'd become until Duncan stopped speaking to me; it was like there wasn't any of me left. Ya know?" She quickly blinked away the warmth building behind her eyes.

"I always wondered why you quit; you were so good. I used to really love watching you play."

Veronica couldn't bring herself to look at Logan. She didn't want him to see how upset she truly was. "I changed so much and then Lilly was gone. Then you were all gone. I guess being here like this with you is bringing on some self-reflection. I've spent this last year imagining that all our time together was this soft-focused fantasy. But do you know what really happened that day? I manipulated you into thinking that Lilly was sorry for whatever it was that she'd done—"

"She made out with Sean Friedrich, among other things," Logan clarified. "And it's not manipulation
if I was fully aware. I knew. I knew she wasn't sorry. But I missed what it was like with all of us together so I decided to let it go. Anyway, I knew how much you liked Duncan and he was all ready to ask you out that night so I capitulated."

"Nice use of an SAT word." She smirked at him. "I guess that makes me feel a little better, though. But what does Duncan asking me out have to do with you and Lilly getting back together—"
Veronica's was shocked by a sudden splash of sea water to her face.

"Nothing at all, Mars, nothing at all." Logan laughed and paddled away from Veronica to catch the incoming wave.

Veronica remained confused about the end of their conversation as she watched him ride all the way into the shore. *What was that about?*

Wallace was lying on the sand taking a break. He and Veronica had spent the morning alternating who was out with Logan while the other rested and played with Backup. Wallace felt like he'd done okay for a first-timer. He hadn't stayed upright on the board for very long, but he had managed it a few times. For someone who could be act like a real jackass, Logan had actually turned out to be a patient and encouraging surf instructor. While Wallace had been feeling pretty confident about the good shape he was in because of all the conditioning he'd been doing for basketball, he wasn't used to using his muscles the way he had today. He was already feeling a little sore which didn't bode well for the next day.

Wallace slid V's big beach bag under his head and looked out at the water. Logan and V had come to shore and left their boards by him after they had all enjoyed a relaxed lunch. Now the two of them were just playing in the water to cool down. Logan kept diving over small breaking waves and splashing Veronica. Wallace couldn't help but smile. He hadn't seen V laugh so much in all the time he'd known her. Despite their short friendship, from what Wallace had been able to figure out, happiness hadn't been a big part of Veronica's life in a while.

Wallace watched as Logan lunged for Veronica and then tossed her into an incoming wave. It reminded Wallace of a picture he had seen in Veronica's room. The photo wasn't out where just anyone could see it, but hidden in the drawer of her light table where he had once found a whole stash of pictures of V with Lilly, Logan, and Duncan. The one Wallace was thinking of in particular was of Veronica in a long-sleeved rash-guard like the one Logan had loaned Wallace today. He couldn't be sure how old the picture was, but Logan had his arms wrapped around Veronica and Duncan wasn't in the picture. Wallace assumed that it had been taken before V and Kane had started dating. Logan and Veronica's grins were huge and goofy. They had both looked happy, just like they did right now.

Wallace looked back out at his friends; he knew that if everything hadn't happened like it did he probably wouldn't have ended up friends with Veronica. She was the reason that things had turned out in his favor with the PCHers, so he couldn't regret their friendship, but seeing Logan and Veronica together made him wish that neither of them had had to go though all the trauma of this past year.

He knew that things had been bad for Veronica. But in just the short time he'd spent with Logan, Wallace got the feeling Veronica wasn't the only one hiding demons.

"Hey Fennel, you ready to get back out there?" Veronica called as she ran up the beach to where Wallace was watching them.

"I don't know, Mars. Have you had enough to eat? Can you surf more without elevenses?" He
teased her as Logan jogged up to them.

"Hobbit jokes…really, Wallace? Look at her feet—completely hair free. Anyway, I think it would be luncheon and she needs more than seven meals a day." Logan laughed.

"Whatever you say Logan, but clearly I'm not the only one with hobbit knowledge." Wallace smirked and reached into the big basket to pull out chocolate croissants to wave them in front of Veronica.

Veronica snatched the bakery box from Wallace, "I guess I could eat more."

Duncan sat in his silver SUV—Lilly's SUV—watching Logan and Veronica. He supposed that he was watching Wallace, too, but only because the guy happened to be there. Duncan was surprised that none of them had spotted him during the two hours that he'd been watching them. He wasn't doing anything to hide his presence, but the plain silver SUV probably didn't attract much attention, which suited his needs perfectly.

It wasn't like Duncan was stalking them; it just happened that he had gone to Logan's that morning hoping to catch him so they could talk. Of course when Logan hadn't been there, Mrs. Navarro had been kind enough to let Duncan know where she thought he might be. Duncan had expected to find Logan alone at the beach, or maybe with Dick. Instead, he'd been shocked to see Logan standing on the beach holding Veronica's waist as she practiced popping up on a board. Duncan's anger had surged up to the surface and run along his skin in a hot flash. Dr. Levine had warned him about this.

Dr. Levine had been very upset when Duncan told him he'd stopped taking all of the depression and anxiety drugs. He'd insisted that Duncan start taking everything again, explaining that it was for his own safety as well as that of those around him. Duncan was still confused about the doctor's comment; he didn't see how being a little moody was that big of a deal. Who was he hurting by having some mood swings as long as he didn't have any seizures? After only one day back on all of the meds, Duncan was already feeling the effects. His head was going from flat to angry to anxious in a heartbeat, and he hated it. He'd told his dad that morning that he wanted to go back and see his doctor again, but his dad had said that it would have to wait. It was something that Duncan had heard plenty of times. 'Just give it time Duncan; this combination will have you feeling right as rain. There's nothing wrong with needing a little help, Son. Losing Lilly was hard on you…' Despite what they'd said, Duncan was convinced that he was being lied to. They were trying to do something to him, trying to control him. He just couldn't figure out what their intent was. He couldn't help but wonder if somehow Logan and Veronica had timed renewing their friendship with him deciding to take control of his medications.

Duncan took two deep breaths and felt his anger recede. The clarity the calm brought allowed him to return his attention to his ex-girlfriend and the guy who he'd always considered his best friend. Seeing the two of them together like this, on the beach, reminded him of the time that Logan had convinced Veronica to try surfing with them. Duncan had been against it from the onset. She could have gotten hurt, and with her pale skin she'd surely end up with a sunburn. He preferred her skin lightly tanned; he didn't want to look at her all red and peeling. Lilly had tried to help him convince Veronica to just hang out on the beach, but she had been too caught up in Logan's excitement and had ignored them both. It had not been a fun day. In fact, other than the last few weeks, Duncan couldn't remember a time that he had resented Logan more than he had the day that they had taken Veronica surfing. The two of them had gotten so close. He couldn't abide Logan getting to touch Veronica without her looking uncomfortable. He hated their little inside jokes.
"Don't you need to make a move. Veronica doesn't think of Logan as anything more than a sibling but I can't say the same for Logan."

"Don't be ridiculous, Lilly. Logan knows how I feel about her. He would never do that to me." Duncan rolled his eyes for Lilly, but if he were honest, he wasn't so sure.

"Think what you want little brother, but do you have any idea how much time they spend together?" Lilly focused her penetrating green gaze on Duncan.

"We all spend a lot of time together." Duncan shrugged.

"Sure, but they hang out without us, too. You remember that party at Enbom's last weekend?"

Duncan nodded. Veronica and Logan both hadn't gone; Lilly made out with Sean Friedrich in front of everyone, and Duncan had ended up getting a hand-job from some girl named Cindy, who turned out to be in eighth grade. He was greatly relieved that no one had noticed when she had dragged him off behind the pool house, thanks to Lilly's shenanigans.

"Donut! Pay attention. Before my little performance with Sean, I went over to Logan's hoping for a somewhat different performance. Veronica was there and they were cuddled up on the couch in the pool house watching movies." Lilly's face narrowed and her eyes looked dark. "They lied to us about not being able to go to that party. So if you really want Veronica, you need to make a move now. Tonight. Ask her to the dance. It's in two weeks and if you wait much longer someone else is going to ask her. I'll even help you with all the stuff that she likes." Lilly had smiled sweetly and walked to Duncan's closet to pick out his clothes for the party.

END FLASHBACK

After several beers during the bonfire that night, Duncan had finally worked up the courage to ask Veronica to the Spring Dance. He'd waited until he saw Logan and Lilly walk back toward the parking lot together, a sure sign that they were heading back to an 'on' period, to approach Veronica. He'd decided that Lilly had been right and he didn't want to risk Logan deciding to make a move on Veronica. If Veronica said yes to going to the dance with Duncan, then she must not have feelings for Logan, and the rest wouldn't matter. The logic seemed perfect. And for six months everything was...well, not perfect, but close to it.

Duncan raised his eyes back to the beach and saw that Logan, Veronica, and Wallace were all sitting together on the shore again and picking at something from one of their baskets. A loud knock on his window shocked Duncan and he turned to find Dick, Casey, and Beaver all standing by the door. He had been so occupied by Logan and Veronica that he hadn't noticed the guys approach.

"Hey man. Whatcha doing here?" Dick asked.

"Oh, I was checking the waves to see if it looked worth paddling out."

Dick looked at him strangely. "Tide's changing, you're going to lose the good break...you surf here all the time, you know that."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"We saw Logan's truck. So we thought we'd see what he was doing." Dick pointed at the yellow Xterra a few spots down.
Duncan wanted to kick himself; of course that would have made much more sense. *Too late now.* "Oh, I hadn't noticed."

Dick laughed, but Duncan noticed that Beaver was watching him closely with a small smirk on his face.

"Well Kane, let's *all* go say hi."

__They'd just finished the chocolate croissants when Logan heard a familiar booming laugh and felt Veronica tense at his side. He looked up to see Dick, Beaver, Casey, and Duncan approaching them. Logan stifled a groan, knowing that their fun and quiet day at the beach just got a whole lot more complicated. He tried to subtly place himself between Duncan and Veronica by wrapping an arm around her shoulder. Logan caught a momentary glimpse of an infuriated glare cross Duncan's features, but it was gone as soon as it had appeared, smoothed back into pleasant indifference.__

"Hey Logan, Veronica, um…I'm sorry I don't think we've met." Casey held his hand out to Wallace.

"Wallace Fennel." Wallace shook Casey's hand hesitantly.

"Casey Gant. Nice to meet you."

"Save it Casey, we all know how you like to meet *new* people." Dick punched Casey in the shoulder.

"Hey!" Casey responded indignantly. "Some of us are heirs to publishing empires. I'm just making sure I'm familiar with a variety of different types of writers and media. Maybe I'll expand Gant publishing into the literary magazine category."

"Whatever dude, you just think Miss Mills is hot." Dick laughed and turned away from Casey. "Wally, what up?" Dick offered his fist to Wallace.

Wallace glared at Dick, "That fist up your ass if you call me Wally again, Dickie."

Logan laughed, knowing that being called 'Dickie' wouldn't bother Dick in the least.

"So Logan, Veronica, Wallace…what brings you all here today?" Duncan asked.

Logan looked between Duncan and the surfboards and raised his eyebrows. "Surfing…"

"Oh, right, of course."

"Dude, I can't believe you didn't invite us!" Dick slapped Logan's finally healed back. "Are your new friends too good for us? I thought *Wallace* and I had really hit it off the other day; didn't we Fennel?" Dick turned puppy dog eyes to Logan and then Wallace.

"Sorry man, I wasn't trying to exclude you. Just um…" Logan tried to subtly turn his eyes to Duncan, hoping that Dick could take the hint.

"Oh right, Kane. Whatever, we just won't leave him alone with Ronnie, right Ronnie-kins?" Dick reached out to grab Veronica around the waist.

"Look, don't touch, unless you want to meet my stun-gun." Veronica said sternly as she stepped forward to smack Dick's hand away, which also dislodged Logan's arm from her shoulders.

Logan took a moment to admire her sparking eyes and how her defiant stance emphasized her small
curves. He looked back at the rest of the guys and realized they were all openly admiring her too. "Don't look either." Logan scowled at them as he moved closer to Veronica and wrapped his arm across her shoulders again. Veronica smirked up at him but she didn't step away.

Dick laughed loudly and winked at them, "No prob. You've got all the touching and looking covered. Am I right D-man?" Dick stepped back and picked up the ball they had been throwing for Backup and tossed it down the beach.

Logan looked at Duncan and saw that he was staring at Veronica or, more specifically, where Logan's arm was wrapped around her.

"Sooo," Wallace interjected, dissipating most of the tension, much to Logan's relief, "You all surfing, too?"

"Naw, waves are pretty flat now." Casey said with a regretful expression as he looked out at the water.

"Yeah, I think we're going to be heading out pretty soon," Veronica added in a lighter tone.

"What are you guys doing later?" Dick asked, throwing the dirty tennis ball for Backup again.

Logan looked to Veronica and Wallace, but Dick caught their glances and that damn puppy dog look was back, "Come on, man. Don't be like that. Are you three planning to party without me?"

"No, Dick, we would never dream of doing that." Veronica smiled tightly at him. "We were just going to watch a few movies and order some takeout. See, nothing you'd want to do."

"Actually, that sounds great," Casey said. Beaver nodded enthusiastically.

Logan deflated. Since when does a movie night sound good to these assholes?

"No, that sounds lame, but much better than anything we had planned. Whatcha say, Logan? I could call a few babes and we could add some brews." Dick offered.

Logan felt Veronica sigh heavily against him. That was the opposite of what she had wanted to do tonight. "No, man, not really what we had in mind."

"All right, no babes, but what about the beer?" Dick's smile was directed at Veronica. He had clearly picked up on who wore the pants here, and Logan couldn't care less. This was about Veronica having fun, not Logan asserting himself as some douchebag alpha male, à la Aaron Echolls.

Logan looked down at Veronica, "It's your call."

"Fine Richard, beer—yes, babes—no. I can't stand any of those bitches."

"No loss; they really are all bitches," Casey added and Dick bumped fists with him.

"I dunno; a couple of the cheerleaders seem all right."

While Casey, Dick and Wallace chatted back and forth, Logan took a minute to assess the situation. Duncan did not look happy. And Beaver was watching Veronica and Duncan in a way that caused goose bumps to break out across Logan's arms. He shuddered involuntarily.

Veronica looked up at him with raised eyebrows. Logan knew that she wanted to know what was up, but he didn't feel like he could say anything without causing a problem. He leaned down and whispered softly, "Later. Sit down with Wallace; I need to talk to Duncan, okay?" She nodded
slowly, her reluctance obvious, but she took a seat on the blanket next to Wallace, who handed her a small bag of cookies.

"Duncan, can I talk to you for a minute, alone?" Logan asked once Veronica was situated.

"I guess," Duncan shrugged and started walking a bit down the beach.

"I'll be right back." He winked and smiled at Veronica and then made quick eye contact with Wallace, who nodded in acknowledgment. Logan didn't like the way Beaver was staring, but the guy was harmless, especially with Wallace, Casey, and Dick there. He jogged to catch up with Duncan.

"What is it now?" Duncan asked, exasperation clear in his voice.

"I don't think you should come over to my place. Veronica isn't comfortable being around you right now and this is supposed to be a fun day for her." Logan said matter-of-factly.

"What the hell, man? You're supposed to be my best friend." Duncan stopped walking and took a few deep breaths. "I didn't mean to upset her. Maybe spending time together will help." Duncan's face twisted into something Logan thought was meant to be a smile.

"You didn't just upset her, DK. You essentially attacked her and left her covered in bruises." Logan tried to keep his temper under control, but every time he thought about it or saw the bruises again he found himself very upset.

"Look, I assume my dad told you I'm taking medication for that. My meds were off; I saw my doctor and it's all fixed. I won't be losing control like that again."

"I dunno." Logan glanced back to where Veronica and Wallace were folding the beach blanket. "If you come, don't approach Veronica. Wait for her to come to you. And if she tells me she doesn't want you there then you need to leave, okay?"

"I guess I can live with that." Duncan said, holding his hand out to Logan who reached around and patted Duncan on the shoulder instead. They started walking back when Duncan paused, "Maybe you could see if she would be willing to talk to me? With you there too, I mean. I really want to explain what happened, but not in front of everyone else."

"I'll ask her."

Veronica wasn’t thrilled about the change in their plans, but she was also feeling in touch with her marshmallow core. *I never was very good at saying no to either of the Kanes,* she reflected as they drove through the gate onto the Echolls estate. She had her stun-gun as well as Backup, Logan, and Wallace so she felt pretty secure even in the presence of Duncan. After all, she didn't need any of them to protect her; Duncan had caught her off guard before—something that would not happen again.

"Hey Wallace, can you take Backup and a cooler into my garage? I need to talk to Veronica for a minute." Logan's voice sounded a little off as Wallace came around to take Backup's leash.

"Veronica, can I have a minute?" Logan had come around the Xterra.

"Do I have a choice?"

"With me you always have a choice." Logan said, his brown eyes intense and burning with sincerity.
Veronica softened her tone in an attempt to offer Logan the version of herself that used to come naturally, the version that trusted him implicitly and without hesitation. "Okay, what is it that you need to tell me? Whatever it is, it can't be good. You've been on edge since we left the beach."

He stepped closer, "Let's go sit by the pool. I need to tell you what Duncan said to me and then you need to decide what you want to do before they get here."

Veronica nodded and followed Logan through a door in the garage to the back yard and the pool. He kicked off his sandals and sat down with his legs dangling in the pool. Veronica joined him, scooting close to him but remaining far enough away that they weren't touching.

"Tell me. It can't be that bad if you let him come here."

"I did, but you say the word and he leaves. No questions asked. Do you understand, Veronica? You don't even need to have a reason. One word from you and he goes. Just because I'm going to try to make things right between he and I, doesn't mean you have to, or even should," he said, gently touching the mostly faded bruises visible on her bare arm.

"Thank you." Veronica reached for Logan's hand where it lay on her arm, entwined their fingers and gave, what she hoped, was a reassuring squeeze, before setting it back on the edge of the pool. "Tell me. What did he have to say?"

Logan shared Duncan's story about his medication being off at the time of the attack and how he was back on track now.

"So, what does he want to talk to me about if you've explained why he behaved the way he did?"

"He said he wants to 'explain' what happened. What do you think?" Logan twisted the hem of this t-shirt in his hands.

Veronica stared at the ripples their bouncing legs were causing in the pool. Do I want to give Duncan the chance to explain? Not apologize? Veronica was thinking when it struck her, "From what you said he doesn't even remember hurting me. So what is this really about?"

Logan shrugged, "I honestly don't know, but with everything that's happened..." He trailed off.

"Don't you want to find out? Did he tell you what the medication was for?" She asked.

"I have no clue about the meds and I do want to find out what he wants, but he's been so weird lately. And Beaver..." Logan flicked his foot shooting a stream of water away from them. "If you decide to hear him out, I'll be by your side the entire time, if that's what you want."

Veronica scooted closer to him and rested her head on Logan's shoulder. He moved his arm and wrapped it loosely around her back. "Thank you. I'm going to take you up on that offer. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious." Logan pulled away and raised his eyebrows at her with a smirk. "Fine, fine—when am I not curious, I get it." She laughed lightly before turning more serious, "Whether he stays or leaves, I don't want to be alone with any of them. I don't know Dick, Cassidy, and Casey anymore. They were all..." She stopped herself. She knew Logan suspected that something had happened to her. In a moment of weakness, Veronica had all but told him about that night. Not that she even really knew everything herself...

Logan grimaced, "They were all at Shelly's. Okay, you know what, I'll just tell them all to go when they get here. Go wait inside with Wallace and I'll get rid of them."

"No, Logan. Just don't leave me alone with any of them. There were like a hundred or more people
at the party. If I refused to be in a room with any of them I couldn't go to any of my classes." She sighed and stood up. "When they arrive, I think we should all just go and watch the first movie. When it's over, Duncan, and I will talk. That way if we aren't happy with what he has to say he can leave without attracting too much attention."

Logan stood and faced Veronica, a look of admiration on his face. "Okay. Let's do this."

Much to Duncan's surprise, Logan and Veronica didn't insist that they all talk before hanging out. But it didn't get past him that Logan never left Veronica's side and that Wallace was watching him closely. Duncan wasn't so bothered by this however; this was about regaining their trust rather than getting Veronica alone. At least for now. This restoration of faith was just one step in the long game Duncan was playing.

After Anchorman finished, Logan tapped Duncan and led him out to the pool.

"Say what you need to say, Duncan." Veronica stated as Logan took a seat on the chaise with her. It bothered him, but he just smiled, and took the chair across from them.

"Well, Veronica, I wanted you to know that I've been having a really hard time lately. Watching you and Logan become friends again has been difficult for me. I came to your house on Tuesday to try to find out why you were giving him another chance but seemed determined to not give me one. I had stopped taking this stuff that helps me since, well since…" He looked at Veronica meaningfully, hoping she would get the message. But all she did was stare at him blandly. "You know…"

Veronica looked to Logan who nodded his head. *Did she tell him? No, she wouldn't have told him about that.*

"Okay Duncan, I get it, you've been having a hard time. And what do you call what the rest of us have been going through? A vacation?" Duncan held back a frown as Logan placed his hand on Veronica's knee, which she stared at, took a deep breath, and then looked back at Duncan. "I don't want to have a problem with you but too much has happened. I don't want you showing up at my apartment and if I'm not with Logan or Wallace, don't—"

"I get it, Veronica. I scared you. But I just wanted to talk to you and you wouldn't answer me. I don't remember hurting you."

"Well you did, man. I had to pull you off of her." Logan pointed to the marks on Veronica's arm that Duncan didn't remember causing. "See how bruised she still is four days later?" Duncan could see that Logan was getting agitated. He decided that it was time to end this conversation before it went somewhere none of them would enjoy.

"Veronica, I won't bother you again. And I'll go through Logan if we need to talk." Duncan smiled blandly and turned his attention to Logan. "There is one more thing; Logan, I'm going to run for Student Council President. Do you think you could help me put together my campaign video? You're really good at that stuff and I was hoping maybe your dad could say a few words on it."

Logan looked to Veronica who shrugged. "Um…I guess. My dad should be back late tomorrow or early Monday. I'll ask him. And either way I can help you make the video. Anything else?"

Duncan shook his head, "No, that's all. Thanks, man."

"Okay then, let's go see what movie they put on." Logan stood and held his arm out toward the door.

Duncan took the hint and preceded them into the house.
It had been months since Lianne had left Neptune, but a day didn’t go by that she didn't wish she could go back. Lianne had spent too many years lying to herself, so when she left she decided to be honest, even if it was only with herself. This meant she could admit that it wasn't just Veronica that made her want to go home. Of course she missed Veronica, but she missed Jake, too. Now more than ever. She stared down at the prepaid phone in her hand that had shown up in the Mailboxes Etc. box she had set up. She'd only given the forwarding information to a handful a people in case someone came to them needing to get in contact with her.

Lianne pressed send and leaned against the cold concrete wall, listening to the phone ring and finally transfer over to voicemail. She felt both relieved and sad that Veronica hadn't answered her call.

"Hello, sweetheart." She breathed into the phone, "First of all, I miss you…so much. More than you could possibly imagine. You know what? I did get one of your letters, but I won't tell you which one because I don't want you to try and find me. Veronica, you listen to me. I know you have a million questions, but everything will make sense when the time is right. I promise." Despite her words, Lianne knew that there would never be a right time to explain to Veronica all that she had done wrong in her life. She didn't know if she would ever be ready to discuss with her daughter the impact that those decisions had had, were still having, on Veronica's life.

"I'll be in touch soon. Trust me, okay? I love you. And could you tell your father I said 'happy birthday’?" Lianne disconnected the call, hoping she'd said enough to buy herself some more time. She looked around the empty corridor and then quickly pulled the battery and the SIM card out of the cell phone. She wiped away the tears sliding down her cheeks as she threw each component into a different trashcan on her way back to her car.

"Veronica, I think you missed a call." Casey said, holding up Veronica's phone to her as she, Logan, and Duncan reentered the screening room.

Veronica reached for the phone and moved back toward the entrance of the room. Logan turned to watch her but stayed where he was to give her privacy. He watched as her face turned from confused to distressed. Logan strode toward her; completely ignoring whatever Beaver had been in the middle of saying.

"What's wrong?" He asked in a low voice.

Veronica shook her head, "Not here." Her eyes darted to the other people in the room.

Logan grabbed her hand and led her out of the room, up the stairs, and into his bedroom. He shut the door and turned her to face him. Tears threatened to fall from her eyes and her lip trembled as she bit down on it.

"It was my mom…I missed her call."

Logan reached for her and pulled Veronica in tight against his chest. "I'm so sorry you missed her call. Did you try calling her back?"

"Line no longer in service." She wrapped her small arms around his waist, her fingers digging into his sides almost painfully.

Logan kept one arm wrapped tightly across her shoulders and began to stroke her hair slowly with his other hand. "What did she say? Is she okay?"

"I don't know." Veronica's voice broke and the tears she'd been holding back soaked into Logan's
He had no idea what to say, so he didn't say anything. He walked them back to his bed, kicked off his shoes, and tucked Veronica into his side until she calmed down. She had been so strong all day while dealing with unwelcome company and unpleasant memories.

Then, on top of everything else, Duncan’s non-apology had been troubling. Logan felt like he owed Duncan the benefit of the doubt; they’d been friends since they were little kids and had always been there for each other. At least until Lilly died. Veronica had been right when she’d said that she felt like she’d lost everyone in that tragedy. Logan felt that way too. Having Veronica back in his life as a friend rather than an adversary made him feel like he’d found a piece of himself that had been missing for the past year.

Logan noticed that while he’d been musing Veronica’s breathing had evened out. She was now snoring softly so Logan decided to let her get some rest while he rescued Wallace from the others. Logan carefully slipped his arm out from under Veronica, pulled off her shoes, and covered her with a blanket. He’d get her under the covers later when he came up to bed, he decided.

When he opened the door, Backup was sitting there patiently. "Hey buddy, why don't you go lay down next to her." Logan pointed toward Veronica and Backup trotted over to the side of the bed and settled onto the floor. Logan left the door open a crack, in case Backup needed to come and get him.

Back downstairs, everyone but Wallace was throwing popcorn at the screen, cursing the restaurant owner for making Ron Burgundy eat cat shit. This was their second time through the movie and Dick, Casey and Duncan were decidedly more drunk than they had been just a little while ago.

Logan made his way over to the empty seat next to Wallace. "You can take the guest room across the hall from my room whenever you want to go to bed."

Much to Logan's chagrin, Wallace answered loudly enough to attract the others' attention: "I thought Veronica would be taking that room."

Logan shook his head and tried to play it off casually until the others were focused back on the movie, then said into Wallace's ear, "Her mom called; she's asleep in my room." Wallace nodded and turned back to the movie.

Duncan had settled in to enjoy watching Anchorman again with the guys. The conversation by the pool had been quite a success, in his opinion, and he was relieved. They didn't trust him yet but, after a few more well-planned conversations and interactions, he'd win them over. He was sure of it. Duncan was disappointed that Veronica had disappeared upstairs with Logan and had yet to return, but he was happy that Logan had reemerged. When the movie ended, Logan headed back upstairs, claiming that he was tired. Always the gracious host, he’d told everyone to stay up as late as they wanted. Duncan wasn’t buying it, but he was pleased. One down, one more to go.

Wallace headed up to bed shortly thereafter, leaving Dick, Casey, and Beaver with Duncan. The way that Wallace watched him was unnerving, so his absence was welcome. Duncan knew that he'd have to wait a while longer and let the others get even more wasted before he left the room. After another movie and a few more drinks—though Duncan was careful to make his very weak—Duncan was sure that Dick, Beaver, and Casey were completely passed out in the screening room. It gave Duncan the opportunity that he’d been hoping for—time to find Veronica.

He just wanted to watch her sleep. She was always so beautiful when she slept. The way her hair
spread out reminded him of Lilly. *Of course it does. They look alike*, he scolded himself. He walked carefully up the stairs, down the hall and past Logan's room where two of the guest rooms were located. He assumed that they were the ones that Wallace and Veronica would be using.

Duncan was surprised when he found the first room empty. *Maybe Veronica and Wallace are a thing?* It seemed unlikely, but he had seen them be physically affectionate with each other. Though they hadn't seemed as close as she and Logan were lately. He found the whole situation puzzling.

Duncan found Wallace sprawled on his stomach in the second room, snoring. *Maybe Veronica is in a different room? She'd better not be in Logan's room.* Duncan felt an anxious prickling on the back of his neck as he approached the door. He slowly turned the knob and opened the door enough to peek in. The scene that awaited him sent waves of angry heat across Duncan's skin. Veronica's head was resting on Logan's chest and his arm was holding her against him. Duncan started to cross the threshold when two eyes appeared around the side of the bed, accompanied by a soft growl.

Duncan shuffled back and shut the door less carefully than he had opened it. He turned quickly to get back downstairs and bumped hard into Beaver.

"Hi Duncan. Looking for just the right bed? Or maybe you were looking for Goldilocks?" Beaver's expression was shadowed in the dark hall, but his voice had that slight whine that Duncan had always found irritating.

"Just walked into the wrong room is all." Duncan tried to walk nonchalantly past Beaver.

"Oh sure. Because you forgot which room was Logan's? I have to admit that, up until the last two weeks, I was impressed. You never so much as looked twice at Veronica. But then that day by the bleachers when you interrupted her kissing Troy…you broke. Although you did manage to get it back under control by the next day." Beaver paused and tilted his head at Duncan then tapped his chin. "What has me curious is why you're having so much more trouble now that it's Logan showing an interest?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Duncan replied flatly as he headed down the stairs.

"Dun-can." Beaver sing-songed. "I know…I know everything."

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: Huge thanks go to: Bondopoulos, BryroseA, and Marshmallowtasha! Thank you to everyone reading, reviewing, whatever-ing! Readership of this beast has about doubled over the last few chapters :) With all the Duncan this one was a bit of a bear... We're headed into 'Return of the Kane' territory in the next chapter.

I'm teaching an extra summer session course since one of our faculty is out on leave so the next chuck may come a little slower (stupid real life and jobs!). But not to worry I'm working on both stories!
Chapter Notes

A/N: Well my summer hiatus is finally over! It's still the weekend after they beat Troy at his own game and our last chapter ended with Beaver and Duncan doing what they do so well—being complete creeps! Just a quick reminder the events of Shelly's party are a little AU, Logan didn't dose Duncan unknowingly and Logan doesn't remember what happened to his other dose.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Veronica woke up standing alone in a long hall. When she turned to take in her surroundings, she saw lockers everywhere, rows and rows of familiar lockers. It only took a second for her to realize that this was Neptune High. Instinctively, she turned to walk in the direction of her sophomore year locker. Only a few steps later she had already reached her destination. Veronica swiftly looked up and down the door of her locker, which was covered in pictures and articles protesting her father's 'witch hunt' of the Kanes. 'Recall Election Scheduled!' one headline read. It had to be before Shelly's party.

Veronica ripped down the articles, but they instantly reappeared. She ripped them down again to no avail. Giving up, she ran back down the hall until she reached the glass doors that were her escape. All hope of salvation on the other side of those doors was obliterated when she pushed and pushed but the doors wouldn't open.

"Don't go Veronica," Aaron Echolls' seemingly charming voice called from behind her. She turned and found Logan on his knees in front of her, his eyes boring in to hers, pleading for her help as Aaron held up a belt. "I'll have to punish him if you go. You wouldn't make me do that would you, Veronica?"

Veronica shook her head, "No, I'll stay; whatever it takes."

"Whatever it takes…I like the sound of that. Take his place," Aaron ordered.

"But you said if I stayed you wouldn't have to punish him." She replied timidly.

"New deal. I'll punish you instead. It's your choice Veronica—Logan or you?"

The earth quaked around her, causing her to topple over onto the…What? The floor at NHS isn't feather soft…

"Veronica, you're having a nightmare—wake up!" Logan's familiar voice called her back to awareness as his hands shook her body.

"Enough Logan, I'm awake now." She took an uneven breath. Well, at least that wasn't Shelly's party…I guess that's some kind of improvement, she thought sarcastically.

"Are you okay? You were thrashing. What were you dreaming about?" Logan sounded exhausted and upset. "I wish you would tell me, maybe I could help."

Veronica took a few deep breaths before she spoke again. "Um…okay, I'll tell you about this one. It
was your dad. He wouldn't let me leave. He made me choose between punishing you or me. I had to decide who he would," she gulped, "beat."

"Fuck." Logan stroked his hand down Veronica's hair and pulled her into his chest. "Veronica, that would never happen. He wouldn't ever intentionally let you see that side of him. He works very hard to hide it, and so do I." Logan's heart was beating rapidly against Veronica's ear. "And if that ever happens, pick me. There is nothing he can do to me that would hurt me more than seeing him hurt you. Nothing." His conviction resonated through her body.

Veronica was instantly defensive. "What about me? What about how much it hurts me to know what he does to you?"

"It's nothing, Veronica. I'm out of here in less than eighteen months. Think your dad'll let me crash on your couch for a couple months next spring? No way Aaron would look for me there." He chuckled into Veronica's hair and she was sure she felt him kiss the crown of her head.

"You'll have to take that up with him. But that couch is awfully uncomfortable."

"Maybe I can talk him into a different arrangement." Logan said so softly that Veronica wasn't even sure she'd heard him right and she was too sleepy to question him about it. His hand stroking her back and the steady beat of his heart was like a metronome that was calling her back to sleep.

Logan woke with a start, Veronica spooned tightly against him. He tried to shift his hips away from her but her body followed his. Great… There is no way I'm getting out of this without both of us feeling awkward. It didn't help that every minute shift of her body sent a shockwave through him. She felt amazing.

He tried to focus on the previous day's events, particularly the reason for Veronica being in his bed. She finally got a call from her mother and missed it because we were talking to Duncan. Logan, once again, regretted his decision to let Duncan come over. Yesterday was supposed to be about Ronnie, not Duncan…yet he had managed to infiltrate the second half of their day. The guy had a real knack for making everything about himself.

FLASHBACK

Logan had his freshly-minted learners permit in hand and planned to pick up Veronica to go down to the boardwalk for ice cream. Originally, it was supposed to be all four of them, but Duncan had called and said that Lilly couldn't make it. A year ago Logan would have been upset, but Lilly ditching him was such a common occurrence at this point that he'd learned to just shrug it off just like he'd done with all the other disappointments in his life.

He arrived at the Mars house hoping that the Sheriff was away. There was no way he'd let Logan take Veronica out with just a learner's permit, but Mrs. Mars wouldn't be nearly so concerned about the 'law'. Logan jogged up to the door to find it slightly ajar. He raised his hand to knock on the door before pushing it the rest of the way open when Lianne Mars pulled the door open the rest of the way and stumbled right into Logan.

"Oh, Logan dear." She hiccupped. "Soooo nice to seeeee you." She patted his shoulder and stumbled down the walkway to her car and drove away.
Logan couldn't stop himself from staring after her, even after the car was long out of view. Mrs. Mars was completely wasted and now she was driving. He shook his head and headed into the living room. "Veronica? Where are you?" he called.

"Back here, Logan." He could hear her voice coming from the kitchen. He quickly headed toward the back of the house where the kitchen was located. The sight before him was far from what he usually encountered in this homey little kitchen. Instead of fresh baked cookies or lasagna, there were shards of broken glass in a variety of colors scattered across the floor and Veronica was dumping the contents of several liquor bottles down the sink.

"Jesus, Ronnie, what happened?" Logan asked as he tiptoed around the broken glass.

"She was trying to sneak her empties out to the trash before Dad saw them. She tripped and dropped them all." Veronica set down the now empty bottle and reached for a new one. "Of course it made a lot of noise so I came down to check on her, and she drunkenly informed me that she had to meet her friends and then told me to clean all this up." Veronica sighed heavily and her shoulders slumped forward as she emptied the second bottle into the sink. "I'm not sure I feel up to the boardwalk now."

Logan's heart ached at how defeated Veronica sounded, but seconds later, his eyes lit up with the beginnings of a plan. "Nope, I'm not taking 'no' for an answer." He pulled out his cell phone and shot off a text. "All taken care of. Everything will be cleaned up by the time we get back. Let's get out of here."

Veronica raised her eyebrows at Logan, waiting for an explanation.

"I just texted the maid my mom pays extra to clean up after we have parties...she's always willing to earn extra money. She'll be over soon and will take care of everything. Now come on we've still got to pick up your boyfriend. And then we're getting ice cream."

While the start to their afternoon may have been a bit rough, once Logan had gotten Veronica to the boardwalk and plied her with ice cream her spirits had started to rise. She understandably remained noticeably subdued, but it was a vast improvement.

"Hey Logan? What's the deal with Veronica?" Duncan asked while Veronica had headed to the restroom. "She's being so...you know? She's usually more fun to be around than this."

"Why don't you ask her, Duncan? She's your girlfriend; if she wants to share what's going on, she will." Logan replied.

"It's probably stupid girl drama, though, and I don't want to listen to that," Duncan snapped.

Logan stared at Duncan at a complete loss for words. He knew that Duncan didn't know anything about the problems going on in Veronica's home, and Logan would never tell him; that was Veronica's decision. But to be so insensitive—Logan just didn't understand it.

When Veronica returned from the bathroom her eyes were a little glassier than they had been before. Logan was getting ready to pull her aside when Duncan stepped between them.

"Hey, baby. Stop being so down. When you're with me you should be happy. I make you happy, don't I?" Duncan asked sweetly, wrapping his arm around Veronica.

She sniffled a little and wiped her eyes before she responded, "Of course you do." Logan watched as Veronica put on a big, obviously fake smile and leaned into Duncan. "See? Happy!"

Logan shook his head but continued to follow along behind them. They spent the rest of the
afternoon walking around playing carnival games. Veronica maintained her faux smile the entire
time. Finally, Duncan announced that he needed to get home and that Celeste had sent a driver to
pick him up.

Once Duncan was gone, Logan expected Veronica to let go of the fake smile and 'perkiness', but she
kept it up all the way to the car. She never said another word about her mom or what she was
feeling, but Logan saw a few stray tears slip down her cheek once they were in the car. He took her
home and walked inside to make sure everything was back to rights.

"Thank you, Logan. It's like it never happened," she said softly before giving him a brief hug and
telling him goodnight.

END FLASHBACK

If anything was good at killing an unwelcome hard-on, it was these less-than-shiny memories of the
fab four. After that day, Veronica had rarely let herself be anything but perky and happy in public,
though there had been a few more times when Logan had seen the true Veronica behind her cheerful
mask. As much as he hated to admit it, there were a lot of things about those months leading up to
Lilly's death that had been anything but what they appeared to be from the outside.

Logan squeezed Veronica briefly and inhaled her scent. Being around her again was bringing back a
lot of memories. They may not have all been filled with happiness but they were real, and it had been
too long since Logan had felt anything real.

After his run-in with Beaver, Duncan had fled to the safety of the theater room to find that Casey and
Dick were already asleep. As quietly as possible, Duncan tiptoed around the room gathering all of
his things before making his way out to his car. Once he was out on the road headed back home, he
started to consider Beaver's words:

"I know…I know everything."

Duncan couldn't be certain what exactly Beaver knew. A lot of questionable things had gone on that
Beaver could know about. But when it came to Veronica, there was only one secret that mattered. If
Beaver knew that secret, then he owned Duncan. And Duncan knew it.

There was only one real option, and that was to try to talk to Beaver and see what he really knew.
And what he wanted. Surely he wasn't after money; Beaver had plenty of that. Duncan felt an
intense sense of dread at the prospect of having that discussion. He would put it off as long as he
possibly could.

Duncan slept fitfully and woke to a text message from Dick checking to see if he wanted to go
surfing. Duncan declined the invite and buried his head back under his covers to block out the light
streaming in his window. As he drifted back to sleep, he wished that he could hide from all of his
problems as easily as he could the sun.
"Logan. Wake up. It's too hot." Veronica's voice wormed its way into Logan's consciousness.

"Don't wanna," he whined. Veronica wiggled in his arms, so he tightened his hold.

"Too hot. And now I can't breathe." She continued to struggle against him.

"I know. I'm hot, and if you keep wiggling like that you're going to find out exactly how hot I think you are," he whispered huskily in her ear.

"Logan!"

Logan released her and started laughing. "Don't get your panties in a bunch. I'm just teasing you." He continued to laugh at her irritated expression.

"One of these times I'm going to tease you back and you aren't going to find it nearly so funny," Veronica said, her expression deadly serious. Logan immediately swallowed back his laughter.

Veronica nodded her head, apparently mollified. "Good. Now I'm going to brush my teeth, and then I want some breakfast," she said, heading into the bathroom.

After the door clicked shut, Logan scooted down the bed and reached out to scratch Backup behind the ears. It was still early, and Backup seemed content to continue lying at the end of the bed. After giving the dog some attention, Logan wandered over to the window and looked out at the driveway. Dick's truck was still there, but Duncan's silver Mercedes was gone. Thank god for small favors.

Logan snapped out of his thoughts when Veronica reappeared in front of him. "Your turn. I'm going to wait up here until you're ready to head down. I don't want to face Duncan alone right now." She sighed heavily and flopped back onto the bed next to Backup.

"He's gone. Looks like it's just Dick, Casey, and Beav now. I mean, besides Wallace and us. But I'll only be a minute if you want to wait." Logan got off the bed again and headed to the bathroom.

He quickly brushed his teeth and washed his face, hoping the cool water would help to wake him up and to clear away some of angst of the previous day. When he walked back into the bedroom, Veronica and Backup were gone, so Logan headed downstairs hoping that no one had been tased in his absence.

When Logan reached his friends, the scene in front of him took him aback. The French doors in the kitchen were open, and Backup was lying out on the patio while Wallace laughed at Dick, Casey and Veronica all fighting over a plate of Pop-Tarts.

"That's the last strawberry one and it's my favorite," Dick exclaimed.

"Well, strawberry is my favorite, too," Casey replied.

"Wildberry is my favorite. Since there aren't any of those left, obviously I should eat the last strawberry to make it fair for you both," Veronica declared snatching the Pop-Tart out of Dick's hand.

While Veronica was busy keeping the toaster pastry away from Dick and Casey, she held it right under Logan's face, so he grabbed it and quickly stuffed it in his mouth.

"I don't even like these ones!" he mumbled around his full mouth, earning glares from everyone. Logan smiled broadly after he finished the Pop-Tart and took a seat next to Veronica. "So what's the plan for today?"
"I think we're going to see if the waves look good since we missed out yesterday," Casey replied. Dick nodded his agreement.

"I've got a bunch of homework to catch up on," Veronica added and looked to Wallace.

"I have 'family time' today," Wallace said, holding up quote fingers.

"Family time? Don't remember the last time I had anything like that," Dick mumbled. "Hey, speaking of family, where's Beav?" Dick asked.

"He's your brother; shouldn't you know where he is?" Casey asked.

"I'm not his keeper," Dick responded, as Beaver appeared further down the patio by the pool house.

"It's more like I'm his keeper," Beaver said with a shy smile on his face. "Morning, Veronica. Guys," he said sweetly. Logan raised his eyebrows at Beaver, noting the way he was looking at Veronica. Does Beaver have a crush on Veronica? Logan felt a chill run up his back followed by a wave of protectiveness. He looked at Wallace and found that he was also watching Beaver with apprehension. I just can't catch a break here. First Troy, then Duncan, and now I'm going to have to keep an eye on Beav, too. Logan sighed in exasperation.

"Logan, can you drop Wallace and I off before you boys go hit the waves?" Veronica questioned, seemingly oblivious to Beaver's odd stare.

"Hmm...drop you off? Sure. When did you want to leave?" Logan was surprised by how disappointed he felt.

"Now would be good. I have a lot to do before my dad gets home," she said, getting up from her chair and heading out of the kitchen.

Wallace followed her lead and headed out of the room after her, leaving Logan with Dick, Beaver, and Casey. Backup had wandered back in and nudged Logan's hand for a pet. He obliged while the rest of the guys discussed surfing plans.

"I'll text DK," Dick said while fiddling with his phone.

"Or maybe we could skip him," Logan joined the conversation.

Dick looked up from his phone with a confused expression. "Too late. I thought the three of you kissed and made up last night?"

"Um...yeah, we did." It was true; they had made up in the technical sense, but Logan was still feeling off about Duncan. Something weird was going on there, and the more he thought about it, the more he believed that whatever it was wasn't exactly a new development.

"Never mind, anyway," Dick looked at his phone and then at Logan. "He passed. Guess it's just us four unless we round up some of the others."

"Whatever, man. You decide. Just text me where to go and I'll meet you guys there after I drop Ronnie and Wallace off." They all stood up and headed for the door where they met Wallace and Veronica.

"It was nice meeting you, Wallace. And it was fun hanging out again, Veronica. It's been a long time." Casey wrapped his arm around Veronica and pulled her into a one-armed hug. Logan felt his pulse increase at the sight. But, as quickly as Casey had put his arm around Veronica, she had
shrugged it off. "Yeah, it has been a long time," was her only response before opening the rear passenger door of the Xterra for Backup. "Load up," she commanded before climbing into the backseat behind her dog. Wallace nodded to the other guys and got in.

"All right, dude. See you in a bit," Dick called out to Logan who was checking that his board was still secured to the roof-rack. Satisfied that the bindings hadn't come loose, Logan gave Dick a thumbs-up and jumped in his truck.

After they pulled out of the driveway and turned toward Veronica and Wallace's neighborhoods, Logan saw Veronica slump in the backseat. "That was a trial in self control," she said gloomily. "As if last night wasn't hard enough. Is it just me or is Beaver creepier than I remember?"

Logan had been wondering if Veronica had noticed. "Maybe not creepy, but definitely a bit off-putting. I think he just has a little crush on you."

"Yeah, I saw that too. He was watching you a lot, V, but he seems pretty harmless," Wallace added, turning in his seat to face the back.

Logan navigated his way to Veronica's apartment while Veronica shared with Wallace a few of the more important details of their conversation with Duncan.

"He wants you to make his campaign video?" Wallace asked Logan as they pulled into the parking lot of the Sunset Cliffs apartment complex.

"Yeah. Actually maybe you could help me with that. You wanna meet the humble and gracious Aaron Echolls? Duncan wants him to say a few words on the video," Logan offered, throwing the truck into park.

"I'm not sure I want to help Kane. I don't think I would even vote for him." Wallace shook his head.

"Hold that thought," Logan said, hopping out and opening the back door on the driver's side. "Come on, Buddy, you're home." Logan said to Backup as the pooch jumped out of the backseat. Veronica scooted across the bench seat to get out on that side of the truck, too.

Logan took her bag from her while she slid out and then shut the door behind her. He walked slowly next to her as she headed for her apartment.

"Your mom and dad get back tonight?" Veronica asked.

Logan nodded. "Yeah, probably pretty late."

"I…" They had reached her door. Veronica turned to face Logan. "Promise me you'll call if he…" She trailed off again.

Logan pulled her into a gentle hug. "I promise. And, hey, it's almost Halloween; you love Halloween. We should make plans."

"Okay." Veronica pulled out of Logan's arms and looked up at him. "Thank you." Logan nodded and waited until she had gone inside to head back out to his truck and Wallace.

Logan was amazed at Wallace's restraint. He didn't say a word until they were back on the road headed toward Wallace's home.
"Okay, round two. You got a plan?" Wallace asked.

"Yeah, I've got a plan. I'm going to start with Casey. I don't think he knows anything, but I'm hoping he might have noticed someone watching Ronnie that night. Or maybe he saw something else that will help us. But, in the end, I think it's Dick that I'll be able to get the most out of. He isn't one of the people who brought drugs to the party, but he's Dick and he always seems to be in the know."

"He does seem to have his finger on the pulse of you 09ers. What about Beaver? What's his real name?" Wallace asked.

"Cassidy. I'm not sure about him. I'll ask and see what happens. But I honestly think that he doesn't know much. He essentially just passed along what he heard from Madison. I guess I should talk to her, but she is such a bitch. I really don't want to if I don't have to. And she hates Veronica...so I'm not sure that she would tell me anything anyway. I just can't imagine any of them hurting her, but then I couldn't imagine anyone hurting her..." Logan trailed off.

"Hey man. We're just speculating here. Maybe it's not as bad as we think? Maybe we're jumping to the wrong conclusion?"

Logan shook his head. He'd spent a lot of time this past week thinking about Veronica's transformation after that party. There was no denying that she was, at least outwardly, almost a completely different person. "You didn't know her before. She was sweet and optimistic and even a bit naïve. No, I don't think that someone just drew a cock and balls on her cheek as a prank that night. This goes deeper," Logan huffed, remembering the time Lilly had done that to him.

"No, I guess not." Wallace sighed heavily. "And what about Duncan?"

"There's not much to say where Duncan is concerned. He wants us to all be friends again. He's acting like a fucking weirdo, but the guy's been my best friend since we were in kindergarten back in LA. I'm going to cut him some slack and try to be a buffer between him and Veronica. He promised to leave her alone unless you or I are with her. But he never did apologize for how he's been acting or what he did...I don't really see him and Veronica making up and being BFFs if you know what I mean?"

"I do. Anyway BFF is my title. It's hard for me to picture her ever dating that guy."

"Like I said, she was really different back then. They both were. Hell, so was I." Logan left out how much Veronica had changed while she was with Duncan. "What do your parents do?" Logan asked as he pulled over in front of Wallace's house; it was nicer than he'd expected.

Wallace chuckled. "Mom does front-end development for Kane Software's web applications."

Logan stared at him open-mouthed, "Um...and that is?"

"She makes their websites look pretty and work well. And I think she's starting to do a lot of work on the new mobile stuff that's coming out." As Wallace jumped out of the Xterra, he continued to laugh at Logan. "Let me know if anything interesting arises from your recon."

Logan nodded at Wallace and pulled away, heading for the beach and what would hopefully be some more fruitful investigation.
After a couple hours of surfing, Casey decided that he'd had enough and paddled toward the beach to just lay out until the others were done.

The last twenty-four hours had been entirely too strange. Dick and Beaver were not his usual crowd, but Darcy had been nagging him about not taking her out to do things, and he just didn't want to deal with possibly running into her this weekend. So when he'd run into Dick on Saturday afternoon it had seemed like a reasonable way to pass some time while avoiding Darcy.

Casey stuck his board into the sand and collapsed next to it, covering his eyes with his arm. If someone had told him last week that he'd be hanging out with Veronica Mars last night he would have laughed at them. Not that he'd actually spent much time with Veronica, but still. Though stranger yet had been all that had gone on. He was still processing everything. Duncan and Veronica hadn't spent much time together since they'd broken up, but with Logan and Veronica making peace, it seemed natural that Duncan and Veronica would too. Casey was more than a little surprised to see how apprehensive Veronica was around Duncan.

"Hey, man, can we talk for a minute?" Logan's voice drew Casey out of his thoughts.

"Sure, what's up Logan?" Casey turned his head to look at Logan who was now seated in the sand next to him.

"Remember last weekend when we were all talking about Shelly's party?"

You mean when you were asking about Veronica? Casey thought before he responded. "Sure, what about it?"

"Did you know people had GHB that night?" Logan's eyes nervously shifted away from Casey.

"Sure, I remember Luke giving some to Dick. I think Sean had some too, but you know how he is—not much of a sharer."

"I had some that night too. But I didn't take mine. I kind of don't remember who I gave it to…"

Logan said in a low voice.

Casey bolted up, "When you say gave it to…do you mean you dosed someone or that you gave it away to someone who wanted to take it?"

Logan shifted nervously, "I'm fairly certain I would not dose someone but…I don't remember."

"Are you sure you didn't take it? If you don't remember…" Casey decided to ask the obvious. Liquid X mixed with alcohol was a surefire way to not remember much of your night.

"Oh, I remember that night, I just don't remember giving it to anyone. It was in my pocket when I got to the party, but the next morning it was gone. I really didn't think much about it until…"

"Until you and Veronica started getting close again?" Logan nodded in reply but continued to stare out at the waves. Casey turned his gaze to the waves as well and thought about the implication of Logan's words.

Logan had a dose of unaccounted for GHB on a night when a girl that they had once cared deeply about had behaved totally outside the realm of her normal self. A girl who had then changed dramatically.

"You think someone drugged Veronica." It wasn't a question and Logan didn't respond. "You didn't —"
"Never," Logan replied earnestly. "I was horrible to her but I would never do that. Never."

Casey nodded. He'd known Logan for a long time and while he could be a jackass, drugging a girl and... Casey cut off the thought, "Does she know you're talking to people about this?"

"No. And she'd kill me if she did."

"Then why?" Casey asked.

"Whatever it was that happened to her—it was my fault. I let—hell, I encouraged—everyone to treat her like that. I made her vulnerable." Logan jumped up and waved his arm out toward the water until Dick waved back and started paddling in.

"Logan. If you want, I'll help you figure out what happened to the GHB you had. I may be able to ask about it without attracting as much attention as you."

"I dunno. I shouldn't have said anything to you at all." Logan pulled his board up as Dick and Beaver walked toward them.

"Think about it. I promise to keep this to myself. I always liked Veronica."

"I will." Logan nodded. "I'll see you later, Casey." They bumped fists. "Dick, I'm going to head out. I've got some shit to do for Duncan's big campaign."

"Lame, dude," Dick shouted at Logan's retreating form. "Are you being lame too, Casey?"

"I was thinking about it, but I think I'm getting my second wind. I could ride a few more waves if you two aren't ready to pack it in for the day." Casey said, standing up and reaching for his board.

"You can just go with Logan if you wanna leave now." Dick gestured to Logan who was loading his board onto the roof of his truck.

"He didn't offer," Casey said simply, heading back toward the water.

"Well he's been extra emo lately. And mostly sober... Ronnie is a bad influence," Dick said, shaking out his shaggy hair.

_I don't think bad influence is the way I would put it_, Casey thought, following Dick back out to the water.

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After spending her afternoon catching up on studying and recovering from the previous day's drama, Veronica decided it was the perfect night to have dessert for dinner. Her dad had texted saying that he would be home soon, so she headed into the kitchen to make sure that it was stocked with everything she needed. She pulled out two bowls and went to work creating heaping sundaes for the two of them.

The sound of the door opening distracted her while she was putting on a final flourish of whipped cream, which sent the last spurt onto the counter rather than into her bowl. Veronica frowned at the puff of cream.

"Hmm, all out, huh?" Keith asked, setting down his briefcase.
"No matter!" Veronica declared, reaching for the chocolate sauce. She looked up at her dad as he collapsed into his recliner chair with a heavy sign. "Tough day? I'd have thought you'd still be riding the Santana good-times train."

"Oh, yes, good times indeed. I'm just tired, kid. It's been a long time since your old man stayed out that late with a dame." Keith winked at her.

Veronica winced but kept up her happy face. "Well, you're in luck, I've got a whole sundae thing set up here that is sure to revive you." Veronica swept her hand across the counter.

"Honey. Shouldn't we try something at the base of the food pyramid; you know, fruits and vegetables?" Keith joked as he made his way into the kitchen.

Veronica gasped dramatically and plopped several maraschino cherries into her bowl. "What are those? Maraschino cherries?" She grabbed her bowl and headed for the couch.

"You know, if Child Services finds out about this, they will take you away," Keith quipped, settling back into his chair with his bowl of ice cream in hand.

Veronica laughed. "Well, that's a risk I'm willing to take." She stared down at the swirls of ice cream and chocolate. "Actually, Dad?"

Keith scooped a large spoonful of ice cream into his mouth. "Yes, honey?"

"What does it take for Child Services to remove a child? You know, what are grounds for…" She debated a moment, feeling unsure if this was the right thing to ask. After a week of internet searching, she still felt way out of her depth. "…involuntary termination of parental rights?"

"Whoa, I was just joking! The state doesn't actually remove children from their home for eating ice cream for dinner." Keith chuckled.

"I know you were, but now I'm asking you. While you were Sheriff did you ever have to deal with that sort of thing?"

A dark look settled over Keith's face, and Veronica immediately regretted asking but she pushed all hesitation aside. She really needed to know.

"Yes, I had to deal with that sort of thing. Veronica, why are you asking me about this?" Keith stared at Veronica, unblinking with his brows drawn tight. Interrogator-face had settled over his features.

"We talked about it in Journalism last week, and when you mentioned Child Service just now it reminded me," she lied smoothly.

"Okay. Well there are two main things. The first is evidence of abuse and there's an assessment of the benefit of severing the parental relationship. Evidence in those sorts of cases can be tricky depending on the type of abuse. And to be perfectly honest even in cases where it seems cut-and-dry —say physical abuse, for example—it is surprisingly rare for a full termination of parental rights to be granted."

"But why? Let's say a parent is regularly beating their teenage child and there is medical evidence to support that; wouldn't it be—" Veronica gestured wildly with her spoon accidently sending droplets of ice cream across the room.

"Well, that depends on a lot of things." Keith rubbed his chin. "If the parent has a known drug or alcohol problem, that would make things easier. But if we were talking about a 'model' citizen," he
held up quote fingers, "even with medical records, I've seen cases be thrown out."

"What about emancipation as an alternative?" she asked before she could stop herself. Realizing her mistake, she quickly schooled her features and went back to eating her ice cream.

"Veronica? Is there something you want to tell me?" Keith's eyes bored into her, and it took all of Veronica's self control not to tell him everything right then and there.

Instead she shook her head, "No, Dad. I really am just curious." She leaned back against the couch and turned to watch the TV where she was greeted by more bad news. The banner read 'Up Next: the Lilly Kane Murder Case'. Veronica reached for the remote and turned up the volume as a reporter appeared on the screen.

"The Lilly Kane murder case took an unexpected turn this morning as convicted killer Abel Koontz fired his public appointed legal council. Forfeiting further appeals, the defendant is scheduled to die by lethal injection as early as next year..."

Footage of Lamb holding up two, see-through evidence bags appeared on the screen, capturing Veronica's attention. In one bag she saw a pair of white sneakers with a heart hand-drawn on one. Veronica knew those shoes; she had drawn that heart herself and had written Duncan's name on it just a few weeks before Lilly's death. In the other bag was Lilly's backpack. Veronica shook her head sadly.

Keith moved onto the couch next to Veronica, took the remote, and turned off the television.

"Why did he do that? Why would he forfeit his appeals?"

"I guess he's ready to die," Keith replied unhappily.

"Well, what are you going to do about it? I know you don't believe he's guilty."

"I hate to break it to you, honey, but nobody in Neptune cares what I believe. They didn't care when I was Sheriff; they sure as hell don't care now. This town's gonna have to find another conspiracy nut." Keith hugged her gently, "I think we need some daddy-daughter time. How 'bout the zoo this coming weekend?" He smiled down at her and then headed back to his bedroom, leaving Veronica alone with her thoughts.

The next morning, Logan woke up early and wandered down to the kitchen. While questioning Dick may have been a bust, Logan was very seriously considering taking Casey up on his offer. He needed to think more about it, and maybe discuss it with Wallace too, before he made a decision. Despite the dramatic weekend, it had been a pretty nice week over-all. Not having to worry about pissing off Aaron or dealing with his mom being drunk made up for all the drama he'd dealt with. But the reprieve was over for a few weeks at least. Late the previous night, his mom had told him that Aaron's next press tour didn't begin for at least two weeks. And, unfortunately, it was only a domestic tour, so it wouldn't last past Thanksgiving. After Thanksgiving, Aaron would begin filming his next fifty million dollar crap pile with the illustrious Connor Larkin.

Logan sighed as he dug through a cupboard looking for more Pop-Tarts or something easy to make since Mrs. Navarro wasn't in yet.
"Mister Logan, put those back." Mrs. Navarro's sweet, grandmotherly voice rang out from the back entrance to the kitchen. "I'll make you a real breakfast. Sit," she commanded.

Logan was used to her demands and was much too big of a fan of her cooking to refuse her anything. He climbed onto a bar stool and watched while she grabbed a few things out of the fridge. He really was glad his parents had hired her back after she'd been cleared of the credit card fraud debacle.

"Go get the newspaper for your mama; you know how she likes to read the entertainment section with her morning coffee." Mrs. Navarro shooed Logan out of the kitchen. "I'll have French toast ready when you get back."

Logan smiled; he loved her French toast. He slipped into a pair of flip-flops and hopped on the ridiculous scooter thing that his parents had brought back from Aspen, or maybe LA, he wasn't sure and didn't care. He figured he'd ride it to get the paper, tell them he loved it and then, like so much of the other crap they came home with, it would disappear.

Weevil was trying to pull out of the staff entrance of the Echolls Estate after dropping his grandmother off, but there was some 'tour of the stars' bus blocking the way. He glared at the driver who just shrugged back at him. "Oh, c'mon! It's not even eight in the morning. Go back to Kansas, you fucking vultures."

It figured that it would be today of all days that his grandma's car would be in the shop. She'd asked him to drive her rather than risk being late. Weevil could always tell when Mr. Echolls was back in town; his grandma was always on edge. Weevil couldn't figure out what his grandma saw in any of them beyond the paycheck and health insurance. Aaron Echolls was a shitty actor, his wife was an over-Botoxed lush, and his son was a complete asshole.

Weevil continued to glare at the bus driver until a black limo pulling up to the main gate caught his attention. And then he spotted a miserable-looking Logan in plaid sleep pants and a robe. Weevil wasn't inclined to care about what was going on, but he was blocked in and had no choice but to watch the scene play out.

Aaron Echolls climbed out of the back of the limo and pulled Logan over to pose for some pictures. That must suck; the guy isn't even dressed yet, Weevil thought idly. He watched as Aaron signed autographs and posed for pictures with each person from the bus.

Weevil hadn't had many opportunities to watch Logan recently. Back when Lilly was still alive, he'd found himself watching Logan pretty often while trying to figure out what he had that Weevil didn't...money obviously, he was good looking he supposed, but the guy was also a jerk. Weevil slapped his palm against the steering wheel, impatience getting to him. It had been more than a year since Lilly died, and he didn't want to spend another day thinking about Logan fucking Echolls.

Finally, the bus pulled forward enough for Weevil to navigate his way around it. When he pulled out of the driveway, he turned back toward his own neighborhood, heading back to his grandma's so he could swap out his car for the bike.
Logan had had a less-than-great morning. He didn't even know how it was possible for some podunk tourist to snap a photo of him at seven-fifteen in the morning and for that photo to be on TMZ by the time he got to school. He'd barely made it to campus on time to find his locker plastered with pictures of himself posing with Aaron.

Logan tried not to be bothered by this type of crap; no one would say anything to his face, but that didn't stop assholes from making sure that Logan never got to forget who his dad was or his, so called, station in life. You'd think that after all these years he'd be used to it, or maybe even like some of the attention. But the reality was that Logan simply craved normalcy. Parents who cared about what time he got home—okay maybe that was an exaggeration, but he would love to at least have parents who cared if he made it home…parents who didn't leave him alone with the help for weeks at a time. Or, you know, at the very least parents who didn't get off on beating him with a belt.

Logan continued walking out to the quad and headed for the table that Veronica and Wallace had already claimed. He increased his pace and, despite plenty of other free space, plopped down on the bench right next to Veronica. She gave him a strange look before she continued her conversation with Wallace.

"So, my dad wants to take me to the San Diego Zoo this weekend."

"Aw, man, I love the zoo. Everyone gets all excited about the monkey house. I'm a big cat man myself."

"As it so happens, I'm partial to bobcats."

"As it so happens, I'm partial to bobcats."

"As it so happens, I'm partial to bobcats." Logan smirked at Veronica. He'd often thought that she was like those small but feisty cats. And now that she wore so much eyeliner, there was even a slight resemblance, though he'd never tell her that.

"My dad's gone a little nutty with all these father-daughter days. He thinks we don't spend enough time together now that he's traveling so much. And all the testosterone hanging out at my apartment doesn't help matters any." She playfully glared at them both.

Wallace's smile turned down. "Yeah, see me on the other hand, I would love to go to the zoo with my dad."

Logan wasn't sure what the pointed look was for but continued watching them both.

"Wallace, don't…" Veronica shook her head and turned to Logan, looking for what he wasn't sure.

"But he's dead, so…"

Logan felt his mouth drop open. He remembered the previous morning when Wallace had only said what his mom did for a living… Logan had no idea Wallace's dad was dead. Some friend he was. Sure they had only known each other a week, but still, that was a pretty big deal.

"Okay. I hate myself. And I think you broke Logan. Are you happy?"

"Um-hum." Wallace smirked and chucked a fry at Logan's face. "Chill man. I don't talk about him much."

Logan snapped his mouth shut. "Well, on that awkward note, perhaps I can offer a father-related tale. Were you both fortunate enough to see the lovely art adorning my locker this morning?" They both nodded. "Then you know that you are both more fortunate than I, for I am the offspring of Aaron Echolls." Logan pulled one of the pictures he'd torn off his locker and held it up, smiling at the face
of his father with mock adoration. "The man who forces his son to pose for pictures for his fans before he's even brushed his teeth. And to really up the ante, I am also getting a torture—I mean tutoring—session with the family publicist to help 'manage my interactions with the fans'. Because you know how much I like to interact with Dad's fans..." Logan crossed his arms on the table and dramatically threw his head onto them.

"I'm going to say it again; I would love to pose for pictures with my dad." A glance up showed a less amused Wallace and a very concerned Veronica.

"No, Wallace, trust me. You don't want my dad—you'll see. You're still going to help me film Duncan's campaign video, right? If you still feel that way after being around him for thirty minutes, I'll let you punch me." Logan felt Veronica flinch next to him. "Or, you know, I'll buy you a new video game or something." Logan reached down and squeezed Veronica's knee reassuringly. A commotion across the quad cut off their conversation.

"Oh, you little bitch!" Madison Sinclair screamed at a girl wearing combat boots and a 'Sex & Drugs' t-shirt. Logan was sure he recognized her but couldn't remember her name.

"Oh, really?" Combat-boots-girl replied, stomping hard on both of the pizzas sitting on Madison's table.

Vice Principle Clemmons sighed heavily and called out, "Wanda! Be so kind as to follow me to my office."

Wanda! That's right she was on pep squad with Veronica and Lilly.

"Who's that girl?" Wallace asked seeming mesmerized by the scene playing out in front of them.

"That—" Veronica began but Logan couldn't help himself and interrupted.

"— Is Wanda Varner. She and Veronica used to be in pep squad together." Logan smiled brightly at Veronica, recalling the image of Veronica in those little shorts and the tight shirts. He'd once said that her soccer uniform was hotter, but those pep squad uniforms were the material of more than a few of his fantasies, too.

"You two seem less peppy." Wallace winked at Veronica.

Veronica snorted and started to laugh which got Wallace laughing and finally Logan gave in and laughed along with them.

Logan pulled the Xterra into one of the only available spots at the movie lot and jumped out with Wallace following his lead. Logan was beyond relieved that Wallace had agreed to help him film this stupid thing for Duncan. Especially since Duncan had soccer practice and couldn't get out of it. Ugh! First the guy acts like a total creep to Veronica and then he wants favors from me—he may be my best friend but I may need to seriously reevaluate that title or my criteria.

"So what exactly do you need me to do?" Wallace asked, shouldering the camera bag.

"Basically, you hold the camera while I give my dad direction. You'd think I could just hold the camera and it'd be fine, but trust me, Aaron will act better if we treat this more like a job for him,"
Logan explained.

Wallace nodded, Logan hoped in understanding, as they headed toward Aaron's trailer. Logan was surprised the lot was so set up since principle filming didn't begin until after Thanksgiving. It wasn't even Halloween yet.

Logan knocked on the trailer door with Aaron's name on it. A few seconds later, a familiar petite blonde opened the door. She looked Logan and Wallace up and down while she buttoned her shirt then called out, "Aaron, you have visitors." She leaned into Logan. "Mmm...You've really filled out Logan. Maybe we could hang out again sometime." She winked at him and then headed farther into the lot. Logan couldn't stop his groan of exasperation and refused to meet Wallace eyes.

"Wasn't that the girl from that Disney show? Daryl watches it. I thought she was like our age," Wallace whispered.

Logan shook his head. "She's nineteen or maybe twenty now."

"Logan! And Logan's friend." Aaron held out his hand to Wallace.

"Wallace Fennel, nice to meet you Mr. Echolls," Wallace replied politely.

"Thanks for warning me she'd be here, Dad," Logan hissed, unable to contain his anger.

"What? You two used to be so close. I didn't realize you'd had a falling out," Aaron said, the picture of fatherly concern that only made Logan angrier.

"I was thirteen...remember. You must be thrilled she's old enough for you two to be close now."

"I don't appreciate what you're implying Logan. Especially in front of your friend. She and I were just running lines. You're being dramatic."

"Must be in the genes." Logan continued to glare at Aaron.

"I think you were here to ask for a favor, Logan? What was it?" Aaron ignored Logan's comment.

Wallace quickly replied. "Mr. Echolls, Logan and I are making Duncan Kane's student body president campaign video. Duncan was really hoping you'd say a few words on his behalf."

Veronica was right. This is the sort of guy you want on your side. He probably just saved my ass from getting smacked around. Logan let his scowl go and smiled at his father.

"Wow, I'd be honored to. Will Duncan be joining us?"

"He's at a soccer thing that he couldn't get out of now that he's captain. But he promised to come by for a visit while you're in town." Logan did his best to sound neutral. As mad as he was, he knew that now was not the time to provoke his father further; there'd be plenty of time for that later.

"Excellent. I haven't seen Duncan in quite a while. I look forward to that." Aaron turned his Hollywood action-hero smile on them both. Logan waited for Wallace to be awestruck, but it didn't happen. Instead Wallace smiled blandly and started pulling the camera out of the bag.

"I've got a few notes for you. Wallace will be handling the camera and I'll give direction if that works for you, Dad?" Logan asked.

"Great!" Aaron reached for the script-style notes that Logan had put together for him and took a seat on the stairs of the trailer. "Wow, Son. This is very professionally put together. Did you do this?"
Logan felt a little blush creep up his neck. Even after all these years and with how much he hated his dad, that small compliment still had the power to affect him. It bothered him to no end how much he still craved his father’s approval. "Yes, sir." Logan nodded.

"Well I look forward to seeing the whole thing after you cut it together. You do seem to have a talent for it," Aaron complimented again.  

In just over two hours, they had filmed a couple of takes as well as recorded the voiceover.

"Thanks, Dad. I know Duncan really appreciates it."

"Of course. Tell him I was happy to do it. And it was nice to meet you, Wallace." Aaron shook Wallace's hand and gave Logan a fatherly pat on the shoulder before heading back into his trailer.

"That was not at all what I was expecting," Wallace said after they were far enough away from the trailer to not be overheard.

"Oh, come on. Surely you've seen him give interviews before. He oozes charm and geniality," Logan snarked.

"Well sure. I just hadn't realized that version of him was a character…" Wallace replied softly.

"So I guess I don't owe you a video game, huh?" Logan asked, referring back to his offer at lunch.

Wallace shook his head and climbed into the Xterra. Wallace was silent while Logan pulled out of the lot and headed to the freeway. Logan started to reach for the radio to turn it up but was stopped by Wallace speaking.

"Did he mean what I think he meant about that actress and you?" Wallace asked, his expression stony.

Logan cleared his throat. "That depends on what you think he meant," Logan evaded.

"Considering that she was still pulling her clothes on when she opened the door and her little comment to you, I'm thinking that at thirteen you were screwing a Disney darling."

"Well when you put it like that…" Logan still didn't answer the question.

Wallace sighed and turned to look at Logan. "Look man, you don't have to tell me anything. Your evasion answers my question well enough. But I don't get it.

"What's not to get? My dad sleeps around on my mom…constantly. He doesn't even really try to hide it, as you saw. Neither of them noticed that their thirteen year old was hooking up with much older girls because they were too busy schmoozing at Sundance." Logan blew out a breath.

"Wait, I thought you were with…" Wallace trailed off leaving the unsaid name hanging in the air.

Lilly.

"Yeah, Lilly and I were in an 'off' period at the time. She broke up with me because she thought I was seeing another girl. And I was but not the way she thought. I had ditched her to hang out with Ronnie. Anyway, a few days after that I got hauled off to Park City for Sundance. Mix lots of unsupervised teenagers, easy access to alcohol and voila. Hell you can probably Google it and find pap shots of us partying that week."

"Didn't that make Lilly even more pissed?" Wallace asked, confused.
Logan laughed mirthlessly. "No. If anything it made me more desirable in her eyes. We got back together within hours of my return to Neptune." Logan felt a small smile form at the memory of that particular reunion.

"It's like you all live in a different world," Wallace said, sounding equally awed and disgusted by the antics of the supposed crème de la crème of Neptune.

"Maybe, but I'd trade you any day."

Veronica hurried home after school let out. She knew that she only had a limited amount of time alone before Logan would be coming over to study or her Dad came home.

She headed straight for her room and pulled out her laptop, accessing the hidden desktop where she kept all the information she had on Lilly's murder. She also had a file on her rape. On a whim she opened that file rather than Lilly's.

Veronica had written a complete statement based on the limited amount that she could remember from the night of Shelly's party. She also had a copy of her medical report from the free clinic she had gone to after her horrible conversation with Lamb. Her eyes were drawn down to the bottom of the page where they had recommended she come back after several weeks for additional screening. She hadn't done that. When she had gotten her period a week later, she'd been so relieved she wasn't pregnant that she never went back. But now her mind was reeling as she stared down at the list of recommendations; in addition to the pregnancy test, tests for chlamydia and gonorrhea were also listed. It had been months since she had looked at any of this stuff and she hadn't looked at the medical report since she'd scanned it in the previous March.

She quickly Googled both STDs and was shocked to find that testing for both required several weeks post exposure to get an accurate result. It had been different before her dad lost his job as Sheriff. They'd had great health insurance…now they had the minimum they could get away with, which meant Veronica hadn't been to a doctor since that trip to the free clinic. An annual visit to the gynecologist hadn't even crossed her mind—that was the kind of thing her mom had always scheduled. It surprised Veronica that Lianne Mars could remember anything with how drunk she frequently was, but apparently her daughter's reproductive health had been a priority before she'd left town. Veronica laughed to herself at the strangeness of the realization.

Another quick search provided Veronica with the phone number for the closest Planned Parenthood, and a brief phone call got her an appointment for the following Friday.

She turned back to the file on her computer and decided to add one more thing to it before switching over to Lilly's case. She opened the 'Suspects' tab and stared at the list she had compiled of everyone who had been at the party that night. It was divided into three categories: Suspects, Witnesses, and Cleared. She clicked on Logan's name, currently listed in the Suspects column, and dragged it into the Cleared column. If Logan did this to me, he's the best actor on the planet.

She closed out her own case and opened up Lilly's, and then started adding in the new information about Abel Koontz firing his attorney. She finished up just as she heard a knock at the front door. Veronica quickly brought up her other desktop, which featured unicorns and rainbows, before heading to get the door.
It had taken a few hours to edit together all the clips that Logan wanted to use for Duncan’s campaign video. He had to admit that, courtesy of his father, the end product had the perfect ratio of political promise and slime. Veronica had even contributed a couple of good photos of Duncan from his last soccer game, since she had been the photographer assigned. After finishing, he uploaded it to a file-sharing site and sent the link to Duncan so he could take a look.

An hour later, Logan found himself enjoying the companionable silence of studying with Veronica. *I could get used to this,* he smiled to himself, peaking over at his friend. Veronica's phone rang, breaking the moment. She indicated that she would take it in her room before she disappeared down the hall. "Hi, Dad…" he heard her saying as her bedroom door shut.

Now sitting alone in the reclining chair while reading their history assignment, Logan was bored silly. Sure they had a quiz in a couple of days, but he could always finish reading it tomorrow. He lifted the heavy text book up with one hand and winked at Backup, "Now you see it—" then pulled his hand out from under the book rapidly, causing it to plummet to the floor, "—now you don't. Thanks ladies and germs...and dogs…I'm here all week." He gave Backup a small bow.

"All right Backup, what should we do while we await your mistress? Think the Sheriff has any beer in the fridge?" Logan asked the dog while crossing over to the kitchen. He grabbed himself a cherry coke and made his way back to the couch to play on Veronica's laptop.

He popped it open and waited for the desktop to load, but when it did it looked wrong. The background was usually pink and had unicorns and Rainbow Bright or something like that. But on her screen was what looked like a brown corkboard background with file folders neatly lined up across it. Logan looked more closely and saw that each folder had a name on it. He quickly scanned around the screen until his eyes landed on the file labeled 'Logan Echolls'.

"What have you been up to, Veronica?" He stole a quick glance toward the hallway. Nothing indicated that she would return soon, so he focused back on the computer.

He clicked on his name and the folder opened new tabs along with his photo. His pulse sped as he read the titles of the tabs: Information, Alibi, Motive, and Evidence. He clicked 'Alibi' and found a description of where he had been when Lilly had been murdered as well as what looked like transcripts from both Dick and Beaver's interviews with the Sheriff. Logan rolled up the sleeves of his button-down and read the rest of the names on the folders before he clicked on Abel Koontz's. Logan's blood boiled as he read Veronica's notes about Koontz having an alibi. Clearly she believed that Koontz couldn't have killed Lilly.

He stood up abruptly and crossed the room to pluck his bag from its place near the recliner before he began throwing all of his belongings into the bag. He had to get out of there before Veronica came back out of her room. He was going to completely lose it. He was almost to the door when Veronica came out into the living room.

"Ready for me to quiz you over that chapter? Logan? Where are you going?" she asked.

Logan steeled himself before turning around. "I don't know, Ronnie. Away. I can't even look at you right now." He threw the door open and practically ran to his car. He didn't want to risk her following him because he knew that, in his current state of mind, he would later regret whatever came out of his mouth. Right now he was too upset.
Finally arriving at the Xterra, Logan yanked the door open, tossed his bag into the passenger seat, and jammed the keys into the ignition. When he looked up, he could see Veronica's shadowed form standing in her doorway. *I have to get out of here!* He threw the car into gear and tore out of her parking lot. He knew exactly where he needed to go, but first a little pit stop.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Huge, giant, enormous thanks to Bondopoulos who looked at this so many times, first as little pieces when I was writing whenever I could squeeze it in and then twice more after it all got pieced together. And that doesn't even cover all the conversations about how to get where we need to go… Many thanks also go to the wonderful Marshmallowtasha who always has great questions that make me really think about what my character's motivations are and for her insights into who these characters are and how they interact with each other. I also want to thank BryroseA, she didn't have time to look at this because of Life (stupid life) but we certainly wouldn't be here without her too! And thank you to all of you still reading this and welcome to all the new readers who found it while I was busy teaching this summer. The next couple of chapters are mostly written so there won't be a three month wait this time ;)}
Still Holds Out For A Shred Of Humanity

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Veronica watched Logan peel out of her parking lot from the doorway of her apartment. The scene had played out so quickly that her head was still spinning. She thought about running after him, but she had enough experience to know that Logan was intensely volatile right now, even if she didn't know the reason for it. Confronting him in his current state would just cause him to lash out. Not physically, never physically—at least not with her—but that didn't mean that his verbal assault would feel any better than a right hook to her orbital socket.

She closed the door and bent down to scratch Backup's ears. "What happened boy?" She stared into the dog's dark eyes, wishing that they were a different set. Logan's eyes were deep and soulful; she couldn't help but wish he'd given her a moment's glance so that she could read them. She sighed and looked back to the living room. "I thought my laptop was closed—oh shit!" She scrambled over to the now open computer. Sure enough, rather than the pink ponies and cartoon characters of her public desktop's background, the screen had Abel Koontz' file open…Logan had seen her Lilly Murder Board.

"Shit shit shit!"

Of all the things for Logan to see on her computer, that was the very last thing she would have wanted for him to find. And now the big question: should she risk going after him and trying to explain now, or should she let him cool off and try to explain tomorrow? No good would come of her leaving the house this late, especially since her dad was on his way home. He would be less than pleased if he returned to find her gone.

Veronica twisted each of the rings on her left hand and then her right, hoping a solution would present itself. She finally packed up all of her study materials and headed to the bathroom, suddenly feeling the need for a shower.

Veronica felt hot tears hit her cheeks as she stripped out of her clothes and climbed into the stream of water. It was far from the first time she had retreated to her shower when things were crumbling around her, but something felt different about this time. She'd just been starting to feel more confident in her friendship with Logan. Sure, they were far from where they had once been, but the renewed camaraderie over shared comfort and secrets had felt so natural, so safe.

Veronica couldn't entirely blame him. She wasn't at all surprised by his reaction. She'd never intended for him to find out that she was investigating Abel Koontz. What was I thinking working on any of that knowing he'd be here!? she scolded herself as she scalded her skin with water as hot as the apartment offered. She wanted to scrub off the pain and disappointment she'd seen on his face and now felt in herself. Veronica reached for her luffa and began scrubbing at every surface she could reach. At first, the scrubbing was limited to herself. When she couldn't take it anymore, she exchanged the luffa for the sponge that she kept in the tub. She shut off the water and scrubbed the tub, then the sink, and finally the toilet.

With both her body and the bathroom as clean as possible, she felt her pulse gradually return to its normal rate. Her adrenaline rush now over, Veronica was left feeling exhausted and bone-weary. She changed into sleep clothes and crawled into bed, not even bothering to say goodnight to her dad. It was better that way…she didn't want him to see her like this. It wasn't long before she fitfully drifted off to sleep.
Logan sped out of the parking lot his mind going a mile a minute. Veronica didn't think Abel had killed Lilly. She was still investigating. Mr. Mars was searching for Abel's alibi.

"What I want to know, Logan, is what happens next time?"

Logan could hear Keith's words from just a few nights earlier.

"I want you to think about that. Because I'm not sure I can watch her lose you again."

Running had been the right choice. Logan knew if he could just deal with this—have some time alone—he'd be able to talk to Veronica without lashing out and ruining everything again. But first he needed to let it all sink in with a little liquid assistance. Which was why Logan found himself overwhelmingly grateful for two things that evening: the fact that he'd told his parents he was studying late with Veronica and for his fake ID. He'd pulled into the Sac-N-Pac and purchased a pack of cigarettes and a bottle of tequila without a second thought. This was what Logan did when he couldn't stop thinking about Lilly.

He drove out to a secluded little beach with public access. The surfing was shit, but that just kept most people away. He parked at the back of the lot where he hoped no one would see his truck.

He and Lilly had come here many times. He snorted at his double entendre as he walked down to where a large boulder blocked the view of the parking lot and then he threw himself onto the sand. He pulled out the pack of cigarettes and a lighter. It had been months since he'd last indulged in this particular ritual. He'd considered it on the night of Homecoming, but champagne had been the more sentimental choice. He took a long drag before cracking open the bottle of tequila. Leaning back against the boulder, he stared out at the reflection of the moon over the ocean and waited for the nicotine to calm his nerves. He took a long draw off the bottle and reveled in the burn he felt as the alcohol slid down his esophagus.

Pain and pleasure. He could almost hear Lilly.

FLASHBACK

"Pain and pleasure, Logan Echolls. Our brains mix 'em up, and they can amplify each other," Lilly purred into Logan's ear right before she bit sharply on his ear lobe.

Logan groaned and resisted the conflicting urges to both pull Lilly closer and throw her out of his lap. "Love and hate, Lilly Kane. Our brains mix those up, too."

"You don't hate me, Logan…" she kissed her way down his neck and nipped his collarbone.

"I hate you all the time, Lilly. I just happen to love you all the time, too." He tried to push her off of him. She was in a weird mood, and while sometimes that could equal a whole lot of fun, Logan wasn't up for her games. The more he thought about it, he realized she'd been acting weird since Homecoming.

"What hurts you the most, Logan? Emotionally, I mean," Lilly asked, her tone softer than before.

"I'm not going to tell you that. I might be horny but I'm not stupid, Lil; you'll just use it against me." He finally succeeded in pushing her far enough away to look her in the eye. "What game are you playing?" But rather than the mischievous glint she usually got when playing these sorts of games, she looked completely serious.

"What feels the best then?" she asked. "Surely that's something you'd like for me to use against you."
Logan let out the breath that he'd been holding. "What feels the best? Being in the ocean, catching a perfect wave, the person I love the most in my arms," he finished wistfully.

"But that isn't me, is it?" Lilly pouted her lip at him and moved her hips.

Logan's eyes rolled up into his head. "Of course it's you. Who else do you think I love?"

"Hmm…Is it actually possible that you don't know, yourself?" Lilly untied her bikini top and tossed it to the side, causing Logan to groan in approval. "Do you ever think about her when we're like this?"

"God Lilly, shut up." Logan leaned forward to capture her lips with his own.

END FLASHBACK

Logan couldn't catch a break. All he wanted was to get lost in a good Lilly memory and that's the one his subconscious had chosen? He took another long pull on the tequila only to feel immediately nauseous.

FLASHBACK

Logan stumbled out to the pool. He'd had too many shots to count, but it still wasn't enough. It was never enough. He was seriously considering disrobing and jumping into the pool—anything to liven this party up—when he spotted a white dress and long blonde hair on one of the loungers.

Veronica.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the traitorous bitch herself." He kneeled down next to her. "Ron-nie—Ver-on-i-ca," he sing-songed, trying to get her attention. "Wake up. I want to torment you. It's no fun if I don't get to see your lip quiver and your eyes well up. Wake up, god dammit!" He felt his frustration rise as he brought the bottle up to his lips, wishing he had some salt and a lime. Now that's an idea, he thought. "Hey John! Grab some limes and the salt. We've got ourselves a salt lick!"

Logan yelled to John Enbom who had just walked out to the pool.

"Excellent, who is it this time?" Enbom called back.

"Veronica Fucking Mars."

END FLASHBACK

Logan tried one more time to drink the tequila but had to spit it out or risk throwing up. What the fuck? I've had tequila dozens of times since that night. He had finished the first cigarette and decided another might be necessary. He lit it and tried to refocus his thoughts on Lilly. That was why he was here, after all.

He recalled the first time they had come to this beach. They had snuck out in the middle of the night, having driven one of the many cars sitting around the Kane's driveway. It was a yellow Porsche, though he couldn't remember its model anymore. What he could clearly remember was just how amazing it had felt to drive like a race car driver with a blonde head in his lap at the age of fourteen. That's more like it, he cheered himself on. It had been one of the most exhilarating experiences of his life. Lilly had given him head plenty of times before that, but they had just gotten back together after one of their numerous breakups and that particular blowjob had been amazing.

Of course the feeling of euphoria hadn't lasted. It never did. After spending a few hours fooling around on the beach—lesson learned, sand gets everywhere—they had returned to find Jake and
Aaron waiting for them.

Logan growled, throwing the bottle at the ocean before practically running back to his truck. He'd had enough memories for tonight. He arrived home only to find Aaron waiting for him. *Fuck!*

Logan took a moment to try to calm himself before getting out of the truck. He plastered a smile on his face and greeted his father, "Hi Dad. Thanks again for helping out Duncan earlier. He's pretty excited about the whole student council election."

Much to Logan's relief, Aaron's expression softened. "I was glad to do it. It's so nice to see you so engaged. I think Veronica has been a really good influence on you. You should bring her around more often. And that Wallace kid, too." Aaron said, wearing his 'movie-star dad' expression and wrapping an arm around Logan.

"Um…sure Dad." Logan said hesitantly.

Aaron pulled Logan tighter into him and seemed to smell him. *Shit, I probably smell like smoke.* Logan waited for the rebuke, but it never came. As they approached the door, Aaron just held out his hand and Logan set the pack of cigarettes into it.

"I get it, son. Were you thinking about Lilly tonight?"

Logan nodded, keeping his eyes on his feet.

"It's okay, this is much better than you driving home drunk. I think we'll just let this one slide. But if I catch it becoming a habit we'll be having a *talk.*" Aaron's eyes went flat for a moment before returning to the 'normal' mask he always wore.

"Thanks. It won't. Become a habit, I mean. I just…sometimes it's a lot." Logan shrugged, thankful for this rare moment of reprieve. He'd almost forgotten that Aaron could occasionally be tolerant.

"Why don't you show me the final cut of Duncan's campaign promo?" Aaron offered, leading Logan into the house.

Wallace had arrived on campus and headed to his first period French class with Madame Rousseau, where he knew that he would be tortured with the various campaign videos, but saved from more verb conjugations. Unlike the rest of his classmates, Wallace hadn't been surprised by the cameo that Aaron Echolls made on Duncan's promo since he had helped Logan film it the previous afternoon.

The guy sure could put on the charm when he wanted to, but no amount of affable faux 'father knows best' could fool Wallace into believing that Aaron Echolls was who he pretended to be. Maybe a few weeks ago he would have fallen for it, but not after getting to know Logan better and then seeing that barely-legal girl leaving Aaron's trailer. A girl that Aaron knew his son had had a relationship with…

Wallace pushed the memory from his head and tried to refocus on the rest of the campaign videos. After Duncan came Wanda Varner promising to abolish pirate points and make the world a fairer place. *Yeah right. She's as deluded as Duncan…* Even if all the non-09ers voted for Wanda, Wallace had a hard time imagining NHS without the 09ers running things.

The next few campaign videos were of people Wallace didn't recognize. Luckily, all the buzz from Duncan and Wanda's videos, along with the credit Logan had given him at the end of Duncan's, kept Wallace busy through the rest of French.
At the bell, he slowly made his way to Mr. Wu's class, hoping things had died down by the time he got there. Wu had a test coming up, and Wallace really wanted to make sure he had good notes from this review.

Wallace took his new, usual seat next to Logan. Logan was a mess. His eyes were bloodshot, it didn't look like he'd shaved, and rather than Logan's customarily smirk, Wallace was greeted by a troubled look.

"Whoa man, are you okay?" Wallace asked quietly.

Logan shook his head. "Veronica and I got in a fight." Logan put his head down on his forearms where they rested on the table. "No, that's not right. I saw something I wasn't supposed to, freaked out, yelled at her, and ran away," Logan said miserably.

"Okay. Well, what did you see?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Logan mumbled.

"All right." Wallace was rapidly running out of appropriate responses. "Have you talked to her? I haven't seen her yet today, but I think she would have called me if she were really upset." Wallace hoped that that was the right thing to say.

"I haven't. I'm afraid to. I don't want to make it worse. Can you help run interference? I just need to work through a few things and then I'll talk to her."

"You aren't going to turn on her again, are you? Because I'm not going to help you do that," Wallace said very seriously.

"No, no. I'm trying to make sure I don't say something I can't take back." Logan rubbed his eyes warily.

"What did you see that has you so messed up?" Wallace really looked at Logan again. Even his clothes looked wrinkled and messy.

"Ask her; if she wants you to know, she'll tell you."

Logan put his head back down, effectively ending the discussion. Wallace was left with more questions than answers, but he hoped that maybe he'd get a chance to talk to V later, one-on-one.

Veronica was unsure of what to expect as she walked into Journalism. She hadn't seen Logan at all that morning. Even though it had only been a week, she had gotten used to him meeting her during the midmorning break to grab a snack or just to talk. When she had looked for him during the fifteen-minute break, he was nowhere to be found.

Veronica took a seat at the table in the middle of the room, hoping it might force an interaction between herself and Logan. Ms. Dent approached her while she was pulling her things out of her bag.

"Morning, Veronica. I was thinking maybe you'd be interested in covering the election," Ms. Dent offered.

"Sure. I'll write it up this afternoon." Veronica chuckled to herself.

"But the results won't be released until tomorrow." Ms. Dent gave Veronica a strange look.
"And I can already see the headline. Brown-nosing, resume-packer wins in a landslide," Veronica replied dramatically.

"Hey, I am not a brown-noser." Duncan sounded offended as walked past the table followed closely by Casey Gant. "And you helped with my campaign video."

Veronica could see the smirk Ms. Dent was trying to hide. "Maybe you wanna dig a little bit deeper, Veronica."

"Fine, I'll take it. Maybe Wanda will win. Though I will miss the take-out," she said, looking around the room for any sign of Logan.

"Looking for someone?" Casey asked, taking the seat across from her at the table.

Veronica huffed, "No, what makes you think that?"

Casey chuckled at her, "Um…the way you keep looking at the door like you expect someone to walk in, maybe?"

"Casey, what are you doing here? This isn't even your class," Veronica said, her frustration getting the better of her.

"A mutual friend asked me to come and babysit." Casey grinned at her.

"I don't need a babysitter."

Casey leaned forward. "Not you," he said quietly and directed his eyes toward Duncan.

"Oh."

"Exactly. Logan just needs a little time, but he didn't want you to be left alone," Casey said still keeping his voice down. "You know, with him."

"Thanks Case. I hate to admit it, but I don't feel too comfortable being around him."

"I know. I don't know why, but it doesn't take a genius to see how tense he makes you. So, since I'm here anyway…what can I help you with?"

Duncan carefully watched Casey and Veronica's interaction. It made him uneasy. He'd heard, through the grapevine also known as Dick, that Logan and Veronica were fighting about something. It was clear that Logan was avoiding her like the plague, and Duncan desperately hoped that, whatever it was, it was big enough to keep them apart permanently.

What Duncan couldn't figure out was why Casey was in Journalism while Logan was conspicuously absent. Was Casey interested in Veronica? Had Logan sent him?

Duncan got up and approached Ms. Dent. "Where is Logan?" he asked.

"Oh, hi, Duncan. Logan is doing a student poll for the election. He should be back before the end of the period."

"Oh, okay." Duncan wandered back to one of the computers, ignoring the strange look Ms. Dent was giving him.

A little more than halfway through the period a haggard looking Logan came into the room. Duncan
watched as Logan clapped Casey on the shoulder and gave Veronica a long, sad look before taking a seat at an unoccupied computer in the back corner.

Duncan pulled a chair out and approached Logan. "Hey, man. Everything okay?" Duncan asked, working hard to sound concerned.

"Just didn't get much sleep," Logan said without taking his eyes off the computer.

"Want me to talk to her? She probably needs to interview me for the article about the election, anyway," Duncan offered, hoping Logan would agree.

Logan's head whipped around and he glared at Duncan. "No, man. I don't want you to talk to her for me. Leave Ronnie alone."

Duncan fought to keep his bubble of anger at bay. Ronnie. He hated when Logan called her that. Duncan stood abruptly and then realized that they were being watched. He leaned into Logan. "I don't see why you two are trying to be friends when you don't really seem to get along."

"Whatever, Duncan. I'm not talking about this right now." Logan turned back to the computer and pulled out an iPod and ear buds.

Realizing he'd been dismissed, Duncan walked away and left Logan alone. For a few moments he thought about approaching Veronica just to see what Logan would do. But not only would that completely undo all the work he had already put in to start getting them to trust him, but, from the looks Casey kept shooting his way, Duncan was pretty sure that he wouldn't be able to get close enough to even attempt it.

He would bide his time. He was sure that something he could use to keep them apart would present itself in due time. And, with Logan's track record, it would be sooner rather than later.

Veronica had opted to skip grabbing her things from her locker and instead rushed straight from Rooks' class to Logan's truck. She knew that he had headed to his locker so she had a couple of minutes head start on him, at the very least. He couldn't avoid her now. He'd have to at least listen for a few minutes.

She positioned herself near the driver's side door. Veronica was thankful for her short stature, as she was pretty sure she couldn't be seen from where Logan would be approaching. She waited several minutes before she heard Dick's booming voice.

"Come on, dude. This was your idea. Don't you want to see it all go down?"

"I dunno, Dick, I'm not really in the mood tonight. Maybe next time..." Logan sounded sad until his eyes landed on her standing there. His expression hardened when he met her gaze. "Veronica Mars, I should have known. What part of my avoiding you didn't you understand?" he asked while making a shooing motion with his hand to Dick and Beaver.

"All of it, apparently." Veronica stood her ground and tried her best to ignore all of the eyes that were turned on her and Logan. "I want to explain—"

"No." Logan stepped into her personal space, but Veronica didn't feel as though he intended to intimidate her. "I'm not talking to you about this here." He whispered a bit harshly into her ear before stepping back. "Don't call me. I'll call you." He said loudly enough that their audience could hear him. Veronica heard snickers from some eavesdroppers a few cars away.
Logan turned back to Dick, who hadn't left despite being dismissed earlier. "I've changed my mind. Let's get out of here."

"Sorry Ronnie, bros before hoes." Dick winked at her and jogged around to get in Logan's trunk.

Veronica recoiled slightly. Logan didn't seem like he was going to lead a charge against her just yet, but he hadn't defended her either. It wasn't a good sign.

Beaver walked up to Veronica, "Sorry, Veronica, but you're blocking the door." Beaver indicated the door behind her. She stepped away from the truck and watched them peel out of the parking lot.

Veronica stood frozen. So we're back to the 09ers calling me names, are we? She was ashamed of herself. She had allowed to happen exactly what she had sworn she wouldn't. She was torn up inside over Logan Echolls, Psychotic Jackass Extraordinaire. She'd been down this road before. Apparently the reprieve was over. He had done just as he always did. He'd turned on her the moment that she'd done something he didn't like. Veronica shook her self and headed for her car.

Logan knew that he was being a bigger ass than was really necessary, but he couldn't seem to rein it in. He was so damned pissed off at her. For a minute there my protective instincts kicked in and I completely forgot why I hate her. Well not hate but... Fuck, I need to get drunk or high. I can get over her choosing her dad, maybe…but the fact that she's investigating…and hiding it from me. Why can't she just leave fucking well enough alone? And then she had to push me in front of everyone. She's always...pushing.

"Fuck, Logan, are you trying to get us killed," Harry Diddon squeaked from the backseat.

Logan looked down at the speedometer and realized he was driving way too fast. He decreased the pressure on the pedal when he caught sight of the gas station-convenience store he'd been looking for. Logan pulled in and all the guys jumped out.

"Tequila or Whiskey?" Dick asked Logan as he climbed out of the Xterra.

Logan shuddered a bit. "Definitely Whiskey." And as Dick was almost to the door Logan called out, "And a cherry coke!"

While the rest of the guys ran into the store, Logan quickly began pumping gas into his truck. He was a bit taken aback at how much this situation with Veronica had gotten to him. He'd just needed some time to blow off steam, and she'd—

"You know what goes with an icy, cold beverage? A nice clean windshield," a voice said from the front of the Xterra.

"No, man, you don't have to do that," Logan called out to the large homeless man, who ignored Logan and continued to spray the windshield before cleaning it.

Will no one listen to a word I say? "The car was just professionally detailed," Logan said, exasperated. Dude, you're messing with me on the wrong fucking day.

"Ah, they got a lot of nerve calling themselves professionals," the homeless man responded jovially, while showing Logan all the dirt he got off the windshield. "Look at that. They just move the dirt around."

"Man, 'A' for effort but, uh, you're not getting paid for it."
"I don't remember asking," he answered while pointing to his sign: 'Homeless Vet. Donations Accepted'.

Logan nodded at the man and then turned his attention to Dick who had just come back out of the store with the bags of provisions.

"Hey, what about him?" Logan asked Dick. Earlier he had decided he wasn't going to have anything to do with the bum fights, but after his disagreement with Veronica he was feeling a relapse of 'Jackass Logan'. He looked over at the man cleaning his windshield. This guy looked perfect.

Dick eyed the guy. "Pretty well fed for a bum."

"Hey, you Army?" Logan asked the homeless guy.

"Hell, no. United States Marine Corps."

"That's even better, huh." Logan looked more closely at the man in front of him. He looked to be close to 240lbs and well over 6 feet tall. Maybe this day won't suck after all.

Logan continued to nod to himself while climbing back into the Xterra. "Hey, I'm, uh, I'm putting together a little amateur boxing night. If you're interested," he offered while placing a hundred dollar bill into the frame of the rolled down window.

"You want me to fight?" the man asked, incredulous.

"Fight? Do I want you to fight? Hell no, man," Logan laughed and turned to see the rest of the guys in the truck agree with him. "I want you to win."

"You think that you can just come in here and buy me like that? Is that how it is?"

Logan paused for a moment as he was hit hard with the realization of what a colossal asshole he was being. Veronica would be beyond pissed. But Ronnie isn't here, and it's not like I'll ever see this guy again. And what she doesn't know won't hurt her. Logan felt his jackass smile spread across his face. "Yeah, that's exactly how it is. I think we're on the same page." Logan smirked out at the homeless man. The man was clearly furious, but even as big as he was, Logan just couldn't bring himself to be afraid. This guy's got nothing on Aaron. And I've got nothing to lose.

"Get out of my face. Before I beat your ass down for free."

"All right, suit yourself." Logan held his hand up and mimicked squeezing the spray bottle while making a chhu-chhu sound. "You have a nice day." He grabbed the money out of the window frame, smirked, and peeled out while all the guys in the car laughed.

"Now there is the Logan Echolls we all know and love!" Beaver called from the backseat where he was sitting between John Enbom and Harry Diddon.

Logan felt himself deflate. Yep, psychotic jackass and all. "What time is everyone else meeting us?"

"In a couple of hours. What do you want to do while we wait?" Dick asked.

"Get magnificently hammered." Logan couldn't wait to stop feeling if only for a little while. He deserved it after all the shit he'd been through lately.

"Well, dude, I'm pretty sure we can make that happen," Dick replied holding up a large bottle of Maker's Mark.
Veronica's phone vibrated a second time, showing Logan's name on the display. She hit ignore once again. She wasn't ready to deal with him. She knew that if he apologized she'd forgive him, and if he didn't she wouldn't forgive herself for letting him back into her life. After her little confrontation with Logan outside of school, Wallace had pulled her aside and tried to talk to her. He mentioned that Logan wanted some space, but she hadn't been ready to listen. All Veronica had heard was Wallace trying to defend Logan. *He needs space? Space to rally the troops against me or just to blow me off in front of everyone?*

She pushed that train of thought from her head and tried her best to refocus on the homework sitting in front of her. After she'd read the same sentence three times, she was almost relieved when her phone vibrated again; this time it was a call from an unfamiliar number. Veronica almost ignored it, too, but as her finger lingered above the button, the thought that it could be her mother prevented her from pressing it.

"Hello?" Veronica asked warily.

"Ronnie, it's Dick. Please don't hang-up."

Veronica sighed heavily. "If I wanted to talk to Logan, I would have answered his calls."

"That wasn't Logan, it was me calling from Logan's phone. I know you two are having a lover's quarrel or whatever, but someone needs to come get him and keep him tonight. He can't go home like this and…Ronnie, there are people with cameras. I think you understand what I'm trying to say, right?"

"Damn it, Dick!" She knew exactly what he was saying; she just couldn't believe it was Dick saying it. "Fine! Text me where you are and I'll come and get him." Veronica dumped her book onto the couch and reached for her purse as she headed to the door. "And I think you and I might need to have a little chat, Dick."

"Whatever, Rons, I'll talk to you about whatever you want after you take care of Logan," Dick replied and promptly hung up.

The address arrived in her inbox a few moments later and Veronica was out the door and heading to the warehouse district. It took fifteen minutes to drive to the address Dick had sent her, but finding their actual location had taken almost no time at all. The streets leading up to the empty lot were lined with mid-range to high-end vehicles. The closer to her destination she got, the more concerned Veronica became.

Veronica pulled over in the first available spot that she saw and called Dick.

"Ronne, please tell me you're here," Dick's troubled voice answered the phone.

"Yeah, I'm about a block from the actual address you gave me. Why are there so many cars? What the hell is going on?" Veronica asked, feeling even more agitated as she saw a group of Pan High students wander by.

"Did you see the yellow monster? We need to get it and Logan out of here, pronto. You can interrogate Logan at your leisure once you've got him to your place."

"Dick, you're starting to piss me off! Tell me what's going on, or I'm leaving."

"Logan's wasted and people are recording the bum fights. We can't let them get him on camera." Dick sounded more desperate than she'd heard him before, but it only made Veronica more angry.
"I don't see how that is my problem."

"I don't know what happened yesterday, but Logan is a mess. He keeps blubbering about you and Lilly. Now, I don't give a shit about what's going on between you two, but you're the reason he is such a mess. He wasn't even going to come to this shit-show before you provoked him earlier today. So get your ass down here and rescue him."

Before Veronica got the chance to respond, he had hung up on her. Veronica hit her steering wheel and let out a frustrated scream. Some of her anger now released, she climbed out of her car and trudged in the direction she'd seen the other people heading. It didn't take long for her to spot Logan's obnoxiously yellow Xterra.

Once there, she found Dick, Duncan, and Casey all blocking Logan in. She could hear Duncan's voice scolding Dick. None of them had seen her approaching yet.

"I don't know why you called her. Why didn't you call Trina?" Duncan snarled.

"Obvs, dude, Trina would take him home…" Dick had an incredulous look on his face, which turned to a smile when he saw Veronica.

"Ronnie! Took you long enough." Only Dick could be thankful and insulting at the same time.

From the backseat of the Xterra, Veronica could hear Logan call out, "Ronnie? She came. Are you sure? I'll only leave with Ronnie; you can't fool me with some other small blonde. She's one of a kind—I'll know."

Oh yay, drunk Logan.

"It's me, Logan. Come on; I'll take you home."

"Nonononono, not my home—your home."

Veronica looked at the other guys. They seemed completely unaffected by Logan's comment. She stepped up to the open door and met Logan's red, glassy eyes. Softly she told him, "I know. I'm going to take you home with me. My dad is out chasing a bail jumper." She held out her hand for his.

Logan stared at her outstretched hand for a few seconds then grasped it and kissed her knuckles. He leaned forward and whispered, "I love you—you know that right?"

Veronica was still mad, but if there was any statement that would goo-ify her core it was that one.

FLASHBACK

Veronica looked down at Duncan, snoring loudly on the bed of the Echolls' guestroom. He was out for the night. Veronica leaned over him to steal the pillow next to him and made her way to the ensuite bathroom to check on his sister. Lilly was passed out on the bathroom floor, so Veronica stuffed the pillow under Lilly's head. Veronica knew that she'd have to check on Lilly later, but for the moment leaving her next to a toilet was the safest bet.

Veronica tiptoed back across the hall to Logan's room and was surprised not to find him on the floor where she'd left him. Instead he was up and brushing his teeth. It was a huge improvement over the Logan she had left a while earlier, puking and dry heaving. Veronica had held a cool cloth to his neck until she'd heard Lilly retching again.
One of these times, I'm not going to be here and they are going to be a mess, Veronica thought to herself as she watched Logan stumble back into his bedroom.

"Ronnie, you came back," he slurred while pulling off his jeans. He managed to trip over the bunched up fabric and ended up on his knees with his face buried in Veronica's stomach.

Veronica gently pushed her fingers through his sweaty hair. Logan wrapped his arms around her hips and nuzzled his cheek against her.

"Come on, Logan. Let's get you into bed." She smiled down at him. He was always very affectionate when he was drunk.

"Will you get a cold washcloth and sit with me for a while?" he asked, rising unsteadily from the floor.

"Yeah." She helped him onto the bed and went to retrieve the washcloth she had been using earlier. She got it nice and cold again and toed off her shoes. Veronica climbed onto Logan's bed and motioned for him to snuggle into her. She placed the cloth against the back of his neck and gently played with Logan's hair while she waited for him to fall asleep so that she could go crawl into one of the other guest beds.

Just when she was sure Logan had fallen asleep, he entwined their fingers and pulled her hand to his chest. "I love you, Ronnie. You know that right?" he mumbled into her stomach.

Veronica laughed softly to herself. "Sure, Logan. I love you too. Now go to sleep."

"Mmm…hmm." After a few minutes Logan's breathing had evened out, and his grip on Veronica's hand had relaxed. She carefully extricated herself from his loose hold and covered him with his comforter before heading to the other guest room to sleep for the night.

END FLASHBACK

Veronica gently pulled her hand, still wrapped in Logan's, away from his lips and encouraged him to get out of the backseat of his truck.

"Come on, you." Veronica led him to the front seat on the passenger's side.

Before he got in, he hugged her tightly. "I'm sorry I wouldn't let you explain. Sometimes I'm an ass."

"I know. I have plenty of experience dealing with that part of you." She couldn't help but smile a bit at the ridiculousness of the situation.

Once Logan was buckled in and ready to go, Veronica circled around to get into the driver's seat and found herself face-to-face with Duncan. He looked furious and was reaching out with his hand as if to grab her shoulder. Veronica quickly stepped back, then jumped, when she heard a loud thump from inside the truck. She turned to see Logan scowling at Duncan while he thumped on the dashboard.

Duncan retreated a step. "Right…sorry. I thought the two of you were fighting."

Veronica shifted uncomfortably and moved to walk around Duncan. "Not that it's any of your business, but we had a disagreement. We'll work it out."

"Oh, okay. Well, call me if you need any help with him," Duncan offered.
Veronica turned to look back to Duncan; she really looked at him. His face was open and he appeared to be genuine in his offer, but it felt wrong. Duncan had never been any help in dealing with drunken friends. "Sure. Thanks, Duncan." She got into the truck and swiftly drove herself and Logan away from the scene.

"This is one of those times I wish you didn't drive Big Bird. If there were any paparazzi there, they'll be able to follow us." She sighed. "Maybe I should circle back and get the Le Baron."

"I'll have someone come get your car, Ronnie. We'll call AAA or whatever," Logan said, reaching out for her hand and entwining their fingers again. Veronica wanted to pull away, but she couldn't resist the big puppy dog eyes he was giving her. She settled their hands on the center console. Veronica knew that the impending conversation wasn't going to be fun for either of them, but she decided to take comfort in the physical connection Logan was offering.

"What happened tonight, Logan?" she asked, giving his hand a gentle squeeze.

"I...I was being an asshole." He slumped down in his seat. "We paid bums to fight each other. Like in those Indecline videos. I think there might be pictures of me."

Veronica shook her head. Dick had said something about bum fights, but it hadn't really connected for her. But hearing Logan say it...

"What were you thinking?" Veronica said, beyond exasperated. "And pictures, Logan! What happens if your dad finds out?"

"The same thing that happens every time, Pinky," Logan quipped, then continued in a much more subdued voice, "I get the shit beat outta me."

"God, Logan. Where do your parents think you are right now? Do we need to make a plan for tonight?"

"No, they think I'm staying at Dick's."

"Then why aren't you just staying at Dick's? Why have me come and get you? Surely you could just crash at one of any number of places."

"You and I fought and I wanted to make it better. And..."

"And what? There's more?"

"Dick and Beav's newest mommy hits on me when ever I'm there. I didn't want to wake up to her...you know..."

"Yuck. Seriously? Isn't she like thirty?"

"Late twenties, but who's counting. I don't want to fuck her, so staying there like this," he gestured to his very drunk self, "is a terrible idea."

Veronica laughed, "I thought being in your 'state' made those kind of things...ha—um...difficult?"

"Hard, Ronnie." Logan giggled. "Maybe if I was completely passed out, but um...no, trust me—wouldn't be a problem."

Veronica could feel Logan's gaze on her. She pulled her hand out of his and smacked him on the shoulder. "Maybe I should just leave you out by the pool? I mean, is it safe to let you in the house?"
Logan laughed. "I promise to behave…mostly."

Veronica pulled into the parking lot of her apartment complex, parked, and turned to face Logan straight-on. "We have a lot to talk about." Logan nodded his agreement. "But you're drunk and I'm tired. So let's just go inside and save the deep stuff for tomorrow. Is that okay? Are you going to let me explain later when you're sober?"

Logan looked very serious. "I promise. I just needed space. We'll talk about it tomorrow. But tonight let's just braid each other's hair and have a pillow fight. Preferably in our underwear."

Veronica couldn't contain her laugh at his silliness. *He is so charming when he lets himself be,* she admitted to herself. She climbed out of the truck and waited for Logan to meet her so that they could walk to the apartment together. Logan had to lean against the car, using it for support, as he made his way around to her. When he finally reached Veronica, he practically stumbled into her. She wrapped her arm around his waist and did her best to support as much of his weight as possible.

As they were walking past the pool, the overhead light flicked a few times, surprising them both. But when they looked up the light shone brightly. Veronica thought it was odd, but continued to lug Logan toward her door.

Veronica let Logan drape himself over her while she pulled her keys out of her bag and got them both inside before settling Logan on the couch. She then began searching for everything that he would need for the night. Veronica had only been gone a minute when she heard Logan's heavy steps coming her way. He was staggering down the hall and his face had a distinctly green hue to it. Veronica surged forward to support him as she eased him the rest of the way to the bathroom. They made it just in time.

Veronica automatically fell back into old patterns. She got him a cool washcloth and then rubbed his lower back while he purged all the liquor that he'd drunk that evening.

Once it looked like he was done, Veronica helped him up to wash his face and brush his teeth with the toothbrush she had kept for him after the previous weekend. Now all cleaned up, she expected him to stumble back to the living room, but instead he headed straight for her bed. He stripped out of his cargo pants and flopped onto her small twin-sized bed that was way too short for him.

"Ronnie, can you get another cold towel and stay with me till I fall asleep?"

"Yeah," she said, fondly remembering all the other times he had asked for that. She swiftly changed into sleep shorts and a t-shirt, refreshed the washcloth, and then climbed into her bed beside him.

Duncan quietly slipped back around the side of Veronica's apartment complex to where he had parked after following her and Logan. He was sure that they'd seen him when his camera's flash went off. It had been a stupid, rookie mistake.

The drive back home took no time at all, and Duncan couldn't wait to download the photos and video that he had taken. Duncan had had no interest in the bum fights that night per se, but he hadn't wanted to be at home. When Casey had mentioned to Duncan that Beaver wasn't at the fights, he'd decided to go for it. About half way through the third fight, Dick had pointed out a few people in the crowd who were recording videos. But they weren't recording the fights; they were recording Logan. The realization had given Duncan a brilliant idea. If he could capture Logan at his worst, Veronica wouldn't want anything to do with him. So he'd started snapping photos and even captured a few minutes of video. He'd been thoroughly pleased with himself at the time. It had been the best day he'd had in a long time. First he'd found out that Logan and Veronica were on the outs, and then he'd
found a way to make sure they stayed that way.

When Veronica had come to pick up Logan, despite knowing where they were and what was happening, Duncan couldn't have been more surprised. It didn't go unnoticed by him that Logan had told Veronica he loved her. In fact, the confession had made his blood boil. So he'd followed them, intent on making them both suffer.

Duncan plugged his camera into this laptop and started downloading the files. The last few clearly showed Veronica helping Logan into her apartment. She had her arms around him, and, unless the viewer knew that Logan was drunk, they could easily mistake the couple's posture as being that of two people simply wrapped up in each other. While it rankled Duncan, he was also thrilled. Even if Logan's ass-like behavior wouldn't keep Veronica away from him, there was no way that Mr. Mars would let her be around Logan after this all went public.

Duncan looked up The Smoking Gun's website and clicked the 'submit a tip' link. He attached the video and a few stills to the submission. After sending the tip, Duncan leaned back in his chair and felt the happiest that he had since Lilly had died.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Many thanks as always to Bondopoulos and Marshmallowtasha for all their hard work on this chapter : ) This one took us over 100k words! And we still have to get through the rest of the season…and the summer… Thank you to everyone reading and for all the encouraging reviews. I love hearing from you all.
The next morning, Logan woke up just as the sun was starting to rise. He felt like shit, but he also felt relief. He and Veronica had survived a disagreement. Well…at least so far as she had been willing to come to his rescue. They still had a lot to talk about.

Logan carefully extracted himself from Veronica's bed. It was an easier task than he’d expected since he’d woken up on the side away from the wall, and Veronica's back was to him. He made his way to the kitchen and started poking around. The previous weekend Veronica had shown him how to make pancakes and bacon. It had seemed easy enough, so he decided to give it a try. The best way to start a tough conversation with Veronica was with food.

Logan found the Bisquick and a package of bacon and got to work. As he mixed up the batter, he was reminded of that long ago morning when Keith had brought him home with them after their Homecoming all-nighter.

**FLASHBACK**

Logan woke up to the smell of bacon and the sound of someone singing off-key. He was scrunched onto the plush living room couch at the Mars house, and, despite being a little cramped, he found that he was actually pretty comfortable. He was about to drift back to sleep when he remembered why he was on the Mars' couch. He sat up and looked down at what he was wearing. Too-short sweatpants and a Padres t-shirt.

*Dad is going to beat the shit out of me for his tux,* Logan groaned at the thought of the punishment he was sure to receive that night.

"How you feeling, Logan? I have some aspirin over here if you need it." Sheriff Mars' voice came from the kitchen, and Logan could hear him laughing.

Logan rolled off the couch and assessed the state of his hangover: none, much to his relief. They'd only really drunk champagne, and Logan had had a feeling that the evening wouldn't end pretty, so he hadn't wanted to get completely drunk.

Wondering over to the kitchen to watch Keith cook, Logan accepted the glass of orange juice that the older man offered him. "I don't think I need the aspirin; we can save 'em for Ronnie, she probably will," he said, taking a seat at the small kitchen table. While walking into the kitchen, Logan hadn't seen any sign of his tux. "Sheriff, where did you put my tux? And do you think you could take me by a dry cleaner on the way home so I can drop it off? My dad is going to be really mad that I got it so dirty." Logan tried not to let the fear that he was feeling creep into his voice.

Keith turned and met Logan's eyes. "Already taken care of, son. Lianne has one of those steamer things and all the at home dry cleaning stuff. It's hanging up in the laundry room…good as new." Keith's eyes crinkled in the corners when he smiled. It was something Logan found comforting. His parents were the same age as Mr. Mars, but they had almost no wrinkles. That wasn't completely true, but they both had dermatologists that kept them *camera ready* as his mother referred to it. Logan thought of it as fake, but what he hated the most was that it made it difficult to read the emotions on either of his parents' faces.
"Thank you; I really owe you for that," Logan said sincerely.

The Sheriff's face took on a very serious mien. "No, I know what you've done for Veronica. I—let's not worry about it, okay?"

Logan nodded his head. Veronica hadn't mentioned Lianne's drinking since that day at the boardwalk with Duncan, but it hadn't stopped her from showing up at his house for movie marathons that somehow always coincided with the Sheriff working an all-nighter. Logan didn't push, and Veronica didn't offer—masks up and smiles on seemed to be the new normal.

He looked up at the Sheriff, who bore the same fake smile that Veronica had. Were there no happy families in Neptune?

Keith pulled the last of the bacon out of the pan and headed out of the room, patting Logan on the shoulder. "I'm going to go get Veronica. How about we have that little lecture about curfews and scaring your parents?"

"My parents haven't even called to see if I made it home," Logan said softly.

Keith stopped and came around to stand in Logan's eye line. "Sometimes we don't get the parents we deserve. But we do get to choose whom else we surround ourselves with. If you didn't make it home, you know Veronica would be worried. You have people who care about you, Logan. Don't forget that."

**END FLASHBACK**

Logan thought back over Keith's words from that night that felt like a lifetime ago; he had forgotten that he had people who cared about him. A year of hate and wanting everyone else to be in as much pain as he was had done so much damage. Logan had a lot of regrets from the last year, and turning on Veronica was at the top of that list. But he also still remembered how betrayed he had felt when Mr. Mars, whom he had just started to trust, had turned on Jake Kane. It had been an even harsher blow when Veronica had stood by her father. Logan had worked hard during the past year to forget about that morning after Homecoming when he'd been so grateful to Keith. And now he had another thing to be indebted to him for: that moment where Logan, rather than lashing out, had fled the Mars' apartment. **What would I do next time? Well, run away, act like an ass, and then beg for forgiveness, apparently**, Logan laughed at himself. Not that running away was a good choice, but it sure beat ruining his tenuous, but strengthening, relationship with Veronica and next time he would do better.

Logan was putting the pancakes and hot bacon in the microwave when Veronica sleepily stumbled out of her bedroom wrapping a fluffy pale pink robe around herself.

"I'm surprised you're up so early. You must feel like crap," Veronica mumbled in a sleep-roughened voice.

"Too many years of surfing after partying. I'll probably take a nap during one of my classes." Veronica scowled at him. "Oh take it easy, Mars, I'll pick a class we have together so you can make sure I don't miss anything." He winked at her as she continued to scowl but took a seat at the kitchen bar.

"So you made breakfast. Is it safe to eat?" she asked, apparently having decided to let it go.

"I think so." Logan pulled the plates back out and set them in front of Veronica along with some maple syrup.

She seemed to inspect the plates closely and then took a few tentative bites before a smile spread
across her face. "A+" marks, Echolls. You officially know how to cook something."

Logan couldn't help but beam at her. It was a silly thing, but being able to banter and show her that he wasn't a completely useless asshole filled him with happiness. But he knew it couldn't last. They had to talk about what had happened Monday night.

"At the risk of ruining what is starting out to be a good morning, I think we should talk. Or rather I want to tell you something before you explain to me what I saw on your computer."

Veronica looked nervous but nodded.

"Last week your dad said something to me. First he asked what would happen the next time I disagreed with you, and then he told me he didn't think he could watch you lose me again. I didn't know what to say. And, at that moment, I honestly didn't think that there was anything that could cause me to treat you like I did after Lilly died. But, when I saw whatever that was on your computer, I just felt so angry. I wanted to lash out; I wanted to hurt someone and you were the only person here."

"I didn't mean for you to find out like that. But Logan, you don't know what you saw. Can you at least let me explain? After everything you did to me I gave you a chance."

Logan felt that anger rising up again, and before he could push it back down, words were spilling out of his mouth, "Everything I did to you. What about what you did to me? Remember that little bong incident? You've seen what I got for that. Or maybe not; I guess our little champagne adventure's punishment covered those ones up."

Veronica balked and Logan saw her eyes fill with intense emotion. She started shaking her head and got off the island stool and stepped back from Logan, putting more distance between them.

"Shit! Shit!" Logan stepped back and moved to put the kitchen island between them, wanting to give Veronica space. "You're shaking like a leaf, Ronnie. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you; I promise I would never hurt you."

He saw her swallow and nod, then she spoke in a small voice. "I've never been afraid of you. I'm upset with myself. I never...I never thought." Her eyes filled with tears that started to spill over.

Logan swiftly moved to her and hugged her tightly. "Hey, you didn't know. I didn't mean that. I guess I'm still angry." He leaned away and brushed a few tears off her cheeks before he led them to the couch. "Let's get back to where I was trying to explain myself and pretend that outburst didn't just happen, okay?"

"Logan—" She was shaking her head, but Logan knew that he had to get this all out. It was too important.

"Please, you need to hear this. When I saw all that stuff about Lilly's murder, I wanted to break something. Before Homecoming I'd been doing a really good job of not thinking about Lilly. I'd put as much of that as I could in a box, and was focused on...well, on being a jackass. And then here it all was in my face. But after that initial jolt of anger, I could hear your dad asking me what would happen next time...I realized that if I didn't get out of here I was going to do something I would really regret. So I left. And I'm sorry I avoided you all day yesterday, but I just couldn't...I was afraid I would say or do something I couldn't take back. Do you understand? I wasn't actually mad at you. I was just mad. Unfortunately, it also took getting unbelievably drunk and then participating in that shit show to come around. All I could think about—the entire time—was how disappointed in me you were going to be." Logan ducked his head, afraid to meet Veronica's eyes after his admission.
"Thank you for telling me the truth." Veronica's voice wavered. Logan looked up and could see the conflict in her eyes. "And I do want to explain what you saw. But Logan, while I appreciate that you were trying to keep from hurting me, I realized something too. I'm just not sure I can do this." She waved her hand between them.

Logan reached for her hand and held it in both of his. "Don't say that. Friends fight, they disagree, and then they makeup. We're both very…"

"Easy going, unrile-able?" Veronica offered, smirking.

"I was going to say passionate or maybe volatile. But my point is that there are going to be times when I act like a jackass and when you are a bitch."

"Hey!"

"Oh, you know it's true." He smiled at her displeased face…right, unrile-able.

"Fine, I'll concede the point. But my point is: is it worth it?"

"I think so. Think about how much fun we've been having together. Solving mysteries, making new friends, making your dad suspicious." That finally earned him a real smile from Veronica.

"Yeah, it has been really great having you back. But—"

"No buts, not yet. Let's just say I didn't react well and that next time I'll do better. Though, if you could let me know if there are any other big skeletons lurking, I would really appreciate it."

"Okay. I can't think of any at the moment. And how about you? Any skeletons you want to share?"

Logan was very careful to keep his expression neutral. He had a hell of a lot of skeletons that he wasn't ready to share with Veronica. It was almost a certainty that, if she found out about the GHB at Shelly's party or his lack of alibi for Lilly's murder, he'd be in hot water faster than he could jump out.

"Not today, Mars." He grinned at her. "But I think you had one you were going to explain to me."

"Right. Hold on." Veronica got off the couch and disappeared into her room, finally returning a minute later with her laptop. She opened it and set it on the coffee table in front of them. "Now, before I start showing you this stuff, I need you to know that I have actual evidence to back up what I'm thinking."

Logan nodded and turned to look at the screen. Veronica had the computer open. After a few clicks, the weird corkboard appeared.

"This is my Lilly Kane Murder Board."

"Okay. Veronica, why do you have this? Abel Koontz confessed." Logan worked hard to keep his tone even and open.

"Because he lied." Logan started to open his mouth. "No wait. Let me show you." Veronica pulled up a new file that showed a picture of Lilly.

"Um…what does this show me?"

"That is a picture of Lilly driving through a red light at 6:02 pm on October 3rd."
"Okay, so she ran a red light the day she died." Logan was confused why that would matter.

After a few more clicks, Veronica had pulled up an official looking document. She pointed at the screen. "This is the coroner's report. Her official time of death is listed as between 3:30 and 4:30. So how did she drive through a red light at six if she was already dead?"

How indeed? Logan was speechless. He turned what he knew had to be wild eyes to Veronica.

"There's more." Veronica clicked around a few more times and pulled up a copy of someone's phone records. "My dad found evidence that Koontz had a regular weekly 'date' with a prostitute and his phone records support that he did meet with her the day Lilly died. But my dad hasn't been able to find her," Veronica said glumly.

Logan's head was spinning. He wasn't so sure about Koontz's phone records, but the traffic ticket was proof that something was off. He took a few deep breaths.

"Okay Veronica. I'm not sure I know what this all means, but something is wrong here. I…" He cleared his throat. "How can I help? If Koontz really didn't kill Lilly, I want to make sure the bastard who did pays."

"I'm not sure. And what if it was one of the Kanes?" Veronica looked nervous again.

"I really don't think it was one of them, but if it was…I'll deal with that if that's what we find. So what's next?"

Veronica nodded. "I found my dad's files in the safe at the office. I had planned to get into it last night, but…well anyway…" she trailed off for a moment before she continued. "He shouldn't be back until tomorrow morning, so I was going to get in and copy as much of it as I could tonight."

"Great, I'll go with you."

"I dunno, Logan. I'm happy you aren't just walking away, but are you sure you can handle this? You may not like what we find."

Logan gathered his thoughts; did he want to be a part of this? Yes. Could he handle it? Hopefully. He turned back to Veronica.

"I'm in this with you. We both loved Lilly and if you're right and her killer is still out there..." Logan felt a wave of panic. "I can't lose you, too. No, we're doing this together."

"All right, Logan. Then we start tonight."

Veronica huddled around her notes at one of the computer stations, working furiously to complete the special election article. She had been given special permission to miss her normal classes to speak with students about the election. It was expected that a run-off would be necessary, so she'd been asked to interview all of the hopefuls as well. She couldn't deny that the entire school was on edge. Would Duncan or Wanda carry enough of the votes to prevent a run-off? Veronica honestly wasn't sure. Wanda's platform appealed to the non-09ers, but Duncan had a reputation for being well liked even outside of 09er circles.

At Logan's request, she had put off interviewing Duncan until Journalism so that Logan would be able to act as a buffer for their interaction. Even if Duncan seemed to be making an effort not to make Veronica overly uncomfortable, she still couldn't forget the previous week, or the hollow look in his eyes when he had confronted her and left her bruised and sore. No, interacting with Duncan
one-on-one was not something she would willingly be doing anytime soon. But, under Logan's watchful eye, the interview went off without a hitch. Duncan was polite and answered her questions thoughtfully.

"I come bearing lunch," Logan announced, coming into the Journalism classroom holding two boxes of pizza.

"Excellent, and what will you be eating?" Veronica teased.

"Har-d-har-har. I was hoping you would share with me, Princess." Logan set the boxes down on the table in the center of the room and approached where Veronica was sitting. "After all, this may be one of the last deliveries I'm allowed to accept." He pouted his lip out.

"Eh…You'll survive. If you're really nice to me, I might even make you lunch every once in a while." Logan smiled and pulled her up from her seat, dragging her over to the food.

"So do you think Wanda will win? I saw the student poll from earlier, and it looked like she was definitely carrying the majority," Logan commented.

"I honestly don't know. Clemmons and Ms. Dent seemed to think a run-off would be necessary. Hence the special article. I guess we'll find out at the end of lunch." Veronica shrugged. At the end of the day, she didn't really care who won. If Duncan did, then the status quo would remain intact. If Wanda did, it would have very little impact on her overall, though her victory did have the added benefit of causing some of the 09ers pain, which was okay with her.

After eating a few slices, Logan headed over to the computer. He added some images and adjusted some of the formatting of Veronica's article so that it would be ready to send out to the student body once the results were announced. After one final proofread, the two grabbed the rest of their pizza and headed out to the quad.

Veronica spotted Wallace and Casey sitting at their usual table, so she headed their way with Logan trailing behind her.

"Nice, man. Is there enough left for me to steal some?" Wallace asked Logan.

"If you're fast. But watch out, Ronnie's a biter." Logan winked at Veronica who couldn't help but laugh.

"That was one time!"

Wallace stared at her, confused, and Casey laughed out loud. "This I've gotta hear."

Logan face became very serious. "I made the mistake of trying to take food out of her hand once, and she bit me." He shook his head in disgust. "The scar is still there to this day," he said, holding up his hand and pointing to a 'scar' that was not there.

"I didn't bite you on purpose. You stuck your fingers in my mouth while I was trying to take a bite. It was your own fault," Veronica scolded.

"Maybe, Mars. But it was my slice of pizza you were taking a bite of." The screech of feedback that always preceded a Neptune High announcement came over the PA system, interrupting their laughter.

Veronica looked around the quad and spotted Wanda. She was sitting surrounded by a large group of her supporters who started chanting her name. Duncan was sitting quietly with a few of the other
09ers, looking resigned.

After a plethora of mundane announcements, Clemmons finally got to the part that everyone was waiting for, revealing the winners of the election. "And it gives me great pleasure to announce the 2004-2005 SCA President, Duncan Kane."

"So what exactly are we doing here?" Wallace asked as he took a seat with Logan and Wanda at the large table in the Journalism room.

"Veronica is pretty sure that something is off about the ballots," Wanda replied.

Logan smirked. "I'm here as a 'representative' for Duncan; believe it or not, he actually asked Veronica to look into this."

"Oookaaay. So why am I here?"

"You, my dear Wallace, are here to act as a student liaison to the main office," Veronica announced, bouncing into the room.

"V, you are way too excited about this." Wallace frowned.

"Oh come on—conspiracy, intrigue, and a mystery. This is my bread and butter."

Wallace just shook his head. "Let's get to it then." Wallace led them all to the faculty copy room where the Scantron scanner was kept.

After what felt like hours but was really less than half the class period they had rerun the ballots twice without any change in the results. Wallace collapsed into a chair and watched Veronica pace into the adjoining room as she flipped through the ballots while Logan antagonized Wanda.

"No need to be a sore loser W-W-Wanda." Logan pretended to cry.

"Shut up Logan, your opinion means nothing to me. You're just one of the rich kids who could get away with murder. If Lilly's murderer hadn't confessed I'd think it was you."

Logan's mouth dropped open and the color drained out of his face. Wallace had finally had enough.

"Shut up both of you. Logan, leave Wanda alone. And Wanda don't talk about things you don't understand."

Wallace noticed Veronica brush her hand down Logan's arm as she walked past him and saw his face relax.

"Hold on, if 'Wanda rulez,' why'd you vote for Duncan, you head case? I wanna find out who this kid is and what room they voted in," Veronica said handing the ballot to Wallace.

*Does the girl not remember any of her manners?* "And I want a statue of myself in the main lobby, holding a musket, staring down danger." Which earned him a snort from Logan.

"Seriously, a musket man? I'd want to be holding an AR-15 like Tony Montana or maybe with me on a Harley hydra-glide. Yeah, definitely me on 'Captain America'."

Veronica and Wanda both looked incredulous.

"What? I thought we were talking about stuff we want?" Wallace explained with Logan nodding his
agreement.

"You two are impossible. Wallace could you please find out whose ballot that is and what room they voted in?" Veronica asked, her voice dripping with sweetness.

"See, how hard was that?" Wallace asked trying to keep from laughing as he turned to the computer and looked up the student. "Kevin Carney. He's got art first period."

"Great. I'm going to go check that out and I'll check in with you all later," Veronica announced before marching out of the room.

Wallace turned to ask Logan about how things were going with him and Veronica when he saw the look on Logan's face. Logan had a big goofy grin on his face and stars in his eyes. Wallace sighed. Echolls was giving Veronica's retreating form goo-goo eyes.

"I take it you and V worked things out?" Wallace asked.


"How can you be friends with that guy?" Wanda asked.

"Logan? How is he any worse than Felix? I mean seriously, Felix helped tape me to the flagpole. I think I'll take Logan." Wallace walked out of the room a feeling of self-satisfaction flooding him. Nope, no regrets voting for candidate E, can't remember her name, but she's gotta be better than Wanda or Kane.

Logan jogged up the stairs to Mars Investigations and rapped on the door. Veronica had told him to come with some food because it was going to be a long night.

"Oh good, Luigi's." Veronica snatched the bag out of Logan's hand before he was even able to cross over the threshold.

"Yes, lots of carbs and lots of cheese. Where do you put it? If I keep eating with you, I'm going to have to start running or something." Logan playfully poked her in the belly.

"Excellent genetics. Now come on, we have a lot to get through and I'm starving."

Logan set the drinks that he was still carrying on the low coffee table in front of the couch, while Veronica set out their dinners. "So what ended up happening with Madison?"

Veronica's eyes sparkled as a mischievous grin spread across her face, "Well, Miss 'Pirate Points' lost all of hers, got kicked off student council, and lost her teacher's aid position." Veronica steepled her fingers in front of her face. "And the best part…drum roll…is that she has to do community service during her new free period. She'll be picking up trash and scrubbing graffiti." Veronica cackled with glee.

"Couldn't have happened to a better person." Logan felt a trickle of warmth at Madison's misfortune. He really loathed her fakeness.

"You've never…you know," Veronica's cheeks flamed red, "with her? Right?"

Logan couldn't help but laugh and feel disgusted. "God no! Would never happen. Not even if her
and Dick broke up. I'd never touch her." He shuddered at the thought.

"Good. Good." Veronica looked away and reached for her dinner. "I think I'd have to disown you if you did."

"Duly noted. Never sleep with Madison or Ronnie will disown me." Logan saluted her and got the laugh he was going for.

"Have you talked to Duncan at all? He's probably pretty mad about the run-off," Veronica said around a bite of lasagna.

"Actually, he wasn't mad at all. He seemed just as surprised to be announced the winner as the rest of us were. I was with him when he graciously accepted the run-off decision. I think he was being sincere. Though, it can be a little hard to tell with him lately. He said something strange afterward though—something about more pirate points. I'm not really sure what he has in mind, but I'll guess we'll find out…or not."

Veronica shrugged her answer as she downed the last bite of her dinner and indicated a mountain of paperwork nearby. "Okay. Are you sure you're up for this? There's some pretty rough stuff in these files. I…you know I was there, right. I've seen it all, but…"

Logan sighed unhappily. "I saw the leaked crime scene video. I tried not to watch it, but I just kept imagining these horrible things and I couldn't help it. I know what to expect."

They spent the next two hours with Veronica digging through the reports and Logan scanning the ones that Veronica said were important.

"Hey, I've never seen this before," she exclaimed, pulling out a manila envelope.

"What is it?" Logan asked, removing another sheet from the scanner and walking it back to Veronica. He looked over her shoulder and read: Crime Photographs. Lillian Kane. DOD. BBZ. Crime No A-97-92184xx. 10.03.03. Case 18900-C2. Bedroom.

Veronica pulled the photographs out of the envelope and started flipping through them slowly. It was Lilly's room, just as it had always looked. Clothes were strewn about—it was barely controlled chaos, just like Lilly. Logan felt his eyes well with hot tears, but he quickly swiped them away. He'd been fine when he'd looked at coroner's reports and descriptions of the scene, but seeing her room overwhelmed him with sadness.

"Logan, look at this." Veronica pointed at some shoes under the ottoman that sat by the end of Lilly's bed.

He sniffled and wiped his eyes again. "Um…sure, that looks like her backpack and shoes. It's hard to tell, but those look like the ones you scrawled your undying affection for Duncan on." He laughed lightly at the memory.

Veronica snorted. "Right, undying. Let's scan all these photos so that I can zoom in and enhance some of them on my computer." She stood up and headed to the scanner.

"It's okay, I can do it." Logan shuffled after her.

She turned and placed her hand on his forearm, her blue eyes were softened by the gathering of her own tears. "I know you can. But I need to change the scan settings for higher resolution. When we're done scanning these ones, let's go get some ice cream. I think we could both use a pick-me-up."
Logan couldn't help but smile. His idea of a pick-me-up was more along the lines of a bottle of whiskey or scotch, but he'd make do with ice cream.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: The last chapter hit a couple of milestones for this story :) The first was going over 100k words…wow, never saw that coming. This was just going to be a little one shot of Veronica reconnecting with Logan over skinny dipping in Lilly's honor, and if you're reading this you know it turned into a lot more. Chapter 17 also received the highest number of reviews/comments yet, which was pretty exciting. I love hearing what you all think :) Thank you so much to all of you, I never thought anyone would read this and now there over 300 of you following/subscribed to it – totally blows my mind! Of course you wouldn't have this story without the support, encouragement and great editing skills of Bondopoulos and Marshmallowtasha, Thank you ladies!
Chapter 19 - Or A Knight On A Steed

Duncan sat at his computer before school on Thursday morning, refreshing The Smoking Gun website every few minutes and thinking over the conversation he'd had with his father the previous afternoon.

"I'm not concerned about this election, I just want to see you engaged. Enthusiastic about something. Your happiness is all I've ever wanted."

If only his father knew that he had found something to be enthusiastic about. Jake would not be very happy at all when he discovered the direction of his enthusiasm, but that didn't concern Duncan overmuch at the moment. Duncan could feel himself lapsing into one of his hateful modes as he hit refresh, yet again. This was all his father's doing, anyway. None of this would be happening if his father could have just been faithful to their mother.

FLASHBACK

"Duncan, your mother and I have something we'd like to talk to you about." Jake had a grim expression on his face, and Celeste looked ready to go nuclear. What did Lilly do now?

"Son, we know you and Veronica have been getting very close but…" Jake faltered and Duncan found himself even more confused. Why were they talking to him about Veronica? Please don't let this be another sex talk.

"Just tell him, Jake," Celeste hissed.

"Duncan, did you know that Veronica's mother and I dated in high school?" Duncan shook his head, so Jake continued, "No, of course not, none of us ever speak of it. In any case, Lianne, Mrs. Mars and I were once—" Celeste snorted. "Mrs. Mars and I were close. After your sister was born Lianne and I, well...um...we..."

"For christ's sake, Jake. They had an affair, Duncan. Veronica is your half-sister. Now go breakup with her so we can all go back to pretending that it never happened." Celeste hastily pushed herself to her feet and quit the room in a huff.

Duncan felt heat rushing up his neck. He turned to his dad. "No. Tell me she's lying."

Duncan looked into his father's eyes, but all he saw there was remorse. The reality of what it all meant hit Duncan like a baseball bat to the gut. He ran for the nearest bathroom and emptied the entire contents of his stomach. He'd kissed his sister. He'd been getting ready to start working toward doing a lot more than kiss his...sister. He dry heaved.

"I'm so sorry Duncan."

END FLASHBACK

The day after that fateful conversation with his parents, Duncan had begun ignoring Veronica. Less
than two weeks later, Lilly was dead. And it was all Jake's fault. And now, just as he'd gotten over
the shock of the past year, Duncan was certain there was something going on with Veronica and
Logan. In many ways Logan and Veronica's reconciliation was the harshest blow yet. They kept
denying it, but the more Duncan thought about it the more he could see their connection. He saw the
way Logan was looking at her and treating her. It was the same way he used to act around Lilly.

"They're different Donut."

Duncan was sure he'd heard Lilly's voice. He looked around the room and found it empty.

Duncan hit refresh again and there it was, everything he'd been waiting for: A-Lister Linked to
Twisted Pastime. Aaron Echolls' son caught bruising bums for cash. The headline shone like a
beacon of light to Duncan. He clicked through the piece and saw the pictures he'd taken of Logan
and Veronica at her apartment. It really did look like they were making out against her door. Of
course Duncan knew that Veronica was just trying to hold Logan up while she unlocked the door…
but Mr. Mars wouldn't know that.

Veronica had been so caught up in everything with her and Logan, as well as what they'd found in
her dad's files the pervious afternoon, that she hadn't thought about school much lately. School drama
and the election hadn't been in the forefront of her mind since Logan had told her that Duncan had
taken the news about the run-off really well. Maybe not as well as he thought, Veronica considered
as she exited second period and saw the word 'NARC' scrawled across each of Wanda's election
posters.

"I think the opposing campaign just went negative," Wanda said, shutting her locker and turning to
Veronica. "I'm gonna kill whoever did this! They spray painted "Narc" on the hood of my car, too."

Veronica gave Wanda her full attention. "I'm sorry about your car. I'll see if I can find out who did it.
And you know they only chose the word 'narc' because it would hit closest to home with your
constituency."

"I shouldn't find that comforting. But I do." Wanda smiled broadly.

Veronica nodded and made a conscious decision to put herself out there. She used to like Wanda,
and what had been done to Wanda's campaign posters and car reminded Veronica a little too much
of how she had been treated in the first months after Lilly's death. "Why don't you come over tonight
and we'll make new posters. I'll get some puffy paint and an Avril Lavigne CD, and it'll be just like
our pep squad days," Veronica finished with faux perkiness.

"Awesome." Wanda clapped and struck a 'ready-okay' pose.

"Okay, don't do that."

Veronica spent the rest of the mid-morning break helping Wanda pull down the ruined posters.
When Veronica walked into Journalism, she was still fuming about what someone had done to
Wanda. Two weeks ago she would have immediately suspected Logan. She knew it wasn't possible
because Logan had picked her up for school with coffee, they shared first period, and with an exam
coming up in Chemistry she didn't think he'd ditch that to spray paint Wanda's car, even if he didn't
like her. But all that evidence aside, she just didn't think he'd do it even if he'd had the opportunity.

Veronica took a seat at one of the computers and went to work, trying to see if she could access the
parking lot cameras. Unfortunately, the task of accessing the secure server was outside the realm of
her computer skills. I really need to get a tech savvy sidekick.
"Hey, I missed you at break," Logan said, pulling a chair up next to Veronica.

"Yeah, I was helping Wanda pull down her posters. Please tell me you had nothing to do with that."

Logan shook his head, "Veronica, I'm not responsible for all the things that go wrong in your life anymore. Remember our talk? We don't have to agree on everything, and I am still a jackass and all, but I didn't have anything to do with that. I heard someone even spray painted her car." He lowered his voice. "You don't think Duncan had anything to do with it, do you?"

Veronica pondered that for a moment. Did she? She wasn't sure. She shrugged her answer. "Probably not, but he wouldn't have told people to leave her alone either. You know Duncan... he stands idly by. I want to find out who did that to her car. They should have to pay for it."

"We'll find out. I may not be all Team Wanda, but doing that to someone's car is a dick move..." His face scrunched up. "Crap, it is a Dick move. I'll talk to my sources; if it was one of my friends, I'll make sure it gets taken care of."

"Thank you." Veronica settled into the chair and leaned into Logan. "So what are we working on today?"

Having finished their assignment for Journalism, Logan kicked his legs up on the desk and watched while Veronica put the final touches on her Mendelian genetics biology homework. She was writing something about individuals with their second toe being longer than their big toe.

"Gross!" Dick's voice startled Logan. "What is wrong with that foot?"

Logan turned to look at Dick. "What do you mean?"

"It's called Morton's toe, Dick. It's incredibly common. And, incidentally, it may or may not follow the rules of Mendelian inheritance," Veronica said, hitting save on her report.

"I don't care; that's sick." Dick looked a little green.

"Whatcha doing here, Dick?" Logan asked.

"Oh right. Ronnie, Clemmons wants to see you—something about parking lot cameras," Dick said, handing Veronica an office pass.

"Excellent! I will see you kids later." Veronica jumped out of her seat and headed out of the room.

"What's she so excited about?" Dick asked.

"Wanda's car got spray-painted this morning. There's a camera in that part of the lot, so I assume Veronica is hoping to be able to see whomever it was. If it was you, man, you might want to go after her and offer to pay for the damages," Logan said nonchalantly.

"Naw, man. Wanda gave me a killer blowjob a while back, so she gets a pass from the old Dickster. Just don't tell Madison, okay?" Dick high-fived Logan.

"Nice, but why would that keep you from vandalizing her car?"

"Seriously? Same thing that keeps me from pissing on the cheese at the deli. I want to be able to go back."

Logan laughed out loud at that. Dick did have a point. A good blowjob is better than sliced bread.
"Dude, whatever you're thinking—you're thinking it too hard."

"Sorry man, just beating a dead metaphor in my head," Logan replied, standing to walk Dick back out of the class.

"I don't know what that means, but I think you should do it in private. Oh, hey, now that we're alone..." Dick pulled on Logan's arm to slow him down and decreased his volume a few decibels. "Check out The Smoking Gun when you get a chance. I didn't want to say anything in front of Ronnie. You may need to do some damage control." Dick looked genuinely concerned which puzzled Logan momentarily before he pushed all questions out of his head.

Logan made his way back over to the computer that Veronica had been using and pulled up The Smoking Gun. The headline sent a cold chill through his whole body. He began to click through the pictures. Not only did they have footage of him being a complete asshat at the bum fights, they also had pictures of him and Veronica; pictures that would surely be misinterpreted.

"Shit!" Logan exclaimed, causing everyone to turn and look at him.

"Mr. Echolls, language," Ms. Dent scolded.

"Sorry, um...sorry." Logan closed out the window and stared at the computer's home screen, waiting for an idea to pop into his mind. Any idea that would get him out of the beating he was certainly going to receive as soon as he got home.

Frustrated by his own stupidity on the night of the bum fights, Logan leaned forward and snapped the monitor off. When he did so, he saw Duncan's face appear behind him, reflected in the computer's black screen. Duncan wore an eerie smile that immediately made Logan uneasy. When the bell rang a moment later, Logan turned around to see Duncan strutting out the classroom door.

Veronica walked into Mr. Clemmon's office and found Wanda already there waiting.

"Ms. Mars, I received your request to see the parking lot surveillance footage. As you can imagine, we are not in the habit of giving those over to students..." Clemmons turned the monitor of his computer to face Veronica and Wanda. "But after reviewing it myself, I thought it might be helpful to have you and Ms. Varner review it as well." He hit play.

A small stocky figure entered the field of view. He was wearing all black and his face was turned in the opposite direction of the camera. But Veronica felt a sense of familiarity about the way he moved, though she couldn't quite place it.

"Do either of you know who this is? We never see their face, and I'm afraid I don't recognize the person beyond thinking it is likely a man." Clemmons shrugged and looked to Veronica.

"I can't say that I do." Veronica shook her head. "But whoever that is, they knew there was a camera and did a good job of making sure we never see enough to identify him."

Veronica turned to look at Wanda who was still staring at the screen, sadness plain on her face. "I don't recognize him."

"All right, ladies. Why don't you go back to class. Ms. Varner, I'll release a copy of this to the police when they come to take their report."

Veronica wrapped an arm around Wanda's waist. "It'll all work out. I think we may need to change tonight's musical selection to 'N Sync. You know...really get the old pep squad spirit up."
Wanda nodded, "What time should I come over?"

"I have some stuff to do at the office first, so why don't you come over around five and then we can order some take out?" Veronica offered, hoping to cheer her up.

Wanda smiled, "Yeah, I'd like that."

After Journalism, the rest of Logan's classes flew by. He wasn't able to pay attention to what was going on, and his teachers reprimanded him for it more than once. But that was fine. He hadn't really even tried to follow along; he'd been formulating a plan. He thought that it might even be a good plan, but he wouldn't know if it would work until he found out if Veronica had learned of his latest run in with the tabloids.

It wasn't until sixth period that Logan saw Veronica again, and he was relieved when it appeared that neither she nor Wallace had heard about The Smoking Gun piece yet. In fact, his newfound fame hadn't seemed to have made it through the school gossip mill at all. Logan thanked his lucky stars that Dick was exercising some gossip-based self-control.

Logan did his best to act as normally as possible through class. Once class was out and he'd gotten his things from his locker, Logan looked around for Veronica. After confirming that there was no sign of her, he approached Wallace's locker and leaned in, "Wallace do you think I could hang out at your place after school for a couple of hours? I kind of need to be away from my house until late-ish."

Wallace gave Logan an appraising look. "Sure man. My mom won't mind. She always makes too much for dinner anyways. And we can study for Mr. Wu's test."

"Oh yeah, that sounds great. Do you have anything you need to do right now? If not, I can drive us back to your place."

Weevil spotted Veronica exiting the school. He glanced around to make sure she was alone then approached her car.

"Hey, V. I wanted to give you a little bit of advice." He looked her up and down. He knew it probably looked like he was checking her out, and maybe he was a little bit. The girl was hot, but what he was looking for were signs of more bruises. He'd been on edge ever since he'd seen the clear signs of a handprint on her arm the previous week. He'd seen bruises like that on Lilly, and he'd be damned if he let Echolls hurt Veronica the way he had hurt Lilly.

"Oh yeah, Weevil. Whatcha got for me? Best way to B & E? Or wait, maybe you have some tips for me on the post-graffiti movement?" She tilted her head. "Naw, you're more of the tagger type, aren't you Weevil?"

Weevil grinned at her; can't get much past a Mars. "Me? No, but I sure like all those murals down by the boardwalk."

She leaned in closer to him, her face drawn tight. "I saw the video, Weevil. And the way you just strolled up, you sure move a lot like the person who tagged Wanda's car. Not to mention the fact that you seem to be wearing all black."

"Got no clue what you're talking about, V. But if I was you, I'd be real careful around the narc." Weevil winked at her and turned to walk away, having said his piece.
"You should know better than to believe everything you hear at this school. That's just dirty politics."

Weevil stopped. "You might want to explain that to Felix. Somehow the sheriff found out that all the 'Welcome to Neptune' signs are hanging up in his bedroom, a week after he hooks up with your girl Wanda. Now how did that happen, huh? Now homeboy's got four weekends of washing pots and pans at the homeless shelter." Weevil waited for Veronica to absorb what he'd said. He saw understanding settle across her features, nodded, and smiled. "See you 'round, V."

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Veronica slid into the driver's seat of the Le Baron and sat staring at the entrance to the school. She could feel a headache building behind her eyes.

It had been a long, strange day. First all the stuff with Wanda, and then after Journalism Logan had been acting strangely. He was too quiet. It wasn't that he was brooding, so much as just not interacting. When she'd asked him, he'd insisted he wasn't mad at her, just tired. And then he hadn't even said goodbye at the end of the day. Most days after school he had taken to waiting with her while she got her things from her locker. But today Mr. Rooks had wanted to ask her about an assignment, and when she got out there was no sign of Logan, or Wallace for that matter. She had planned to have them both come to her dad's office and help her with a few things before she met up with Wanda, but since she didn't see either of them she'd decided not to push it. *Maybe Logan just needs a little alone time, and Wallace probably has to work.*

Veronica nodded her head, agreeing with her inner monologue, and started her car. She drove over to Mars Investigations and quickly settled in to the mundane tasks of invoicing and filing. At the bottom of the pile was the invoice for Celeste Kane. Veronica glared at the sheet of paper and pulled out the receipt from depositing the check. Celeste had paid her bill in a timely manner and even included a generous tip. God, that woman disgusted Veronica. *Why did Celeste want Dad to know that Mom was meeting with Jake?* Veronica thought back to the receipt from the Neptune Grand on the day Lilly died. There was something there. Veronica wasn't sure what, but maybe now that Logan was willing to talk about investigating Lilly's murder she could share it all with him. Maybe he'd see something that she'd overlooked. Veronica stapled the copy of the cleared check to the invoice and then filed it with the completed cases with closed billing.

Her back was still turned to the door when she heard it open. "Hey Dad, I'm just about done with all the filing. Did you need anything else today?" she asked. When he didn't immediately respond, Veronica turned around and was startled when she saw that the person who'd entered was not her father.

"Sorry, Veronica, I didn't mean to scare you," Rebecca James apologized. "I heard what you said. I take it your dad isn't here?"

"No, but he should be any minute. You can wait in his office if you want." Veronica pointed to the closed door.

"Actually, Veronica, I'd really like to chat with you for a minute. If that's okay?"

Veronica nodded. Somehow Ms. James always managed to put her in a position that forced her to do things she didn't want to do. And, to make matters worse, Ms. James did it in an irritating way that made Veronica look like the bad guy if she didn't cooperate. Veronica found herself disliking the woman more and more with every encounter.

"Great." Ms. James smiled brightly. "We haven't gotten to talk since Keith and I went up to LA for his birthday. And after everything today, I just thought it might be good for us to catch up."
Veronica narrowed her eyes. "I've been pretty busy covering the election. But you know that. Everything's fine. From what Dad said, it sounded like you had a lot of fun at the concert."

"We did. Maybe you could thank Logan from me again." Ms. James smile faltered a bit. "Um...how is it going between you and your dad...with all this stuff with Logan?"

"Um...fine I guess," Veronica replied, confused by the question.

"Good, good. I was just worried he'd over—" Ms. James' words were interrupted by the office door swinging open.

"Hey ladies! Sorry I'm running a little late." Keith leaned down and kissed Ms. James briefly before he turned to Veronica. "Hey, honey. Wow, you put a real dent in the stack. Why don't you go be a teenager? Have some fun." Keith pulled out some cash and handed it to Veronica. "Dinner's on me. I'm taking Rebecca out; please at least eat something green."

Veronica grinned. "Thanks, Dad, mint chip ice cream it is!"

"Oh, Daughter, don't make me remind you that child services will take you away if they find out," he joked.

"Got it, Pops. Don't tell child services about the lack of nutrition being offered at home. Done and done," Veronica bantered back while grabbing her bag. "I'm headed out. Wanda is coming over to make campaign posters, so I guess I'll see you when I see you."

"What, no Wallace or Logan? I can't believe it. Are you actually going to spend time with another female?" Keith gave her a shocked face. Ms. James just watched them curiously, as if they were animals in the zoo, and she was unable to understand their behavior.

"Naw, not tonight." Her thought about the zoo reminded her of their conversation from Sunday and Wallace's comment about being a cat man. "Hey, we still going to the zoo this weekend?"

"If you can make time for your old man." Keith nodded.

"Can Wallace and Logan come along?" Veronica glanced at Ms. James and decided to keep her reasons vague. She didn't think either boy would appreciate her airing their personal thoughts to Ms. James, of all people. "When I mentioned it the other day they both were pretty excited, and I think they'd really like to go with us. If you don't mind sharing me that is?"

Keith smiled and walked over to where Veronica was standing by the door. "Yeah, I think that might be nice. I'll get you all ice cream and we can sit and watch the flamingos."

Veronica looked into her father's eyes and saw that they were a little glassy. She was sure that her eyes mirrored his, as she recalled the times he'd taken her and Lilly to the zoo, and later Logan and Duncan also. "I'd really like that, and I know Logan would too. We can indoctrinate Wallace into our zoo-going ways." She gave her dad a side hug and quickly headed out of the office.

As the door banged shut behind her, she heard Ms. James ask, "Are you okay?" and her dad reply, "Yeah, I just used to take them all to the zoo..." His words faded as Veronica headed down the stairs.

**FLASHBACK**

"Veronica Mars, what have I told you about ice cream?" ten-year-old Lilly said, with her hands on her hips. Her backdrop was the flamingo habitat. It made Veronica want to laugh, but she kept it in.
"A bunch of stuff that I have no interest in, Lilly. I love ice cream and nothing you or your mother's personal trainer say can change that. Now enjoy your unflavored snow cone while I devour my bubblegum and blueberry double scoop." Veronica stuck her tongue out at her best friend.

"Okay now girls, what do you say we head over and do the cart tour? Or did you young ladies want to just walk through?" Keith asked, joining the girls while holding his own ice cream cone.

Veronica watched Lilly look down at her paper cone filled with plain ice, her face drawn tight with thought before a huge smile graced her face. "Mr. Mars, can I change my mind and still get ice cream?"

"Sure, Lilly. I can't believe you got that boring old thing in the first place. What'll it be? A weird mix like Veronica? Or something more traditional?" Veronica looked up at her dad, her heart singing. This was why all those fancy trips to ski or on a yacht with the Kanes couldn't compare to doing stuff with her family. Her dad would never scold anyone for wanting ice cream or think it was boring to walk around a zoo they'd already been to a zillion times.

"Strawberry, two scoops," Lilly said excitedly to Keith. Once Veronica's dad had walked away, Lilly leaned in. "Don't tell Celeste, and let's just walk the zoo."

END FLASHBACK

Veronica hadn't thought of that day in many years. It was the summer before Veronica started fourth grade and Lilly fifth, back when the Kane's only spent summers in Neptune. I can't believe Celeste was already putting her own issues on Lilly that young, Veronica thought with disgust. Lilly had made them walk so much that day, even through the reptile house, which had always been her least favorite exhibit.

With a deep breath Veronica banished the memories; she had things to do, like making new campaign posters, and being maudlin was not going to work for that. She hopped in her car and headed home.

Wallace and Logan settled into the Fennel's family room and started doing homework. Every few minutes Logan could feel Wallace's eyes on him, but he just played it off. They'd kept this up for more than two hours. And for the second time in recent history, Logan found that he had not only finished all of his homework, but was even ahead on a few things. He was out of excuses. He knew he should talk to Wallace about Casey, but he was scared shitless that Wallace would figure everything out and would subsequently hate Logan.

Logan had been itching to tell Wallace about Casey until he'd played it out in his head—every scenario had ended very badly. In the end, Logan had decided to have Casey help him without Wallace knowing. Logan had decided that once he was sure that it wasn't his drugs that had been used on Veronica he would tell Wallace. Wallace would still probably hate him, but at least it would just be for being a complete asshole and not because he was responsible for the rape of their best friend.

"You okay?" Wallace interrupted Logan's dark thoughts.

"Um…yeah, you?"

"Uh huh. But you, you just turned kind of green. And you haven't turned a page in like five minutes. What are you thinking about that has you so…you know?" Wallace waved his hand at Logan.
"You wanna braid my hair?"

"Knock it off. I know you and V have been riding one hell of a rollercoaster, but I thought things were okay since Tuesday night. She didn't tell me much, but you two seemed fine today."

"Oh um—"

"Wallace I'm home!" A woman's voice saved Logan.

"We're back here, Mom," Wallace called back. A few moments later a tall, slim woman with a resemblance to Wallace came into the room. "Hey Mom, this is Logan. Logan, this is my mom, Alicia Fennel," Wallace introduced them.

"Hi, Mrs. Fennel." Logan smiled up at her from where he sat cross-legged on the floor. "I hope it's okay that I came over. We have an exam." Wallace gave Logan a strange look, which he tried to ignore.

"Of course, Logan. I'm happy to see Wallace making more friends. Are you the friend who showed Wallace how to surf last weekend?" Wallace's mom asked.

"That was me."

"It's nice to see Wallace making some male friends." She turned to Wallace as he started to protest. "I know you and Veronica are close, but that girl's reputation…" She was shaking her head.

Logan found himself less than pleased by the comment. How would Wallace's mom know anything about Veronica's 'reputation'?

"Mom, you really need to stop listening to those gossipy ladies at Kane Software," Wallace scolded. That's right, Mrs. Fennel works for the Kanes. That made a bit more sense. "You should see them whenever I've been there. I've never been asked how my father was so many times." Logan smirked.

"They ask you for his autograph?" Wallace snorted his response.

"They didn't have to; he comes down every now and then and does the meet and greet thing if he's visiting Jake."

Alicia stared at Logan, her eyes narrowed in concentration when a light bulb seemed to go off. "You're Logan Echolls. Of course. I thought you looked familiar."

"Seen me on Access Hollywood?" Logan asked, trying to keep his tone neutral. He didn't want to be rude to Wallace's mom, especially when he was hoping to hide out at their house for a few more hours this evening and possibly more in the future.

"No, well…I mean, yes. I have seen you on those shows, but that's not what I meant. Mr. Kane has a photo on his desk that you're in."

Logan was confused. "What? A photo of me?"

"Yes. It looked like a school dance. You, his two children, and another girl. You all look so happy," Alicia said a little wistfully.

Logan felt his throat tighten and nodded. "That night we were. The other girl is Veronica." At Alicia's confused expression he continued, "I take it you haven't met her yet. In the picture on Jake's desk, the other girl is Veronica. She a-and," Logan's voice cracked, "um…they were best friends. I'm
just…” Logan stood up abruptly and looked around, "bathroom?"

Wallace smiled sympathetically and pointed. "Down that hall, man, second door on the right."

As Logan was escaping for the safety of the bathroom he heard Wallace. "Good job, Mom. He dated Lilly Kane for like two years…"

Logan shut the door to the bathroom and let his tears fall.

"…and not only that, Veronica was, well…is, like his best friend." Wallace frowned at his mother. "The anniversary of Lilly's death wasn't even two weeks ago. He's been hiding it, but he isn't dealing with it as well as he'd like everyone to think." Wallace just shook his head, thinking of all the times he'd seen Logan with a far away look in his eyes or watching Veronica sadly. When Wallace had first encountered Logan, he didn't think there was anything more to him than being a jackass. But lately Wallace had come to see that there was a lot more to Logan Echolls than the show he put on at school or in front of just about everyone except Veronica…and strangely, even in front of Wallace on more than one recent occasion.

Alicia looked chagrined. "Oh, Wallace, I ask you to make some new friends and you chose Logan Echolls?"

Wallace continued to shake his head. Can I never please this woman? "I know this isn't what you envisioned, Mom, but Veronica is a great friend and Logan is…well he isn't at all what I expected. Give him a chance."

Alicia looked down at Wallace with her serious mom face. "I wish you'd make some other friends, Wallace. I'm happy to see you branching out some. And, I know you really like Veronica, but I've heard some really bad things about her. And her father…"

"Don't believe everything you hear." Wallace turned at the sound of Logan's voice to see that he had emerged from the bathroom. His eyes were a little red and puffy but otherwise he looked back to normal. "You should hear what they say about me." Logan winked at Alicia.

"Don't worry, Logan, we have. I think Access Hollywood showed those pictures of you in your PJs like five times yesterday. 'Oh, look at that Logan Echolls posing for pictures with his dad for the fans.'" Wallace snickered.

"Yuck it up, man. One of these times you'll be at my place when it happens and I'll make you pose, too." Logan pointed at Wallace dramatically.

Wallace turned to see his mom shaking her head but she was smiling. "You boys be good. I'm going to start dinner. Will you be joining us Logan?"

"If that's okay?" Logan smiled shyly. Wallace observed Logan closely, trying to decide if the smile was manipulative because Logan Echolls didn't have a shy bone in his body. The interesting part was that Logan didn't appear to be disingenuous; he'd have Wallace's mom's mind changed about him in no time at all. Those acting skills sure as hell didn't come from his Dad, might be time to pull out some Lynn Lester movies…

"Of course. I'll come get you two when it's ready."

An hour later, Wallace was relaxing on the couch in the family room, absently flipping through channels. Logan sat with his Chemistry book in his lab, pretending to continue studying and occasionally throwing Wallace a question. Wallace was surprised Logan was still there; he figured
Logan just didn't want to eat dinner alone or something. Though he did notice that Logan was jumpy and kept checking is phone.

"Logan, chill. You're practically twitching over there. Do you want to watch a movie or something?" Wallace asked, moving to the next channel. The announcer's words stopped Wallace.

"Aaron Echolls must be pretty unhappy tonight. We have breaking news that Logan Echolls not only participated in illegal bum fighting but apparently is getting hot and heavy with someone from the 'wrong side of the tracks'."

Logan groaned and buried his face in his hands.

"Holy sh…crap, dude. Is that a picture of you making out with V?" Wallace asked, anger lacing his words.

"It's not what it looks like," Logan replied dejectedly.

"Mr. Mars is going to kill you either way." I may have to kill you. "Is this what you two were fighting about? When was this?" Wallace's volume had increased, but he'd made a point to keep himself from yelling.

"What are you making so much noise about Wallace?" Alicia asked, coming back in the room right as they rolled the video of Logan drunkenly announcing one of the fights.

She gasped. Before Wallace realized what was happening, Logan had packed up his backpack and stood up. "I'm going to go. Thank you for dinner, Mrs. Fennel. Um…I probably won't see you until Monday, Wallace." Logan headed for the door.

"Wait. You don't have to go," Wallace called after him, he was mad but he did want to hear what was going on. He couldn't believe that V hadn't told him about this.

"Yes, Wallace. Logan needs to go."

Logan looked back once and met Wallace's eyes; there were a lot of emotions on Logan's face, but at the forefront was fear. Why would Logan be afraid?

"This is what I mean, Wallace. How can you tell me that Veronica and Logan are good friends when this—" she indicated the photos still being shown on the TV, "is the kind of thing they are involved in."

"Mom—"

"No, Wallace, now it's my turn. Clearly, neither of them have enough parental supervision. I've been being pretty lax, but I think it's time I took a more active role in your life. Especially if these are the kind of decisions you're making. No more Veronica and no more Logan."

Veronica threw herself back onto her bed, feeling bloated after completely stuffing herself with Chinese food. Between all the egg rolls and the crab Rangoon she was feeling ready to pop, which was quite a feat. She stared at the drying posters scattered across her room. She was pleased to realize that they'd gotten a lot done. But then Weevil's words came back to her.

"Somehow the Sheriff found out that all the 'Welcome to Neptune' signs are hanging up in his bedroom,
"It could just be a coincidence but…"

"I think we should celebrate this weekend. Win or lose. I heard about this rave out in the desert. And we can make it if we leave straight from school tomorrow," Veronica said.

"Bitchin'. I'll tell my mom I'm spending the night at your place. Do we need any…provisions?"

"Provisions? With a capital 'E', absolutely. But I know a guy."

"Oh, jealous. Wish I knew a guy." Wanda looked thoughtful for a moment, "You know, at first, I thought there might be something between you and Weevil. Especially with the way he looks at you. But then I saw those pictures of you and Logan." Wanda fanned herself. "Looked pretty hot and heavy. Is he your guy? I've heard he usually knows where to get just about anything."

Veronica was silent for a moment. Too many things Wanda had just said made no sense. Me and Weevil? Me and Logan… okay, Logan wasn't such a stretch; they had been spending a lot of time together. Despite her intentions, they'd slipped into a relationship with a lot of the same flirty-touchiness that they'd had in the past. But they'd always been that way. There was no way Logan thought of her as anything more than a friend. But even if he did, that could never happen. Date my dead best friend's boyfriend, oh yeah, that'd go real well. And after college we'll get married and have 2.5 kids. Veronica snorted and then realized she hadn't answered Wanda, who was staring at her expectantly.

"I don't know where you got that idea. Logan and I are just friends." I can't even say trying anymore. "And Weevil? No, never."

"Really? I just thought you might have shared your friend Lilly's bad boy thing. But I guess I was wrong."

"Lilly had more of a boy thing." Veronica smiled sadly.

Wanda nodded in agreement. "She always went back to Logan, though. Guess you know why now." Wanda smirked.

"I—what are you talking about?"

"Come off it Veronica. You two may be friends but those pictures definitely implied benefits." Wanda winked at her and reached for a college admissions prep book sitting on the floor. "This one any good?"

"Wait, go back. What pictures? What are you talking about?"

Wanda set the book down. "Lemme see your computer."

Veronica handed the laptop down to Wanda and settled on the floor next to her.

Wanda pulled up The Smoking Gun website and clicked a link with Aaron Echolls' face. At the top of the screen was a video of a wasted Logan from Tuesday night at the bum fights. And below it were a series of photos. Some were from out at the warehouse and looked like they'd been taken from far away. They were of poor quality, but at the end of the page there was another set of much higher quality images and the title: Echolls ends night with a hot blonde. One of the pictures showed Veronica's face in profile, and the final one was of her holding up Logan while she opened the door to her apartment. He was so much bigger than her that, from the camera's angle, it looked very much
like they were kissing.

"Shit," Veronica hissed.

"Told you, you two looked pretty hot and heavy. I've heard he's great in bed; is it true?" she asked sincerely.

"Shit! I don't know, Wanda. This is not what it looks like. I'm not sleeping with Logan, not like that. Um…I'm really sorry, but I have to go." Veronica looked down at the still drying posters. "I promise I'll help you put them up in the morning. Can you lock the door on your way out?"

Veronica ran to her car. *I'm going to kill him.*

Logan turned off his truck's headlights as he turned in his driveway. He parked and climbed out, making sure to not slam his door. He quickly made his way into the house through the kitchen entrance by the pool, hoping to make as little noise as possible. After opening the door, he slipped off his shoes and moved through the dark kitchen and living room as silently as possible. He'd almost made it to the hallway when he spotted the shadow of his father sitting in an armchair with only the light of the small reading lamp.

Logan swallowed and felt his hands go clammy. "Hey Dad. What are you doing up? I thought you had an early morning for test shots."

"I couldn't sleep. What with the phone ringing every five minutes." Aaron stood up and started walking toward Logan. Logan felt a shudder run up his spine. He'd known that this was the likely outcome of coming home, but he couldn't suppress his fear as Aaron came closer and closer.

"Access Hollywood, Entertainment Tonight, E! Any guesses what they wanted to talk about? My charity work? No. My latest Christmas movie? No." Aaron's lips were pulled in a caricature of a smile as he took a final step into Logan's personal space. He was now standing close enough for Logan to see his own alarmed reflection in Aaron's flat black eyes.

Aaron's arm landed on Logan's shoulders heavily and turned him; it took all of Logan's willpower not to flinch away.

"They wanted to talk about my son's latest opus. Skid Row boxing followed by going home with some skank. I hope you had fun, son, because I can promise you won't be going out again anytime soon." Logan fought to stay upright as Aaron squeezed painfully.

Logan brought his hand to his forehead and nervously wiped away the beads of sweat, hoping the movement would help him get a grip on his emotions. But the week had been too much—too much Lilly, too much Veronica—and yet not enough at the same time. He had a flash of longing that Veronica could save him. But he also wished that she would stay as far away from all this as possible.

"Dad, I-I, it was a mistake and I didn't—"

Aaron moved his grip from Logan's shoulder to his neck and squeezed. "I have to say that your performance was really impressive." The volume of his voice increased. "The way you played the ungrateful son determined to humiliate his father was utterly impressive," he shouted and flung Logan onto the couch.

Logan stared back at his father, waiting for Aaron to tell him to go get a belt. Or, worse still, for Aaron to just start hitting and kicking him. Not for the first time, Logan wondered if it could take
"Do you have any idea what you just cost this family?" Aaron paced in front of Logan, working himself up. This was how so many of their sessions began. "Of course you don't. You've never had to work for anything in your life. Now, tomorrow, instead of meeting with my publicist, you're going to get your first lesson in public relations...with me."

Logan heard a loud knock and then a door opening. "Logan, I saw your car. Are we still finishing that article for the election?" Veronica called coming into the living room.

"Veronica," Aaron said, surprise in his voice. Logan couldn't help but hold his breath.

"Hi Mr.—I mean Aaron." Veronica giggled girlishly. "Sorry to come over so late. I need Logan." She smiled flirtatiously then looked down at the ground with pink cheeks.

Why am I always so impressed by what a great actress she is? Logan felt his heart rate increase, and this time it wasn't from nerves.

"Oh, well now Veronica, you may not know but Logan is in quite a bit of trouble." Aaron had put on his serious 'Hollywood-dad' expression.

Veronica shuffled her feet and looked up, first glancing at Logan, who couldn't hide his admiration, and then at Aaron. "I do know, and I have to take some of the responsibility."

"Now Veronica—"

"Let me explain. I picked Logan up and I decided to bring him home with me because it was so late. I didn't want to disturb you and Mrs. Echolls. Logan slept on my couch, and I promise I gave him a very hard time about the drinking."

"That was you in the pictures?" Aaron asked, incredulous.

Logan watched her closely; he couldn't believe she was doing this.

"It was." She blushed again, but Logan knew it was an act. She wasn't embarrassed about that night; nothing had happened to be embarrassed about...for her at least.

Aaron nodded and turned to look at Logan again. "I'm glad that where you went will be easier for me to explain. We will fix this tomorrow." Aaron leaned in closer. "And Logan, don't you ever embarrass me again," he hissed in Logan's ear before he walked out of the room.

Logan let out a breath and sat up, trying to pull up a mask, any mask, before Veronica stopped watching Aaron leave.

Veronica turned back to him. Logan could tell from her expression that, despite his attempts to curb his reaction, she could see right through to what he was feeling. He stood quickly and reached for her hand. Her eyes were wide with apprehension, a stark contrast to the giggly-embarrassed schoolgirl act of moments before.

"Ronnie, that article? Let's get it wrapped up so we can both get to bed. Tomorrow is going to be a long day." Logan squeezed Veronica's hand in reassurance.

Logan led her up the stairs to his room, pulled his bedroom door shut, and tugged Veronica into his arms. "What were you thinking?" he whispered harshly into her ear.
"What do you think? I was terrified for you. And now you're mad at me?" She tried to pull out of his arms but he tightened his hold.

"I'm furious, and thankful. God, I love that you came over here like a knight on a shining white horse—well cereal box car. But..." He leaned back to look her in the eyes. "Never do that again. Promise."

"No, No, I won't promise. I'd do it again in a heartbeat. How about you never pull that BS again? If you had told me about the video and those pictures I could have just come home with you from the beginning. Did you think of that? Then I wouldn't have had to charge in. And what if my dad had found out before I did? I might have been grounded and couldn't have come."

Logan pulled her close and pressed a kiss to her forehead, seeking comfort from her strength. She was right, of course. He should have just told her; it was inevitable she'd find out anyway through the rumor mill and all that. He finally stepped away and took a seat on his bed.

"Yeah, I could have handled it better. I was actually going to try to just stay the night at Wallace's. But after dinner, of course that stupid video and the pictures were on TV so I left before Mrs. Fennel could kick me out," he replied sheepishly.

"What happened?"

"Wallace was looking for a movie, flipping through channels when the clip of me drunkenly announcing one of the matches came on. They might have shown a picture where it looks like we're making out, too. Your dad's going to kill me. Even if he believes us—I wasn't supposed to stay the night." Logan hung his head.

"You let me worry about my dad. For now, let's focus on yours. I caught the part where he said you were going to get a lesson in public relations. I thought you were already setup to meet with the family publicist, so what did he mean about that?"

"No clue, I guess I'll find out tomorrow. I'm betting it'll be public and that's why he didn't actually make me go pick a belt...or maybe it was you arriving." Veronica stared at him in confusion. "Never mind. It's not important."

"He makes you pick?" She shuddered next to him. "Just when I think he can't be any worse than I already think he is..."

Logan led them to his bed and pulled her down with him. "Sorry. Just don't think about it, okay? I'll go do whatever it is he has planned, and maybe you can be waiting for me when I get home? Project or something?"

Veronica nodded and curled into Logan's side. "I'll be here."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So I was going to wait to post this and then we hit 200 reviews on FF :) So I decided to post early. Huge thanks, as always to Bondopoulos and Marshmallowtasha! Bond and I had a lot of fun trying to come up with entertaining lines for the Dick and
Logan exchange, so hopefully you all enjoyed that as much as we did. And I stuck a little punk reference in there for those of you familiar with The Vandals. There is one more chapter that covers The Return of the Kane time period and then we're going to move into time that wasn't covered in the series and my first go at an original-ish mystery.
Veronica tiptoed into the apartment just after 2:00 a.m. hoping her dad wouldn't notice that she had completely blown her curfew. But in the end it hadn't mattered. Not only was he not home, but there was a note on the counter saying he'd gotten a lucrative tip on a bail jumper. Her relief at not having been caught was short-lived, because the note had ended somewhat ominously: 'Saw your tabloid debut. You, Logan and I need some Daddy/Daughter/Backup's-future-chew-toy time.'

Veronica wasn't really sure what to make of her father's missive. She had disobeyed his direct request to ask before a boy stayed the night, but she was hoping that after she explained he wouldn't be too upset. *No mention of shotguns or pistols at dawn, better than I was expecting*, she thought as she crawled into bed and fell into a fitful sleep.

Veronica woke early the next morning, still exhausted, and feeling anything but ready to deal with what the day had to hold. Between Logan's day of public relations training and dealing with Wanda Veronica wasn't sure how she was going to keep it together. Her life had turned into one emergency followed by another. She was really looking forward to a carefree day at the zoo, assuming she wasn't being shipped off to a convent as soon as her dad got back.

She shuffled into the kitchen and got the coffee pot up and running, *no chance of making it through today without lots of caffeine*.

The coffee had just finished brewing when she received her first text from Logan.

**From Logan Echolls to Veronica Mars, 7:32 am:**
Up and showered…will update soon

Veronica breathed a sigh of relief and took a moment to pour herself a cup of coffee while she considered her response.

**From Veronica Mars to Logan Echolls, 7:35:**
Good. Dad wants time w us. ur lucky Backup loves u.

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Friday started early for Logan. Before Veronica had left the night before, his mother had come to his room and informed him that Aaron expected him to be up and dressed by eight. His alarm had gone off the first time at seven, and Logan got up and showered after only one snooze cycle.

Logan made his way downstairs and found Aaron standing at the door to the garage looking at this watch expectantly.

"Excellent. Right on time. I'm glad to see you're taking this seriously," Aaron announced and headed into the garage.

"Excellent. Right on time. I'm glad to see you're taking this seriously," Aaron announced and headed into the garage.

Logan followed silently. He figured the safest option was to just stay mute and compliant; maybe he'd make it through the day. Veronica would be waiting from him when he got home. Due to Aaron's somewhat unpredictable nature, they had decided that Veronica would keep her phone close at hand so that Logan could send her updates throughout the day.

Aaron drove them to the Neptune Grand and led Logan up to one of the suites. As requested, Logan
texted Veronica an update as soon as he was able to do so discretely. If Aaron had noticed Logan's texting, he didn't seem to care. The suite they entered contained several racks of clothing and a tall, somewhat skeletal woman flitting about.

"Oh, Aaron, it's so nice to see you." The woman took off her glasses, and in her skyscraper heels she could almost look Logan in the eye. "You must be Logan. Nice broad shoulders like Aaron. Oh, yes." She squeezed Logan's shoulders then turned back to Aaron. "So, Aaron, what are we going for here?"

"Well, Rachel, Harvey was thinking we might make him look as young as possible. You know, try to make the narrative more of a youthful indiscretion." Aaron glared at Logan.

"Sure, sure. But he's so tall. Standing next to you, it's going to be difficult to keep him looking like he's only sixteen." Rachel walked around Logan, inspecting him like a show dog. "Slouch."

"Huh?" Logan turned to see if she really meant 'slouch'.

"Yes, yes, slouch. Roll your shoulders a bit." Logan did as she instructed, "That's it." She continued to walk around Logan a few more times. "All right Logan, I think I know just what we need." With that, she started digging around on the racks and throwing items onto the bed at the far end of the suite.

"Um…Dad? What exactly are we doing?" Logan asked cautiously.

"We are trying to make sure your image is right for when we go to the homeless shelter. You're going to be serving lunch today and then standing with me for a brief statement."

"Okay," Logan replied. It was actually a good idea, and Logan hoped it might help him to make amends. This might all just be a show to Aaron, but Logan really did feel terrible about the whole thing after seeing it in action. Aaron gave Logan a parting glare before he headed over to see what Rachel was doing, so Logan quickly shot off a text to Veronica letting her know the rest of Aaron's plan.

"Logan, we're ready for you," Aaron called out after another minute.

Logan made his way past the racks of clothes to the bed where his dad and Rachel were both nodding their heads.

"Orange is symbolic of change and determination and it will contrast nicely on camera." Rachel held up a pair of dark olive cargo pants and an orange shirt. "Put these on, Logan."

Logan found himself confused but didn't argue; he accepted the clothes and then proceeded into the suite's bathroom to change out of the jeans and button down shirt he'd been wearing. These clothes didn't look so different from what he already had on, but he'd spent so many years being told what to wear for particular occasions that he didn't fight it.

When he walked out of the bathroom, he could hear Rachel and Aaron arguing over shoes. "Young, but also contrite, Aaron. No one looks contrite in sandals."

Logan stepped out of his flip-flops, knowing they'd be going anyway. Eventually they settled on which shoes he should wear, and just a few minutes later Logan found himself back in the Aston Martin. His father sped across town toward the 90902 where the Neptune Homeless Shelter was located, safely tucked far away from the mansions of the 90909.

This whole thing was a farce. Logan knew it, and when the footage inevitably aired on whatever
news magazine shows picked it up, the whole world would know it, too. What Logan really wanted
to do was apologize to the men they had actually paid to fight. *Maybe I can track them down…*
*Veronica would help me do that,* he considered as his father pulled into the gas station where Logan
had made such an ass of himself on Tuesday.

The homeless Marine veteran was there again, busily cleaning a windshield. Logan ducked down in
his seat and tried to be as invisible as possible while Aaron filled up the gas. Why he had insisted on
taking the Aston Martin, Logan didn't understand. *Aren't we supposed to appear caring and
concerned? This fucking car is probably worth more than what gets donated to the shelter each
year,* Logan thought angrily.

Aaron's cell phone trilled, "Marty! Yeah, Rachel was great as always." He turned to inspect Logan
and nodded to himself. "I know I'm late, Marty. Well, making my ungrateful son look the part took
time. And this place is so far…" Aaron laughed loudly, "Can't argue with that; wouldn't want them
any closer to us, that's for sure. No. Never mind. Are the cameras ready? Good." Aaron ended the
call.

Aaron's comment made Logan cringe. If Logan needed proof that Aaron wasn't so much mad about
what he'd done rather than the fact that he'd been caught, Logan now had it. But he hadn't needed
proof.

"All right. Now this is how this is gonna work. They're gonna get a few shots of you volunteering at
the soup kitchen, then I'm gonna join you for an interview with the TV crews, you got it?"

"What do you want me to tell them?" Logan asked, taking the opportunity to make sure he did
everything that Aaron wanted him to do. Though this seemed pretty straightforward: Look sorry,
which Logan already was, so that was easy. And make Aaron look good, which Logan could have
done without, but what can you do?

"What do you think, Logan?" Aaron rolled his eyes. "That you're sorry. That you're bone-headed.
And that ya screwed up. I'll take care of the rest." Aaron's phone rang again.

"Vince! What's happening? Yeah, I got the script. I've seen better writing on cereal boxes," Aaron
laughed.

Logan cringed; Vince was Aaron's super creepy casting director buddy who used to enjoy watching
Trina and her friends much more closely than was necessary. And on top of that, all the movies the
guy brought Aaron were complete pieces of crap.

"Oh, big deal. The man hasn't made a watchable movie since the seventies. Are they gonna meet my
quote? Hot damn!" Aaron held the phone to his chest and gave Logan a big grin, the grin that meant
Aaron was genuinely happy.

"Son! How do you argue with eight figures?"

Logan nodded. *How indeed? Maybe by being more concerned with the state of your family, or that
of people in general, rather than with making some shit-tastic film with a budget that could feed a
Third World country.*

"Ya can't. Can't be done," Aaron giggled. Actually giggled. Logan felt nauseated. "Okay. Have 'em
draw up the contract."

"Hey," the homeless man from before caught Logan's attention. "It's Don King. Hey, you find some
sucker who's willing to make a bitch outta hiself for cash?"
Logan looked down, waiting for the guy to walk away. He then turned to look at his father as Aaron put on his sunglasses and got back in the car. *Yup, I think I did.*

"All right. You ready to do this?" Aaron pulled Logan out of his introspection.

"Yeah." *I was born ready to do this.*

While she waited for Wallace to join her in the quad for lunch, Veronica nervously read back over each text message that Logan had sent her that morning. Logan was currently at the soup kitchen, and she knew that she wouldn't hear from him for at least an hour, or most likely more like two. Looking over the texts helped to calm her somewhat. Each one had reassured her that things were going fine and updated her about where he was.

That morning at school had gone by painfully slowly. First, voting. She'd decided, after everything she'd seen and heard, that something was off with Wanda. Veronica would have to wait to see what came of the offer to provide ecstasy. If Weevil was right, Veronica would find herself the subject of a locker search at some point before the end of the day. Then on top of that, she was pretty sure that Wallace was avoiding her. She looked around the quad again and saw no sign of her BFF.

Veronica blew out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding; she set her phone down where she could easily see an incoming text and set her head down on the table.

Dick walked out onto the quad and looked for Veronica. He hoped to get an update on how things were going so far for Logan. After that video and the pictures had hit the internet, Dick knew Logan was in some serious shit. He also knew that the only other person who seemed to know or care was Ronnie.

He spotted her at her usual table with her head resting on her arms and no sign of Fennel. That was an unusual bit of luck. He took a seat across from Veronica.

"Wallace!" she exclaimed, her head popping up. "Oh, hi, Dick. Here to get in a few shots while Logan's not here to defend me?" Veronica frowned.

"No, Ronnie, I'm here to see how operation 'feed the homeless' is going."

She snorted, which caused Dick to smile. "So far, so good. He's there now. I'm guessing we'll get to watch it all over the news tonight. One of his texts said they were making him slouch so he wouldn't be taller than Aaron."

"Figures. I remember the first time someone pointed out that Logan was taller than Aaron. Must have been freshman year." Dick thought about it. "No, summer before we started high school. Logan couldn't surf for like two weeks."

He looked up at Veronica; her eyebrows were practically in her hairline. "So you *do* know?"

"Oh, come off it, Veronica. I've been his surf partner for years; you think I didn't know? Of course I knew. The ridiculous thing is that for some stupid reason Logan thinks I don't know. I mean, seriously? How could I not? I'm surprised it took you so long to figure it out," Dick said in full honesty.

"I didn't figure anything out. I almost walked in on it." Veronica's face was tight with tension. "If you've know for so long, why didn't you ever do anything?"
"Right…like what? You've known for what? About two weeks?" She nodded. "Have you come up with anything? I figured it out when we were like thirteen. And his mom…she lives in her head or a bottle. Mr. Echolls cheats on her constantly, and she does nothing. In fact, I'm pretty sure he's fucking my step-mommy." Dick saw Veronica cringe, "Ya, I know she hits on Logan, too; it's why he stopped crashing at my place."

"Yuck. What is wrong with her?" Veronica asked with a disgusted look on her face.

"She's a gold-digging bitch and my dad leaves her alone too much." Dick shrugged; he was just relieved that she didn't try to sleep with him. "Anyway, Mrs. Echolls clearly knows what Aaron does to Logan, and I've never seen her so much as lift a finger unless it's wrapped around a tumbler full of gin. So you tell me, Veronica. What should I have done?"

"Kept him away from Aaron," She replied.

"Well, it's been a lot harder since they banished you. You know how he gets. And I'll admit I make my fair share of bad decisions when it comes to things that would get him in trouble. You must have some serious pixie spy magic, because you're the only person I've ever seen him give in to on stuff like that. Anyway, I used to take him home with me before Dad married Sadie. Now I call someone to take him if I know his dad is in town—like on Tuesday."

"That's all great, Dick. But I've been thinking about the last few years and all those times Logan was sick or out of town…"

"Yeah, they were mostly bullshit. Think about this Ronnie: that was with me making an effort to keep him away from his dad and you keeping him from going off the deep end. I'm sure Lilly knew, though I can't say I ever saw her make any effort to prevent it."

Dick was thoughtful for a moment. Had Lilly ever tried to help Logan? Had she even cared enough? Dick shook his head in frustration. He looked at Veronica and saw matching frustration on her face.

"I don't think Lilly ever did a thing. I think she was too busy worrying about Lilly to fret about anyone else," Veronica said harshly.

That was one can of worms Dick wanted nothing to do with, so he simply nodded and waited.

Veronica sighed loudly, "Well, what are we going to do now that we both know the other knows?"

"What we've been doing: keep him out of the line of fire as much as possible. He'll be eighteen in just over a year. Hell, we'll all be eighteen within that time frame. Once he can leave that house, we get him out and keep him out. My trust will have been released by then, so I was planning on us buying a house on the beach together. Something with security to keep everyone out. I guess we could probably give you a pass." He winked at Veronica.

"Logan's trust doesn't release until he graduates," she said sadly.

"No problemo, I have plenty of money." Dick shrugged.

Veronica's head tilted to this side. "You're surprising…very surprising."

"You know I love him like a brother; why is any of this surprising?"

"I think I'd forgotten that you're capable of being more than just an asshole."
Dick laughed. "Don't tell anyone. I have a reputation to maintain."

Shortly after they arrived at the shelter, Logan was escorted back to the kitchen and introduced to the other volunteers for the day; a nice elderly couple named Frances and Estuardo gave him small smiles, and a black man, in his late twenties or maybe early thirties, who introduced himself as Noah. After being given an apron, Logan was left alone with the others.

"So, man. You think serving some food while there are some cameras makes up for what you did?" Noah asked.

Logan shook his head. "No, I don't think that."

"My brother is homeless. What you did—" Noah glared at Logan. "It makes me sick."

"It doesn't make me feel very good either," Logan replied quietly. Noah gave Logan an intense look and walked out of the kitchen.

"The thing about mistakes," Frances, who reminded Logan a bit of Mrs. Navarro, spoke, "is that you have a choice. You can learn from them and try to be better. Or not." She took her husband's hand and they walked out the same door Noah had.

Logan leaned back against the wall and took a few deep breaths. He was used to people hating him because they were jealous and wanted what he had. But Noah wasn't jealous, he was disgusted—just like all the people Logan would be serving today would be.

Logan stood up and looked around the room. He'd been so absorbed in his own discomfort and guilt that he hadn't really considered much beyond that. There were still a few pots on the stovetop along with some baskets that contained rolls. Logan looked through them all and found that the food barely looked edible. Then he looked around the small room. It was clean, but everything in it looked ancient and nothing matched. It was so different from any kitchen he'd been in; even Veronica's modest apartment was light-years ahead of this.

Aaron stuck his head through the door. "It's time. Get your ass out here. And remember what Rachel told you."

Logan nodded and walked out to the main dining room. He slouched his shoulders forward, and even though they instructed him on his facial expressions, it wasn't a problem. The longer Logan spent in this place, the more remorseful he felt. That part wouldn't require any acting.

Frances waved her hand and Logan took up the station to her right. "What do I do?" he asked her in a whisper.

"Serve them. Some may want to chat—others not. This is about them, so you give whatever they are willing to accept. Just watch us. Noah is especially good with everyone."

"Thank you," Logan replied softly.

Frances turned and looked up at him, a small smile crinkling her eyes. "You'll do fine."

Over the next thirty minutes, Logan served what he thought might be some kind of chicken patty to all sorts of different people. Young, old, friendly, aloof. The camera guy kept snapping shots of Logan, but he did his best to ignore him and focused on the task by emulating the others.

Frances had been right; Noah was really good with everyone. He seemed to know most of their
names, asked about personal things and inquired about people who were apparently absent.

When the food ran out, there were still more than a dozen people standing in line. Logan turned to Frances and Estuardo and asked, "What about them?"

"They’ll come back at dinner. They knew it was possible that there wouldn't be enough. You noticed the people with kids went first?" Logan nodded. "Unwritten rule. We usually run out, so the kids get to go first," Estuardo explained and then handed Logan a pan to carry back into the kitchen.

"So they just won't have lunch today?" Logan asked.

"Nope," Noah answered harshly. "You ever had to go without lunch, rich boy?"

"Yes," Logan said very quietly, remembering a weekend spent in a closet with only saltine crackers and two bottles of water. He set the pot down and went back to the dining hall. He had to get away from that guy. *I can't believe I just said that. He probably thinks I'm lying.*

"Mr. Echolls we're ready for you anytime." The producer said a few moments after Logan came back out of the kitchen.

"Excuse me!" Aaron said, taking his place in front of the cameras. "Uh, I just wanted to say that my father was not an educated man. He dropped out of school after the eighth grade so he could go to work in the new automotive plant…"

Logan had heard this story before. Actually he'd heard a few different versions of it. Logan remembered most vividly the one where said 'father' beat the shit out of Aaron, his mother and the two half siblings Aaron had. Though where they were now, or if they even existed, Logan had no idea.

Years of practice had taught Logan both how to pretend to be paying attention and how to pretend to be an adoring son. They were two skills that had served him well more often than not. But today felt different. Everything felt wrong on so many levels. Today was another day of Logan living 'life according to Ronnie'. Maybe that wasn't quite right, but the idea of disappointing her, Wallace, even Keith…

Aaron's hand thumped on Logan's chest, "But I promise each and every one of you, that this boy… this boy has a great heart."

Logan smiled adoringly at Aaron; he knew that what he was about to do would be painful, but it was going to be worth it. This was about more than fixing Aaron's reputation. Logan actually wanted to do something that helped someone, even if the cost was his own pain. There were so many things Logan regretted, and right now he couldn't fix most of them. He couldn't change what had happen to Veronica, he couldn't bring Lilly back from death, he couldn't save his mother from the alcohol and pills she was hiding behind. What he could do was make sure that until, he hoped, his eighteenth birthday, the Neptune Food Bank would have enough funds to feed everyone who came seeking food, everyone who was hungry.

"Um...I know now that—" Logan had been slouching as instructed, but now he stood up. This was no longer about Aaron; this was about Logan being the person he wanted to be. With the perfect posture his mother had taught him, shoulders back and eyes focused, he said: "I did something horrible, and I couldn't regret it more. It was wrong in so many ways. But most importantly, I didn't live up to the excellent examples I have in my life. I only hope that one day I can live up to the expectations of those that love me the most." Logan turned and embraced Aaron, closing his eyes. For a moment he imagined that he was embracing Jake Kane or maybe Keith Mars, men who over
the years had shown him genuine affection. "I love you," he said softly but made sure the cameras could see. He had to play his role.

Aaron pulled back first, surprise clear on his face. Logan's admission had been unexpected. Good.

"Okay, look, um…I know that he didn't want to make a big deal out of this, but I'm just so proud of him that I—I can't keep it a secret."

Logan turned away from the cameras and looked into Aaron's eyes. He used all the telepathic strength he possessed to let Aaron know he was about to fuck him over. Lynn had taught Logan from a very young age how to use subtle facial gestures to make a point, to express an emotion. And then he smiled his biggest, cheesiest, most Aaron-ish smile.

"Dad told me on the way over that he's donating half a million dollars to the Neptune Food Bank. Way to go, Dad!"

Mr. Rooks had finally finished his lecture on the trade practices of ancient Mesopotamia, which gave Veronica her chance to question Wallace. They were supposed to work with a partner, so she turned to him and under her breath asked, "Where were you at lunch today? I ended up sitting with Dick, and let me tell you that was an experience I don't want to repeat."

"Oh, um…I had stuff to do," Wallace answered nervously, not meeting Veronica's eyes.

"Seriously, Fennel. What is going on? Why are you acting all weird?"

"Last night…Ugh. Look V, my mom totally freaked—"

"Veronica Mars, Mr. Clemmons wants to see you," Mr. Rooks called from the front of the room.

Veronica growled in frustration but got up and went to the front of the room where Mr. Clemmons was waiting.

"Vice Principle Clemmons. To what do I owe this honor?"

"Come with me, Miss Mars." He directed Veronica to the door.

Veronica was fairly certain that this was going to be the locker search and they couldn't have picked a worse time.

"Veronica, the Sheriff's Department has asked me—" Clemmons stared.

"Wait, let me guess. You want to search my locker? Please tell me Deputy Lamb is here."

"Um…no, Sacks I think," he replied, confused.

"Bummer. I like making a fool of Lamb more. Oh well. You win some, you lose some."

"Whatever you say, Miss Mars." Veronica looked back and returned the small smile that was on Clemmons' face.

"Ah, Veronica Mars. I need to inspect your locker," Deputy Sacks said from his position waiting by her locker.

"I could just give you my locker combination, save us all a lot of trouble. You search and you search and yet I've never had anything worth your time." She sighed as she spun the combination. The lock
released and she stepped away.

Sacks dug through her locker and finally turned back to Veronica. "Nothing. I need to check your bag as well." Sacks held out his hand for her messenger bag.

Veronica smiled sweetly and handed it over. "It might go faster if you tell me what you're looking for."

"Drugs, Ms. Mars. Drugs." Clemmons shook his head, clearly as disbelieving of the thought that Veronica would have drugs as she was. If it weren't for the fact that she had set this up herself, she'd have been livid. Instead she winked at Clemmons. "Sorry to disappoint. No drugs here; I earned my D.A.R.E. graduation certificate. I'm really upset you didn't bring Buster. Backup and I miss him," Veronica said as Sacks pulled out her red and white-stripped hat and looked up at her in confusion. Veronica couldn't help the small laugh that bubbled out and just shrugged.

"There's nothing here," Sacks said, a mixture of relief and anxiety on his face.

"Nothing? I'll have you know there's a couple of suckers…" Sacks and Clemmons both glared at her; it took all of her self-control to keep a bland expression on her face. "...in the bag, if you want one."

Sacks slammed her locker and walked away, but Clemmons held out his hand. "What flavors you got?" he said in a rare moment of relaxed speech.

Veronica looked up at the Vice Principle. "Can I interest you in root beer or sour apple?"

"Sour Apple sounds lovely, Ms. Mars."

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Wallace sat nervously as he waited for sixth period to end. Veronica had been gone a long time and he still hadn't had a chance to explain. It was Friday, and if he didn't tell her before class let out, he wouldn't have the chance to speak with her again before Monday. He rubbed his eyes unhappily, still unable to comprehend the extreme sanctions that his mother had leveled on him.

"You be good now, Ms. Mars." Clemmons' voice drew Wallace's attention. Veronica was standing at the front of the room, smiling at the Vice Principal and waving around a small dum-dum sucker.

Wallace glanced at the clock and saw that the bell was about to ring. Crap! He had five minutes to explain to Veronica what had happened before he had to be out front of the school, where his mom would be waiting for him.

"Sorry about that, BFF. I had an appointment to disappoint the sheriff. So you were say—" and the bell rang. "My timing is just terrible today."

"Let's talk while we walk," Wallace offered.

"Nothing doing, Fennel. I've got a showdown at the O.K. Corral. But don't forget we have plans to go to the zoo this weekend. Dad and I are going to show you how 'zooing' is done." She pivoted and took off before Wallace even had a chance to open his mouth.

Wallace trudged to his locker and grabbed his books. There had to be a way for him to make the zoo trip. He'd been looking forward to it all week. He let out a slow breath. He knew his mother meant well, but keeping him from spending time with Logan and Veronica wasn't going to change anything. Wallace enjoyed the other guys on the team, but at the end of the day, they weren't Veronica.
"Wallace Fennel, my bitch," a familiar voice called. Wallace turned to see Weevil looking at him with an appraising expression, "I want to talk to you about something."

"I'll tell you what, Weevil. I'll make some time to talk to you. But I'm going to need something from you first."

The drive back home seemed unending. Aaron hadn't spoken a single word to Logan after the cameras quit rolling. Logan had silently gotten into the car and sat up tall. He knew what was coming, but it didn't matter because before they left, Aaron had written a vanity check to the soup kitchen and called Avi to have the money sent. Once Logan had confirmed that the transaction was complete, he knew that nothing would make him regret his decision. A beating from Aaron would never even come close to the reality that these people lived every day.

Logan didn't even bother waiting to be sent to get a belt. Why wait when it was inevitable? In fact, he briefly reveled in the amount of control he had. He would go pick a belt; he would do it proudly, knowing he had pushed Aaron into doing something completely worthwhile. No one could take that away from him.

He reached for the thick, smooth, black leather belt with a simple silver buckle. He'd learned early on that the smaller belts actually hurt more, something about distribution of the force—Thanks Mr. Woo —and luckily Aaron didn't seem to have a clue.

Logan felt his nerves start to waiver as he pushed the doors shut on Aaron's belts. It didn't matter how many times this had happened, it was never any less unpleasant. And if he was being honest, that was part of what drove him to get the belt without being asked. If he brought Aaron a belt, then hopefully that would be the worst of it. Aaron left to his own devices could be surprisingly creative.

Logan walked down the hall past where his mother sat, a crystal tumbler in her hand. He briefly noted the glass' condensation dripping down the side to stain her silk suit. Logan detoured, picked up a small throw and laid it across her lap. Two silent tears slid down her cheek as she looked up into his eyes.

"Avi called…"

Logan nodded. "No tears," he said, wiping them away before resuming his course to the study.

Aaron stood, his features drawn as if he regretted what he was about to do. Logan knew that it was an act. Aaron had lost control a few too many times, and his real emotions had shown; Logan remembered vividly the look on Aaron's face as he gleefully kicked Logan in the ribs, as he'd choked up on a snowboard and swung it at Logan's head, only missing because his mother has interfered. The Aaron that faced Logan now was the 'in control Aaron', doling out a well-deserved punishment. This was a breeze.

Logan held out the belt, pulled off his shirt and knelt down.

Veronica walked around the corner and found her target, Wanda. "I guess we're not going to that rave in the desert, but I do have a pretty good idea of where you can stick these." Veronica produced a small stack of 'Vote for Wanda' stickers.

"You don't understand," Wanda whined. Veronica's patience was wearing thin, and she needed to get to Logan's. She waved her hand for Wanda to continue. "I got busted last year for possession. This was the only way that they would keep it off my record. I'd never get into Williams with a drug
charge on my file."

"So you were willing to wreck my future to save your own. That's what you get for trying to open up to someone Veronica...an attempted stabbing in the back. Veronica pivoted and started for the door; she'd had enough and she had important things to do.

"Veronica! This wasn't just about getting into college. If I'd won I would have done what I promised. I would have changed the way things work around here."

Veronica shook her head; things would never change around here. Which one of them was Wanda trying to convince? Without a backwards glance, Veronica headed for her locker.

As she approached her locker, a familiar and unwelcome form came into view. I cannot catch a break today—oh, who am I kidding? I haven't caught a break in over a year.

Just as Veronica was considering forgoing grabbing any other books, Duncan turned to face her. "Veronica, just who I was looking for," Duncan called, his big hail-fellow-well-met smile on his face. It was a smile that used to make Veronica weak in the knees, but now it just made her angry.

"Obviously, since you're leaning against my locker. What is it Duncan? I'm kind of on a tight schedule here."

"I don't think so Duncan." She looked down at her watch. "I've really got to go." Veronica glanced around to see if any of her usual Duncan buffers were nearby, but she was out of luck. This conversation needed to end fast because the halls were clearing out and being alone, even just in the NHS halls, with Duncan was not on her to-do list for the day.

"Oh, um...okay, well I thought you might want to come take the election photos at the student council meeting at 3:30." He looked giddy as he bopped up and down on the balls of his feet.

"But you're the photographer for the paper." His voice had taken on an edge that hadn't been present moments before.

"She's not as good as you." Duncan reached for her.

"I don't really care, I need to go." Veronica tried again to step away from Duncan but he moved with her to block her path again. "Move!"

"This is about Logan!" Duncan growled.

"Yes, it is. Now move." Duncan stood his ground. Veronica was getting ready to pull out her Taser when a heavy hand landed on her shoulder.

"Everything okay here, Ronnie?" Dick asked.

"Of course, I was just leaving to go check on Logan. Maybe you could walk me to my car? I wanted to ask you about a few things." Veronica felt herself relax. Must check for pigs flying when I get outside, she thought as Dick maneuvered himself between her and Duncan.

Veronica glanced back at Duncan; his face was red and blotchy. If this were a cartoon, steam would have been coming out of his ears. Veronica picked up her pace, wanting to put as much distance
"Dude, what was that all about with DK? Was he not letting you leave?" Dick asked, his voice low.

"He just wanted me to take the election photos at student council," Veronica answered honestly, but from the look on Dick's face, he wasn't buying it.

"There's something going on there. Remember, I'm not as stupid as I act, Ronnie," Dick said, pushing the door open to the parking lot.

"Not your problem, Dick. Let's focus on one thing at a time. I need to get to Logan's. As it is, I'm already much later than I had hoped," Veronica said, checking her watch again. How did I lose twenty minutes? she sighed.

"Whatever, Ronnie. Text me later about Logan."

Veronica got into the Le Baron under Dick's watchful eye. She glanced up at the sky. Nope, no pigs flying...maybe I'm dreaming. She gave Dick a short wave and saw him take off for his truck, where Cassidy stood waiting for him. Cassidy's eyes were narrowed with arms crossed until he made eye contact with Veronica. His scowl bloomed into a shy smile, so she returned it. She gave him a finger wave from the steering wheel before she pulled out of the parking lot and drove as fast as she could to the Echolls house.

Veronica pulled over a block up from the estate and dug the phone out of her bag. She had no new messages, which was not a good sign. Do I pull in like it's totally normal, or do I sneak in? she debated. Then, the answer presented itself in the form of Mrs. Navarro's Oldsmobile Eighty-Eight pulling out of the staff entrance. Waiting a minute to make sure no one else was going to pull out, Veronica slowly drove up the staff entrance and parked with her car turned for a quick departure. It wasn't a difficult task because all the staff's vehicles were gone, something almost unheard of on a Friday at 3:30. A chill ran up Veronica's spine; this was not good.

This entrance had a short path that lead to a staff entry off of the kitchen. Veronica jogged up the path and quietly let herself into the mudroom, though she suspected the room rarely saw such a thing. She slipped off her shoes and left them at the door, walking as silently as possible through the kitchen and family room before coming to the more formal rooms in the house. Veronica heard a loud thwack as she entered the sitting area. Her eyes began to burn with tears and fury, just as they had two weeks before.

The tinkle of ice cubes caught her attention. "Don't go down the hall, Veronica." Lynn's soft voice came from behind Veronica.

Veronica whipped around, happy to have someone to direct her anger at, someone who deserved the vitriol that was dancing on the tip of her tongue. Her ire faded immediately at the sight of Lynn's broken face. She had a tumbler of liquor in one hand and a tissue in the other. "He wouldn't want you to see," she whispered.

Veronica approached the small sofa that Lynn was sitting on, took the drink out of her hand and set it on the coffee table. Then she gathered Lynn's hands in hers, "I've already seen. How can you just sit here and listen?"

Tears slipped down Lynn's firm cheeks and settled in the barely visible frown lines at her mouth before she wiped them away. "What else can I do?"

"Anything else," Veronica hissed, keeping her voice low. "He needs you. You could have told my
"What could he have done? Aaron has…nevermind. There is nothing your dad can do, nothing I can
do, nothing any of us can do. Logan needs to stop antagonizing him." Lynn pulled her hand free of
Veronica's grasp, reached for her glass and knocked back the rest of its contents. She stood, the
throw across her lap falling to the floor, and walked to a small wet bar and refreshed her drink. "Why
don't you go wait in the pool house…I'll send Logan out when Aaron's done."

Veronica picked up the throw and placed it on the sofa, defeat flooding her senses. She nodded to
Lynn stood, and walked back through the kitchen and out onto the patio, retrieving her shoes on the
way. What does Aaron have? Is it something I can get my hands on? Finally deciding that what she
really needed was some legal advice as she entered the pool house.

She settled herself on the couch, then decided to go into the bathroom and look for first aid supplies.
Once that was done, she paced around the room a few times. She envisioned all the terrible things
Aaron had done and still could do. And then she concentrated on what she wanted to do to him. She
imagined setting the Aaron Echolls curtains on fire, imagined setting Aaron on fire; her mind spun in
circles.

"You're lucky that stunt you pulled made me look good. Don't think I didn't notice you grabbed an
easy one this time." Aaron threw the belt down at Logan's feet.

"Yes, sir." Please don't let Veronica be here, please don't let Veronica be here. With shaky legs,
Logan stumbled out of the study, the belt held loosely in his stiff fingers.

Logan slowly made his way to the sitting room where his mother had been; she sat in the same place,
staring out the window. "Mom?"

"Give it here." She held out her hand and Logan passed her the belt. "Veronica is in the pool house,
"she said, barely louder than a whisper, then stood and walked away.

Logan had hoped she wouldn't come, but he should have known better. He should have texted her
before getting the belt. That would have been the smart thing to do.

"You never think. How could you be so stupid?" Thwak.

His first destination was the large mirror that stood in the hall between the sitting area and the
kitchen. Logan carefully twisted his torso and checked the damage. Not terrible, he thought, seeing
the angry red welts but no blood. A quick detour to the freezer for the full back sized ice pack and
he'd be ready to face Veronica.

The walk to the pool house felt like it took an hour with the small steps Logan had to take to keep his
balance. But he knew in a few hours, and definitely by the next day, he'd be able to act more or less
normal. Sure it would still hurt like a bitch, but that he could hide. It wasn't like the last time, which
he was still healing from to some extent.

Logan pushed open the sliding glass door and found Veronica pacing while mumbling to
herself. God she's adorable, he smiled. She stared at him, her mouth hanging open.

"Why Logan? What happened? Is this for the video?"

"Nope," he popped the 'P'. "This I earned for a good cause."

"No one deserves this."
"Sure, but I earned it. On camera I told them that Dad was donating half a million dollars to the Neptune Food Bank," Logan explained, walking into the bedroom.

"Oh, Logan. Why did you do that? You had to know what he would do."

"I knew. And it was worth it. On the drive there, he accepted a job that he's going to get 'his quote' for. Do you know how much that is?" Veronica shook her head. "Around twenty-five million." Veronica's mouth fell open. "Exactly. He's done two movies in the last twelve months; he has that one with Connor starting after Thanksgiving. You do the math." Logan handed her the ice pack and sprawled out on the bed.

"How much is your family worth?" she asked.

"Not a clue." Logan hissed at the shock of the cold on his hot skin, before continuing. "If I had to guess, though, a lot of the money gets spent, and maybe some of it has been moved offshore." He shrugged. "Last I was told, my trust was worth around fifty million. So believe me, half a million is nothing to him. But for those people..." He sat up and winced at the pain, adjusting the ice pack. "We ran out of food to feed them today. I was wearing a $200 t-shirt with $300 pants, not to mention the hideous shoes they made me wear that probably cost more than a grand. That would have fed all those people for a couple of days. I felt like the world's biggest asshole. And there were all these volunteers. That's how they spend their free time, making food and helping these people. And there I was, standing like a complete douche posing for the camera with my dad.

"When we ran out of food something in me just kind of snapped. And I couldn't stop myself. Honestly, I think it's the only worthwhile thing I've ever done."

He twisted to look at Veronica, who had tears in her eyes. She leaned down and kissed him on the forehead. "That was a great thing you did, you idiot. Now let me help you get cleaned up and let's get you out of here. You're spending the weekend with me."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Huge thanks to my wonderful betas Bondopoulos and Marshmallowtasha! And thank you to everyone reading :) For those of you reading my other story – don't worry I haven't forgotten it, I'm just trying to get it finished so I can post through to the end with less time between chapters.

As for what's next here, we're headed into uncharted territory. As most of you know RT and the writers didn't worry too much about timelines. There is a two-week block of time between Return of the Kane and The Girl Next Door, which includes Halloween. So get ready for costumes, parties, and blackmail–oh my!
It's a new dawn

Chapter Notes

It's been a while so here's a quick recap!

We pick up Friday night after Logan's announcement that Aaron would be donating $500k to the Neptune Food Bank. The previous week included Duncan running for class president, the scandal with Wanda Varner, the bum fights, and a major crash and burn for Wallace with his mother over who he's friends with. Of note was Logan finding out that Veronica is investigating Lilly's murder and deciding to hear her out (after freaking out and being an ass of course!). Veronica is very confused about how she feels in light of Logan's OPJ relapse. Duncan is still avoiding Cassidy, somewhat successfully. And we know that Dick is aware of Logan's abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Logan's chest rose and fell with a soft wheeze. His face was soft and relaxed in sleep, no bruises marring his handsome, but still boyish, features. Veronica could almost imagine she was seeing a glimpse of the past—nights of weak wine coolers and bad movies, popcorn thrown at the TV and laughter.

The memories were so thick she thought she might choke on them.

They had all been so happy. She had known it then, but now, in retrospect, she wasn't so sure. A memory came to mind from before she and Duncan had dated—before Lilly and Logan had dated—of watching '10 Things I Hate About You'. The whole time Logan had quoted the Taming of the Shrew and thoroughly pissed off Lilly, all the while delighting Veronica.

Flashback Veronica

Logan weaved and spun his way around the furniture in the Kane's den, a large bowl of popcorn balanced precariously on one hand.

"Knock it off, Logan. Can't you ever just walk into a room and sit down?" Lilly said, rolling her eyes. It didn't seem to matter what Logan did, Lilly always found something to be irritated with him about. It usually ended with Lilly dragging Veronica up to her room and away from the boys.

"Puh-lease, Lilly! You know I can't. Besides, Veronica thinks I'm funny. And I live to entertain. If it happens to annoy you, well, winner winner chicken dinner," he said, squeezing in between Veronica and Lilly on the couch.

Veronica reached into the bowl and took a handful of popcorn. She'd never tell her friend, but she totally enjoyed it when Logan riled Lilly up. "Okay, that's enough. We have a movie to watch," Veronica said as she hit 'play' on the remote.

Logan's arm dropped onto her shoulders. "This is a scary movie, Ronnie. I'll protect you."

"We're watching '10 Things I Hate About You!' It's a teen romantic comedy, Logan." Veronica elbowed him in the ribs lightly.
"Exactly. Truly terrifying. First kisses, rocker-girl angst, and," his body trembled where it touched her, "Andrew Keegan!"

"I think he's hot," Lilly said from the far side of the couch where she'd scooted after Logan had sat down.

"He's an asshat. And he smells bad," Logan said. Then he turned more to Veronica and whispered in her ear, "Totally Lilly's type."

Veronica couldn't contain the giggle that bubbled up her throat and nodded in agreement.

"Seriously, Veronica, stop encouraging him. God, Logan, could you be more annoying?"

A wide smile spread across Logan's lips. "You have no idea, Lilly. 'If I be waspish, best beware of my sting.'"

Veronica tapped Logan on the shoulder and shook her head when he turned to meet her eyes. "I want to hang out, and she'll want to leave if you bug her too much."

Logan smiled broadly. "Anything for you, Ronnie."

End Flashback

Logan had been so much fun—all silly quips and dramatic gestures. Veronica wracked her memory for Duncan, but all she could conjure up was him staring at her and Logan blankly, clearly not understanding their fun.

What happened to Duncan? How did I ever think of him as my prince charming?

Veronica brushed a few errant hairs off Logan's forehead; his skin was warm and she worried again about how many painkillers he'd taken. He'd insisted that, without alcohol, it wouldn't be like last time but that it would make it so that he would barely notice the pain the next day. Veronica was less than reassured, but what could she do? He'd already taken the pills.

She continued studying him. Her anger about everything the past week wasn't gone, but seeing him look so soft and innocent really melted her marshmallow core. Years of friendship and closeness continued to override her need to escape—to run. And maybe for another night she could just let things be like they used to. To let herself take the comfort that being near Logan offered. The familiar sound of his breathing, the feel of his larger than life presence, and the dream of the missing piece of the puzzle, the wicked laugh, the strong but soft arms, and exuberance that was missing from Veronica's life.

She exchanged her jeans and top for soft flannel pajamas—much more conservative than the boxers and wife beater Logan was currently wearing—and curled up next to him, letting his scent remind her of nights lost to their youth and nights gained since he'd come back into her life, and drifted off to sleep.

Wallace rolled out of bed with the rising sun on Saturday morning, part of his coach's new training regiment. He stumbled toward the kitchen, seeking out a banana and some oatmeal before his run. It wasn't his favorite breakfast by a long shot, but he had to admit that it seemed to do the trick before a run. While putting together his breakfast he realized no one else was up, which surprised Wallace; it wasn't unusual for Darrel to be up watching Saturday morning cartoons by now.

Dropping down on to the couch with his bowl of oatmeal and the banana now sliced up and mixed
into it, Wallace turned on the TV. The lack of Saturday morning cartoons or the rushing about of his mother stood out. Wallace could admit his company may not have been up to his usual pleasant standards, but it was not a good sign if even Darrel was avoiding him...

Wallace flipped through the channels and landed on one of those morning shows announcing their guest—none other than the superstar family man, Aaron Echolls. Normally Wallace would have channel surfed until he found something like Scooby Doo, but after everything that had happened the previous week—not to mention having met the man in person—Wallace found himself intrigued.

"So, Aaron, your family's had a rough week..." the host led.

"Well, Kelly, being a parent isn't easy, as you well know. And when our children are subjected to such scrutiny, every little failure is a big deal," Aaron said, the picture of concern.

"That's certainly the truth," Regis said, shaking his head. "We actually have a clip of your son doing some community service in your hometown."

The screen changed to show Logan wearing an apron standing next to Aaron. He was slumped down and looked miserable throughout most of the clip, until the end when it looked like something had taken over Logan. He stood tall and announced a huge donation to the food bank. Wallace wished his mom had been up to see that clip of Logan.

Wallace clicked the TV off and quickly rinsed his bowl in the sink before heading out the door. At first he'd really disliked these morning runs. His past coaches hadn't made them do so much independent training, but a few weeks of regular running and some weight lifting with the team had Wallace convinced it was worthwhile. The ladies are gonna swoon when they getta look at me in my uniform, killin' it on the court. Wallace smiled to himself.

His good mood was short circuited by the fact that his cheering section wouldn't include Veronica if his mom kept up this new short leash she had him on. Wallace picked up his pace while he thought about the previous afternoon and the plans he'd made with Weevil. In fact, it wouldn't be too much longer and he'd arrive at the place where they'd decided to meet.

Wallace jogged up to an auto repair shop that sat at the border between his neighborhood and Veronica's. It wasn't the bad part of town, but it wasn't nice either. As promised, the side door was open.

"My bitch!" Weevil's voice called from under a car.

"Compadre." Wallace kicked Weevil's leg as he rolled into view. "So here I am, as summoned. What is it you want from me, Weevil?"

"You had a little quid pro quo in mind, yeah? V rubbing off on you?" Weevil winked.

"Something like that." Wallace smirked at Weevil, implying there was something physical or romantic between Wallace and Veronica. Not that she wasn't attractive, in that scary, kick-your-ass kind of way, but despite finding her physically attractive, there were too many things below the surface that kept Wallace from considering anything beyond friendship. He wanted a fun high school level romantic relationship, and there was something fatalistic about the vibes Veronica put out.

Weevil laughed and shook his head. "Yeah, I get that. So here's the thing. Lilly—you know Veronica's Lilly?" Wallace nodded. "Lilly and me used to be...um...friends of a sort. And she'd have these bruises after being with Echolls. I saw bruises like them on V last week when she was working the piñata case. I want you to help me keep an eye on her and make sure Echolls doesn't hurt her like
he hurt Lilly."

Wallace was certain that was the most he'd ever heard Weevil speak. He snorted. "You really think Logan would hurt Veronica? She'd kick his ass into next week."

"I don't care what you think, Wally, just do it; keep an eye on her. And you tell me if Logan does anything to her." Weevil paused for a moment to wipe grease off his hands with a rag from his pocket. "Now that that's over, what can Weevil do for you?"

"You can help me set up a cover with my mother." Wallace smiled.

"A cover? Like a car cover?"

"No, like a friend cover. I'm not allowed to hang out with Veronica or Logan right now. So if you want me to keep up my end of our little agreement, I need you to set me up with a friend my mom will like."

Weevil sat and started twisting his earring. "A friend, huh?"

"Yeah, but you know, a fake one..."

A slow smile curled Weevil's lips. "I have just the person. Norman, total Boy Scout. Your mama's gonna love him."

Veronica woke to a heavy weight across her chest; she pulled in a ragged breath and looked around the room frantically. She calmed when she realized it was her own room, but someone was on top of her and she couldn't move. She took another breath, trying to get a handle on what was happening when the weight shifted and Logan's face came into view. His eyelids fluttered.

"S'okay. Just me. Won't let 'em hurt you," he mumbled sleepily and held her tighter, his head snuggling back into her chest.

Veronica took a few shallow breaths. This was all getting to be too much. The nostalgia of being close to Logan, which had felt warm and comforting last night now grated on her psyche. She could see parts of her old self hovering closer to the surface than they had since Lilly had died. But rather than being happy to see flashes of her old self, it made her feel vulnerable—weak. Like that girl who accepted a drink at a party and got drugged and raped. It was a part of herself that she wasn't sure she wanted back.

She carefully wiggled out from under Logan and headed into her bathroom to get dressed. Sending Logan away wasn't really an option, but she needed some space—some distance—before she talked to him.

Logan woke with a start, a strange sensation bringing his hand to his face, which was wet. Still hurting, but mostly just confused, Logan rolled over to find himself face-to-face with Backup. This had to be one of the better wake up calls Logan had had in a while.

"Mornin', boy," he laughed, carefully sitting up on Veronica's bed so he could better pet Backup.

Logan glanced around the room; no sign of Veronica, but the clock said it was a little after 9:00 a.m. Maybe she slept in the living room? But that wasn't right. He definitely remembered waking up in the middle of the night to her soft snuffles on his shoulder. Giving Backup a final pat on the head, Logan wandered into the kitchen to start making some coffee since he was familiar with the process now.
On the counter he found a note:

Logan,

Went to get breakfast. Take Backup out when you wake up.

— V

Logan smiled and pictured her picking up donuts for them, then turned his attention to finding Backup's leash. It was a short walk down to the beach from Veronica's apartment and the ocean was calling Logan's name, even if was only to walk along it. Leash found, he quickly attached it to Backup's collar and rushed out the door.

The sand was cool on Logan's bare feet, but it felt good, like a steady reminder that he was here and this was real. The previous evening after Veronica had checked him over to her satisfaction, Logan had slipped back into the house only to practically run straight into Aaron.

"See you later, Son. I'm headed to New York. Your 'good deed' got me invited onto Regis and Kelly."

Aaron had been beaming. Only in his house could something like that happen. One minute getting beaten with a belt, the next getting a 'see you later'. But that worked better for Logan, anyway. Aaron was in New York, and, according to his mother, wouldn't be back until the weekend for the Casablancas' big Halloween party.

Logan took in a deep breath of sea air and wished he had his board with him. Maybe I can talk Veronica into surfing later today, he thought idly as he led Backup to the stairs to go back to the apartment.

At the top of the stairs a bear wrapped his arms around Logan and squeezed. Logan shrieked, pain billowing out from his back in waves that would have brought him to his knees if the vice-like arms weren't holding him upright. A deep growl preceded Logan's release and subsequent collapse onto the sidewalk.

"Fuck, man! Get control of Ronnie's crazy mutt!" Dick's voice boomed.

"Backup, chill!" Logan said, using the command he'd heard Veronica use. Backup moved to his side, shoulder-to-shoulder in solidarity, or at least that's what Logan liked to believe.

"Duuude!"

"Hey, man. Um...I'm a little...uh..." Logan struggled to come up with an explanation for why he was in a puddle of pain on the sidewalk.

"Ronnie promised she'd let me know what happened. I guess I don't have to guess after that reaction," Dick said, blowing his shaggy hair out of his eyes.

Logan looked up at his long time surfing companion and it was obvious that Dick knew. "How long?"

"Almost as long as I've known you. Can I help you up without Cujo attacking me?"

Logan stroked Backup's head. "Easy, boy. He's going to help me up." Backup lay down, but Logan noticed that he kept his eyes locked on Dick as he helped Logan up. Securely back on his feet, Logan brushed off his shorts and started walking toward Veronica's apartment again. "Come on,
Veronica's bringing breakfast. If you're lucky, she'll share."

"Nah. I'm not so sure that's a good idea. Rons and I are getting along-ish; don't wanna mess with a good thang, you know? I've gotta go track down Beaver anyway—maybe catch a few waves."

"Oh, okay. I guess text me later or something. Maybe Halo?"

"For sure," Dick said, jogging down the stairs toward the beach.

"Well, that was strange," Logan said, patting Backup on the head. "Thanks for having my back, boy. Means a lot." Logan started walking back toward the apartment and pulled his cellphone out of his pocket. Finding it undamaged after his fall onto the sidewalk, he pulled up Casey's contact info and finally made a decision.

Casey's phone pinged from his nightstand.

**To Casey Gant from Logan Echolls, 9:07am:**
Plan is a go, b careful what u say

**To Logan Echolls from Casey Gant, 9:08am:**
On it – round 1 today

Casey had been anxiously awaiting Logan's go-ahead to start trying to find out who all ended up with drugs at Shelly's party last year. They had all behaved badly that night and it had gotten ugly, but, if their suspicions were correct, there was someone in their group who wasn't what they seemed. And Casey was not okay with that. Being a jackass was one thing, but allowing a rapist to move among them was unacceptable. He worried that Veronica might not be the only victim.

He considered his mental list of people to talk to: Dick, Luke, Sean, Enbom, and Shelly. Seemed like a good place to start, and maybe it would snowball from there.

Casey rolled out of bed and was heading into his bathroom when his phone began ringing with the hospital's ringtone. He lunged for his phone and answered in a panic. "This is Casey. Is my grandmother okay?"

There were a dozen donuts sitting in the passenger seat of Veronica's car, but she was walking down the beach aimlessly. It had been more than an hour since she'd practically run out of the apartment, but she still wasn't ready to go back. The clash of her emotions had her ready to break down in tears, rage at the universe, or go into full-on cleaning mode. And until she knew which it was going to be, there was no way she was going to allow herself to be in the same room as Logan. He was far too perceptive, and she'd given him too much of herself already.

Rationally, Veronica knew she should keep more distance between herself and Logan. She considered Wallace's advice from two weeks prior—that she stay away from Logan. But that was easier said than done. As soon as she was sharing space with him, all of her resolve evaporated. It did two weeks ago, and it was still happening every time she decided to try to put walls back up. The obvious thing to do would be to stop spending time with him. *Are you ready to do that, Veronica? Cut him out? Go back to sitting at your table alone?*

The real answer was that she wouldn't be alone. Wallace had brought friendship back into her life, even if it was very different from when she'd been part of a popular foursome. But she'd never have that life again, and in moments like this, she could acknowledge that even when she'd had Lilly,
Logan, and Duncan, what they had shared didn't actually align with her memories. Lilly hadn't been a best friend who was there for Veronica no matter what. Duncan hadn't been a perfect boyfriend. And Logan was a lot of things, but a totally platonic friend was a stretch if she were really honest with herself. Looking back, many of their interactions over the years had had some serious undertones. And all that was before you even considered their home lives.

Veronica walked closer to the water and let the cool spray wash over her bare feet. She wanted to run—to leave—but Logan needed her, and that's what it really came down to. She was furious with him for plenty of things, but since finding out about Aaron...

"Veronica!" The nasally voice of Cassidy Casablancas drew her attention.

"Beav—Cassidy. How's it going?" Veronica forced her lips into a smile.

"Oh, fine. I'm really glad I ran into you, Veronica. Can we talk?"

At Backup's excited bark Logan turned and saw Veronica making her way up the stairs from the beach. Logan put his phone back in his pocket and led Backup toward the apartment at a slow pace to allow her to catch up with them.

"Hey, boy! Did you miss me?"

So much. Logan turned and smiled at Veronica as she approached. She'd been tired and stressed but the tight smile and her hunched shoulders hinted more to emotional and physical exhaustion.

"We both did. Are you okay?" Logan slipped his arm across her back in a brief one-armed hug.

"Of course, just didn't sleep very well. Not all of us were doped up on pain...killers," she winced and looked away. "Sorry."

"S'okay." Logan shrugged. He'd slept pretty well, all things considered.

"Anyway...I picked up breakfast; let's go eat."

"Yeah. Okay. I'm pretty hungry," Logan said, deciding to let it go for now. He'd already texted Casey, and maybe after some food Veronica would come around.

On the walk back to the apartment Veronica stopped to grab a large bakery box out of her car. Fresh donuts...Logan could smell the sugary goodness on the air as Veronica stepped aside to let him open the door to the apartment.

Once they were settled back in debating about which donuts were whose, Logan started to consider asking Veronica why she had gone down to the beach. He was afraid he wouldn't like the answer. He shook his head, trying to dispel the thought; it wouldn't do him any good. If she was mad at him, which she surely was, at least she wasn't so mad that she'd kicked him out of her place. No, instead she'd come back with donuts. He took a deep breath.

"I took Backup for a walk down the beach. I didn't see you, but you came up the stairs," he stated, hoping she would give him more information if he didn't ask questions.

"Oh. Well." She twisted a lock of her bangs around her finger, her discomfort evident. "Just wanted to clear my head a little. The last few days..."

"Yeah, they've been...um, rough," Logan said, taking a bite of a large apple fritter.
'Logan?'

'Hmm?'

'Do you think we could just not talk about any of it for a while? Maybe just watch movies and pretend to be normal for a couple of hours.' Veronica yawned, stretching her arms above her head, revealing a strip of pale stomach.

'I think that sounds like a good idea. I'd offer to take you out to a movie, but I don't think having our picture taken by paps would feel very normal.'

'Not so much, no.' She disappeared into her bedroom and emerged a few minutes later dressed in sweats and one of Logan's sweatshirts. She dropped onto the couch next to Backup.

Logan slowly made his way over to them, debating taking the chair or stretching out on the couch and using Veronica as a pillow. When she lifted the blanket she'd pulled off the back of the couch and held it up Logan didn't hesitate and quickly laid out, resting his head in her lap.

Veronica clicked through the channels and stopped at Matt Damon and Ben Affleck sitting at an airport. Her hand started combing through his hair, and as Alan Rickman displayed his ken doll deficit, Logan drifted off to sleep.

Rebecca walked out onto the small patio of her condo, coffee and paper in hand. It was her usual routine for a Saturday morning, though she did wish Keith were there to enjoy it with her. Things were mostly going well between them, and he'd even listened to her about what was going on with Logan and Veronica...a little.

Two nights previous, Rebecca had carefully probed to see if Keith had seen the photos of Logan and Veronica from the bum fights. *Those poor kids really can't catch a break.* He hadn't, and while his initial reaction had involved wanting to track down Logan and teach him a lesson, Keith had calmed down some before he'd gotten the call about a bail jumper.

She took a long sip of her coffee and opened the paper, a photo of Logan immediately catching her eye. He'd been kept out of school the previous day—something the Echollses did frequently. There he was in smudged black and white, serving food at the local homeless shelter. In a second photo he stood next to Aaron Echolls with a wide smile on his face. Rebecca stared at the image. The grainy texture of the newspaper image didn't reveal much, though for the second time, she felt as if there were more going on beneath the surface than her colleagues insisted. She'd seen Logan with Veronica during the last few weeks; he wasn't just a spoiled bully. He was grieving, possibly for the first time since Lilly Kane's death. And while acting out wasn't unusual for Logan this past year, he seemed to be curbing it now that Veronica was back in his life. The bum fights were a surprise, Veronica caring for him not as much.

Rebecca wished, not for the first time, that any of those close to Lilly Kane would open up to her. Sadly, it didn't seem meant to be. The closest she'd gotten was Weevil, who'd shared a fair bit about his feelings for Lilly. But it was painfully obvious that Lilly had very much compartmentalized her life. She'd had her very public on and off again relationship with Logan, her best friend in Veronica, and never far away was Duncan. But Weevil...he clearly wasn't someone Lilly intended to include in her public life.

**Flashback**

'Lilly, I'm going to need more than that you 'don't want to be in that section of PE anymore'. Why do
you want me to upend your whole schedule? Give me a good reason and I'll help make it happen.” Rebecca had become used to the whims of Neptune High's more affluent students, but she wasn't going to just do what they wanted without reason.

Lilly leaned back in the chair and seemed to appraise the situation. "Ms. James, you're pretty, you know? I bet you've had your fair share of issues with men who couldn't take a hint, amiright?" Lilly's eyes glittered with excitement.

Rebecca held in a laugh, not wanting to agree with Lilly, but also hoping to make some sort of connection. She decided to open up a little. "I've had my issues."

Lilly smiled brightly for a moment, then nodded, a more serious expression settling over her features. "Well, there is a certain boy in my PE class who's causing problems. We had a thing—" Lilly waved her hand through the air "—and now it's over and he just doesn't seem to get it."

"I take it you aren't talking about Logan Echolls?"

Lilly smirked and shook her head.

"Okay. Well, what's going on?"

Lilly reached down into her bag and pulled out a letter. "He left this in my locker yesterday. It's creepy and I'm over it. Can you just get me out of that PE class? Maybe I can use pep squad for credit or something?"

Lilly held out the letter and Rebecca accepted it, unfolding it and giving it a quick read.

You tore my heart out.

You can act like what we had together meant nothing to you,

but you can't stop me from loving you.

For the rest of your life, wherever you go,

I'll always be there,

just out of sight,

in the shadows.

Creepy was maybe an overstatement; it was certainly melodramatic like only high schoolers were capable of, but either way it fit the bill for harassment and more than qualified, in Rebecca's mind, as a reason to let Lilly transfer classes. She pulled up Lilly's class schedule and considered alternatives to PE. There was an open space in Theater, and Lilly was certainly dramatic enough.

"Would you be willing to transfer into Theater?"

Lilly tilted her head and seemed to come to a decision. "Yeah. I think Theater could work out very nicely."

END FLASHBACK

It had been the last direct interaction Rebecca had had with Lilly Kane. At the time she'd wondered if Weevil were responsible for Lilly's murder and had immediately gone to Keith, but Weevil'd had an ironclad alibi.
Rebecca drank the last of her coffee and started considering how she was going to spend her day.

Their quiet day together had been nice. A few movies, naps, and a lot of snacking with very minimal conversation had been just what Logan needed. It had given him a lot of time to think about what he wanted to do next.

Logan looked out at Veronica and Backup splashing in the foaming waves as the surf swept up the shore. So much had happened in the last three weeks, and he could hardly believe it had only been two weeks since he'd found Veronica skinny-dipping during homecoming. *Two weeks.* She had been so beautiful and fierce that night.

A chill ran up Logan's spine. There weren't any open wounds this time, but he was still sore and feeling some hesitancy about his actions the last few days and the decision they had brought him too. The food bank would be getting its large donation from Aaron Echolls, and if Logan went through with his plan, they'd be getting a new volunteer.

Logan got up and made his way to Veronica and Backup. He grabbed Backup's ball and threw it far down the beach, sending the dog happily scurrying after it. Logan took advantage of the moment to grab Veronica around the waist and spin her.

"What was that for?" she asked, her cheeks pink and eyes sparkling.

"You looked like you needed a twirl." Logan's back stung from the movement but Veronica's smile made it worthwhile.

"I'd forgotten all the silly Logan-isms. Twirls and spins." Veronica's eyes closed like she was remembering.

"Don't forget the puns and innuendo. Those are important facets of my personality as well." He reached down for her hand and pulled her back to where their beach blanket was set out just as Backup returned. Logan offered to throw the ball again, but Backup collapsed onto the blanket instead.

"Silly boy. Did you wear yourself out?" Veronica rubbed Backup's side for a few seconds before turning back to Logan. "You look like you've got something on your mind."

"I do. So you know how bad I feel about the bum fights, right?" he asked, tugging at his hair, unable to stop the nervous gesture. He'd spoken with her about it the night before, but they hadn't really gotten into it all.

"Yes." She raised an eyebrow at him skeptically.

"So, I do know that it was a really shitty thing to do and I know that an afternoon serving food is nothing. And while I do feel good about the money, I know that doesn't absolve me of what I did either." Logan played with the sleeves of his shirt, afraid to look up at Veronica.

"What do you want to do about it then?" she asked, her voice soft.

"I want to find the guys we had fight. I want to make sure they're okay. I'm not really sure what the right thing to do would be. I just..."

"You feel bad." She nodded. "I think we can find them, but I think you need to have a plan. Are you going to give them money? Maybe you should talk to the people at the soup kitchen about it. You mentioned a few of them last night."
Noah would be the person to talk to but... "One of the guys there, he really seems to get it. But he thinks I'm a complete piece of shit." And he's not wrong.

"You're not, Logan. You can be shitty. But you aren't a piece of shit. Tell you what, I need to add some more extracurriculars, well you know, the kind I can put on a college application. Why don't we start volunteering at the soup kitchen? You can show him that you aren't who he thinks you are. And maybe we'll come across some of the people from the fights. One step at a time."

Logan nodded, leaned back on the blanket, and looked up at the bright swaths of color from the setting sun. One step at a time.

Another boring Sac-N-Pac shift complete, Wallace dropped his vest into the bin in the break room and headed for the rear exit. Weevil had promised that his brand new 'BFF' would be waiting, and sure enough, sitting behind the wheel of an early 90's Honda Civic, was a clean-cut Latino guy waving at Wallace.

Wallace made his way over to the car and the open driver's side window. "You must be Wallace, yeah?"

He nodded. "I guess that makes you Norman?" Wallace asked.

The kid snorted, and cracked up, his laughter staccato and a little wheezy. "Norman! Weevil is such an ass. It's actually Cervando," he said, holding out his hand to shake Wallace's. "You wanna ride? We can work out just what it is I'll be doing."

"Sounds good, man." Wallace jogged around the car and got into the passenger's seat.

Cervando pulled out of the parking lot and started driving toward Wallace's neighborhood; apparently Weevil had shared that information with him.

"So, Weevs said you need a cover. Can't say I've ever done that before. But then again, I'm not buddy-buddy with Veronica Mars." He winked.

"Yeah. V makes some things more complicated. My mom isn't a fan. Wants me to branch out," Wallace said, putting on his seatbelt.

"Moms! Mine is always on my case about hanging with the PCHers." Cervando glanced at Wallace, a smile growing on his face. "You know Weevil likes to act like a badass; Veronica too."

"She's really a marshmallow, but don't tell anyone I told you." For the first time, Wallace started to really wonder about what Weevil's motivation was for any of the things he did.

"My lips are sealed."

Veronica relaxed back into the couch, her belly feeling very full. The massive amount of spaghetti bolognese she'd just consumed actually may have been too much. She poked gently at her food baby.

"I think I've done it, Logan. I believe I've finally reached critical mass."

Logan approached her, an apprehensive look on his face. "Do you think you'll explode? I've got my good looks to protect."
"Well, aren't you just so funny! You're the one who ordered so much food. It would serve you right." Veronica couldn't keep herself from laughing at the silliness. She liked the silliness. It felt good. She still had her doubts, sure, but when didn't she? It was her default. Yet, knowing Logan wanted to do something to make up for his actions—to be a better person—reminded her of why they had become friends to begin with, of why she'd let herself fall back into their friendship, of why he felt like family. She finally had the thing she'd been looking for—waiting for—to support her decision to let him back in her life.

A key in the front door alerted Veronica to what she'd been dreading. It was time for her and Logan to get grilled by her dad about what had happened Tuesday night after the bum fights.

"He's not going to kill me, right? I mean nothing happened," Logan said, a small waver in his voice.

"Kill you? No. Find some sort of punishment that we'll both dislike? Probably." Veronica shrugged. She really wasn't sure how this was going to go.

Keith pushed open the door with a goofy grin on his face. "I got the bad guy, Sweetheart. And, Logan, it is your lucky day because I am in a very good mood."

"Mr. Mars, after the last few days I'm pretty sure even you in a bad mood would still be an improvement."

Veronica elbowed Logan lightly in the side. "Logan."

"What? It's the truth. I happen to know your father appreciates my honesty."

"It is one of his better traits, Honey. So who wants to start? I'm just going to serve myself some of whatever you kids ate for dinner and you can explain to me why after I very explicitly said no boys staying the night, Logan did just that."

Veronica's overfull stomach churned uncomfortably while she debated the level of honesty to share. But it was all for naught.

"As you know, I'm quite capable of being an asshole." Logan wrapped his arm around Veronica's shoulder, giving it a little squeeze.

"That is one of your other traits I'm familiar with, yes." Keith said, a chuckle in his voice, as he scooped pasta into a bowl.

"So after Veronica's and my little disagreement, I kind of got wasted and went to a bum fight."

Veronica dropped her face into her hands and rubbed her eyes. "Get to the point Logan, he knows all of this."

"Setting the scene is important, Veronica," Logan said, shifting his hand to rub her back. "Anyway, as I was saying, I was being an ass and my friends noticed that there were photographers. Being the caring sort that they are, they called Veronica to come get me since they didn't want to leave."

"Well, at least you didn't drive under the influence." Keith settled into the armchair. "Veronica, you want to pick it up from here?"

Veronica shook her head, still not looking up. It had been a perfectly innocent night; the pictures had been taken at just the right angle to make it look like more had happened. She still felt guilty and so confused. Logan had become a comfort touchstone for her, a reality she was struggling to accept. But more than that, she was starting to realize that there were emotions deeper than comfort starting
to surface. Not telling her father about how confused she was where Logan was concerned hovered a bit too close to lying about something that she didn't want to lie about. She really hated that she couldn't get a grip on how she really felt. It was like every time she let Logan one-step closer, a whole new set of feelings would surface. It made it harder and harder to keep her masks in place, to protect herself, especially when she was so busy trying to protect him too.

"Are you two kids dating now?" Keith asked. His blunt question further drove home her unease.

"No, we're just friends," Logan answered, his hand still rubbing across her lower back. "I know how those pictures look..." his voice trailed off.

Veronica shifted and sat up. She wanted to take back control, it was just the stress of the past week...months...year. She ruled her reactions, not mercurial adolescent hormones. "Seriously, Dad. Some money-hungry pap followed us back here and struck gold. I was just helping him get from the car to the couch and Logan was off balance. It was completely innocent. Other than the disobeying your rule part...but I couldn't take him home like that."

Keith nodded. Veronica could tell he was trying to read her. To figure out why her reactions were off. "Okay. And Logan slept on the couch?" His gaze turned to Logan.

"Of course," Veronica said. Logan's hand tightened on her back for a moment.

"Definitely, Mr. Mars."

"Logan, you've been spending a lot of time here. Nights too. Is everything okay at home?"

Shit! Logan's hand stopped moving, but a quick glance revealed that his face had remained neutral.

"Sure. Just the usual," he replied, his tone even and nonchalant.

Veronica desperately tried to think of something to say that would distract her dad.

"I know you and your dad don't always get along. It isn't lost on me that Veronica used to spend quite a bit of time at your house when things with her mother were... well, what they were." Keith rubbed his temple. "I get it. And rather than have you two lying and sneaking around, Logan can stay over. But—and this is important—he sleeps on the couch, and if things change between you two, you need to be honest with me about it. Understood?"

"Yep."

"Yeah. Well, good talk, Dad. I'm just going to walk Logan out. Need to get to bed early. Busy day of zoo fun planned for tomorrow, after all."

"Yes, number one daughter. To the zoo we will go! Wallace is coming with us as well, right?"

"That's the plan. He's been acting kind of strange though, so I guess we'll see." She raised her hand in question. "I'll be right back." She shut the door before her dad could sneak in any more questions and collapsed against it.

*If things change?!* She hated that her dad was picking up on her developing feelings for Logan. But it was stupid. Logan wasn't interested in her like that. They were rebuilding a friendship. *Finding each other attractive doesn't mean anything.* Veronica practically jumped out of her skin at the feel of Logan's hand landing on her shoulder.

"That went better than I'd expected. I can still sleep in your bed if he's not home, right? Even as tiny
as it is, it's way more comfy than the couch." His hand squeezed her shoulder and pulled her closer into his side.

Veronica tried to relax into him but couldn't. If things change... "We're friends, right?"

Logan stopped walking and turned Veronica to face him. She quickly dropped her eyes to their feet. "Yeah, we're friends. Are you okay? What changed in the last few minutes? I thought we were doing good."

"It's nothing. We are. I just...I'm tired, Logan."

He nodded and resumed their progress to his car. His arm remained around her shoulders and while Veronica still felt tense and on edge, the heat radiating off his skin was soothing and familiar. They reached the car Veronica let Logan pull her into a hug.

"I'm sorry the last few days have been so rough. Try to get some sleep tonight and tomorrow we'll have fun at the zoo. I'll even let you eat my ice cream," he said softly against the crown of her head.

"You'd better, or I'm going to stop making that friendship bracelet for you."

Logan laughed softly, his chest vibrating against Veronica's ear, and she realized she didn't want to let go. If things change... She dropped her arms and quickly stepped back.

"Goodnight Logan."

"Goodnight Veronica."

Casey sat in the waiting room, head in his hands, unshed tears burning his eyes.

Another stroke.

But this time it wasn't a mini-stroke like the others had been. This one had been massive and they weren't sure if his grandmother would even wake up. He felt his whole body shudder.

"Mr. Gant?"

"Yeah, I'm here." Casey stood and walked toward his grandmother's doctor. "How is she?"

"Not well." He shook his head sadly and placed a hand on Casey's shoulder. "You're her medical power of attorney, Casey, and there are going to be some big decisions moving forward. Is there anyone we can call to help you? I know both you and your grandmother didn't want to involve your parents, but..." the words hung in the air. Big decisions. Help.

"No. It's just me. Do we have to tell anyone what's happened right away? Is she going to wake up?" Casey asked, his mind racing.

"Disclosing her condition is at your discretion. As for if she's going to wake up, I honestly don't know, but I think it unlikely. If she does, Casey, there's a very real chance that she won't remember much. Do you remember when we discussed potentially moving her to a private facility for hospice?"

Casey nodded. It had broken his heart to have to listen to his grandmother outline her wishes.

"I think that once we're certain she's stabilized, we should proceed with that plan. Especially if you want to keep her condition private."
"I do. I don't want my parents or the board to know. I have durable power of attorney; I can take care of things while we wait to see what's going to happen."

The doctor squeezed his shoulder. Casey knew it was a stupid thing to say. They all knew what was going to happen. His grandmother was going to die. It was just a matter of time now, but she had plans and so did he; he'd be damned if his family was going to fuck any of it up.

"How long until I can move her?"

"I'd wait at least twenty-four hours."

"Okay. Can you start making the arrangements? I'm concerned if I do it people may notice. And I have plans I need to put into place as well."

"I'll call you with all of the information. Which name did you want me to use?"

"The last one. The one no one but you and I know about. And I'm going to get a new number. I'll give it to you as soon as I know it," Casey said, holding his hand out to the doctor. "Thank you for all you've done."

"You're welcome, Casey. Let me know if there's anything else I can do."

Casey nodded and turned to leave. There wasn't anything more he could do here. He headed straight for his Porsche and initiated another call.

"Casey, is everything okay?"

"Holly, does the offer still stand?"

"Yes, you're always welcome with us."

"I'm on my way."

Chapter End Notes

AN: First a huge thank you to all of you how made it back here to read! I know it's been a long hiatus (longer than I intended!). So many of you sent lovely messages of encouragement over these long months and it really does help keep me going! If only I could just write full time! Maybe someday...

Next I owe so much to the wonderful Bondopoulos who has been cheerleading me through months of not having as much time to write as I'd like and through our menagerie of real life issues! Much thanks to Marshmallowtasha, as well, for excellent feedback, suggestions, and overall greatness!
Don't Be Fooled by Your Emptiness

Chapter Notes

Last time on Time, Make It Go Faster:

We left off with our crew recovering from a few bomb shells. Logan chose to do something selfless and good knowing what his punishment would be and this leads to a series of revelations for him concerning what he wants in his life and where he wants to go.

Veronica is confronting a great deal of confusion regarding how she wants to go forward herself. She feels herself slipping back into the comfort of her relationship with Logan despite him regressing to his OPJ state during the previous week with the bum fights. His new found self-awareness has her more willing than she expected to continue exploring their rediscovered friendship.

Wallace too is dealing with his mother's decision to not allow him to spend time with Logan and Veronica, and his own decision to not do as she wishes. Finally Casey is up against the reality that his grandmother is dying and he now has to take responsibility for the family business earlier than expected.

Serious Trigger Warning for canon child abuse – non-graphic reference to sexual assault, skip Cassidy's flashback. Note at the end of the chapter fills in important plot points associated with this section.

Wallace woke Sunday morning feeling a little lighter than he had the day before. Things were looking up, or at least a little more up. Well, 'up' in the sense that he would still get to spend time with the friends he cared about without incurring the wrath of his mother. At least until she found out he was lying to her.

Wallace's ill-gotten happy mood wilted, but he was committed. He was not the kind of guy that gave up on people he cared about just because of their reputations, which in this case were not deserved, well not completely deserved.

He glanced at the clock to assure himself he had time before Cervando would be arriving. They'd planned it perfectly. Cervando would pick him up for their 'study' group and then they would be playing pickup basketball in the afternoon. Or at least that's what his mother would think.

It turned out that Weevil really had had the perfect person to serve as a 'Norman' for Wallace. While Wallace would be with Veronica, Cervando would be tutoring the other PCHers as part of Weevil's newest plan—something about ensuring that they graduate from high school. But much like Wallace's mother, Cervando's mom also didn't approve of who he was choosing to hang out with. It was a win-win.

The previous night, Cervando had introduced Wallace to his mom as his new study friend, honor roll
at his previous school and star athlete. And now this morning Wallace's mom would meet Cervando, honor roll student and captain of the chess club. It couldn't have been more perfect if Veronica had planned it herself.

What am I gonna tell Veronica...?

Cassidy relaxed back against the poolside lounger. Things were going his way—at least mostly. He still couldn't completely keep his body's reaction in check when he was near Veronica, but it was getting better. He was in control. He was moving all the pieces around the board. It was his game and they would do what he wanted. Except then she'd appear before him and he'd feel like that little boy again, stuttering and small.

FLASHBACK

Cassidy limped back out to the park, rubbing his tears away with dirty hands. He just wanted to escape. He planned to skirt around the bleachers by the soccer fields and take the city bus; he'd get off where their house staff did and sneak home through the back of the property.

"Beav!" Dick's voice made Cassidy trip over his own feet. He felt the tears well up again; there'd be no escaping.

"Hey Dick," Cassidy said, turning to see his brother and Logan Echolls. He straightened his back despite the pain. Dick had been attached to Logan since they met at the beginning of the school year. Cassidy tried not to let it bother him, but it was hard. Even if Dick wasn't very nice to him, at least he'd always had someone to hang out with.

"Dude, is your brother crying?" Logan bumped Dick's shoulder.

"Seriously?! Come on, Beav, don't cry just 'cause you guys lost. Ya gotta be more like Ronnie!"

Beaver followed Dick's gaze until he spotted a mud-covered Veronica skipping up to them. "Can't all be as cool as me!"

"Not a chance," Logan said tugging on one of her pigtails.

"Careful, Logan, or I'll make you piggy-back me around before I clean up."

"I'm not afraid of a little mud, Veronica Mars!" Logan posed, his arms akimbo, affecting Lilly Kane. Cassidy cleared his throat. "Ver-Veronica-ca? What do you—um, what do you do to win?" he asked in a small voice, embarrassed but unable to prevent the sniffling and stuttering around his words.

"Play better, of course!" she laughed and launched herself onto Logan's back.

Cassidy watched as Logan ran across the field, Veronica's arms spread as if she were flying. He wished he could be her, or maybe it was Logan he wanted to be. Anyone but himself.

"I'm going home, Dick. I don't feel very good."

"Yeah, whatever." Dick took off to chase after his friends, leaving Cassidy alone.

He looked around and spotted his coach's black BMW pulling out of the parking lot. A wave of nausea wracked Cassidy's body, sending him running behind the bleachers. What felt like years later, his body calmed; everything he'd ever eaten had to be on the concrete. He wiped his sweat slick face
on his shirt, his clammy hands on his pants, and slowly made his way to the bus stop, looking back every so often at the fun Veronica Mars was having.

END FLASHBACK

Cassidy wasn't that person anymore though. He'd taken control—maybe not complete control—but today had been an improvement. He'd gained more of her attention, and now she was moving about his chessboard like he wanted. During their talk on the beach—despite the fact that he'd sweated like a pig—she'd agreed to talk to her dad about investigating Cassidy's stepmother. Now he just needed to arrange things so Veronica would catch Logan with Sadie. He knew Sadie had her eye on Logan, and while he might be able to set her up with Enbom or one of the others, Logan would kill two birds with one stone.

"Little brother! What are you doing out here all alone?"

"Working on my tan, Dick. What else would I be doing?" Cassidy pushed his sunglasses up to rest on top of his head.

"Plotting world domination?" Dick shrugged.

_If he only knew._ "Naw. I'm still trying to decide what to wear for the Halloween party. You made up your mind?"

Dick collapsed onto the lounger parallel to Cassidy's. "Got it narrowed down. I found some of those male stripper Velcro pants..." Dick winked and thrust his hips. "Gotta make it easy access for the ladies."

Cassidy sat up and turned to face Dick. "What ladies? Isn't Maddie on a freeze out?" He didn't really care but Dick was a wealth of knowledge and he never knew what piece could be useful later.

"More or less. But she wants to go to the party so she'll come around, and if she doesn't, the *Ladies Loooove cool D.*" Dick jumped up and dove into the pool.

Cassidy shook his head and muttered, "Sure they do, brother. Just like they love me..."

Keith drank his coffee and stared blankly at the TV. His successful bounty the night before had been a particularly lucrative one, and the five-thousand dollars would go a long way to making the coming holidays much better this year than they were the last. At the top of his list was a new macro lens for Veronica's camera. As much as she tried to act blasé about her photography, Keith knew how much she loved it and could easily recognize her talent. It was a hobby he desperately wanted to foster, so he was more than happy to spend the money to keep her in cool lenses and with the right computer software. At least he was when he had the money to spend.

The snick of a door down the hall alerted Keith to Veronica joining the world for the day. In addition to the macro lens, some of the bounty was earmarked for a special day at the zoo.

"Daughter o' mine, are you ready for an exciting adventure? I see lions, tigers, and bears, oh my!" Keith called out.

"You know, I—" she yawned loudly into her bent elbow "—am. Logan and Wallace should both be here by 8:30, and then we can go."

Keith frowned. He had reluctantly agreed to let the boys come along, and the previous night's conversation had placed Logan more or less back in Keith's at least "okay" graces. Luckily for
Logan, Rebecca has talked Keith off the 'crazy-dad' ledge. Without her it was entirely possible that Logan would be buried in the desert now. He harrumphed to himself, acknowledging that he wouldn't really have harmed Logan, but a threat definitely would have been issued.

After seeing Logan with Veronica, and the concern they'd both shared, as well as how they'd protected each other, Keith had decided to go easy on Logan. He was pretty sure there was more building there than friendship and he hoped they'd be honest with him—not to mention with each other. So another chance to strike a little fear into Logan would work nicely and probably save him some effort once the kids realized how they felt about each other. He also wanted to check in with Wallace; from what Veronica had said, something was up. The more Keith thought about it, the more the boys joining them on the day's excursion seemed opportune rather than annoying.

"Maybe you'd better call and make sure they're both awake. You know how impatient I get, I need my predator fix." Veronica snorted, and Keith conceded, "Fine, baby animal fix. And, Veronica, maybe you could work a little harder on making some female friends?"

She had her cell phone out, her thumbs moving rapidly across the keys. She looked up and burst out in laughter when she took in his serious expression. "You're joking right?"

"I wasn't. Rebecca said sometimes it can be difficult after a loss—"

"No, Dad, it's funny because of Wanda Varner. You realize I tried to be friends with her and she set me up for a drug bust. Did we not discuss this at all? Seriously, it's not that I'm unwilling to have female friends. But the first time I tried...well, let's just say as much fun as it was screwing with the deputies—and finding out Clemmons' dum-dum preference. I didn't particularly enjoy getting stabbed in the back."

Keith was taken aback. "Wanda did what?"

"Ugh! It's not even important, but the short version is she set me up to keep some deal she has with Deputy Lamb. And of course I didn't have any drugs so..."

"Honey, you sure know how to make friends."

"Don't I know it, Daddy-o."

Much to Veronica's surprise—though it suited her just fine—the car ride to the zoo had been quiet. Logan had shown up with a carrier full of coffees, which led to them all slowly sipping down their drinks while her dad sang along to bad 80's music. It was the most relaxed Veronica had felt in days.

By the time they'd arrived at the zoo her caffeine buzz was setting in, and she had ice cream on her mind—if the men in her life would hurry up, that was.

Keith turned away from the ticket counter, exasperation wrinkling his brow. "This isn't that big of a decision. Do we want to do the cart tour or not?"

"Yes!" "No!" Logan and Wallace called out.

"Come on, Man, I've never been to this zoo before. If we do the tour I'll be the coolest big bro ever when I bring my brother here." Wallace tried to convince Logan.

"I've been here so many times. It's really not that cool. I swear. Just think, we could go watch them wash the baby elephants. Ronnie looooves watching that. Trust me, watching her watching them is one of the most entertaining things you'll ever see."
Veronica glared at her father as he snorted from behind the boys while handing money across to the attendant.

"We're going to do both!" Keith announced, holding out tickets to the kids. "Tour for Wallace, elephants for Veronica, the front street animal encounter for me, and Logan, they told me that there is a new baby koala making its debut."

Veronica spun around, surprised her father remembered how enamored of the koalas Logan had been on a previous trip they'd all taken. She turned to Logan, a light blush colored his cheeks as he stared down at his shoes, scuffing one toe along the pavement.

"Thanks, Mr. Mars."

Keith patted Logan on the back and started to lead them into the zoo, but Logan's gasp stopped their progress.

"Logan, are you okay? I barely touched you."

Veronica's breath caught. She and Logan hadn't worked up a cover story. She was seriously losing her edge.

"I slipped by the pool. It's not big deal, just a little scraped up, is all." Logan rolled his shoulders with a grimace.

Veronica watched Logan and her dad closely. Neither gave anything away, hardened actors on the stage of life that they both were. If she didn't know better she'd have just taken Logan at his word, the way Wallace seemed to have. But she recognized the penetrating Mars stare that Keith was giving him.

"If you say so, Son," Keith finally said, but his expression suggested there would be probing questions later. "Okay, we're on the next cart tour so Wallace can get an overview of our beloved zoo. Then we hoof it," he said with a forced laugh and a meaningful look at Veronica.

*This is going to be a long day,* she thought as Wallace took the seat beside her.

"Hey, my brotha."

"Hey," Wallace replied, subdued, his eyes cast down. There was none of the usual Fennel flare.

"You ready to finally tell me what's going on with you?" Veronica placed her hand on top of Wallace's. Focusing on someone else's problem was unbelievably appealing.

He nodded his head very deliberately. "I told you about what happened with my mom and Logan." Veronica squeezed his hand, encouraging him to continue. "Well, she kind of flipped out after that and decided that she doesn't want me spending time with either of you. She thinks you're a bad influence."

It was like a punch in the gut. Not because she was shocked by Mrs. Fennel's assessment of her and Logan, but at realizing that she was at least partially right. Veronica regularly asked Wallace to do things for her that, strictly speaking, weren't really the norm for a high school student. And Logan...Veronica snorted.

"She might have a point, Wallace."

He turned confused eyes to her. "You agree? So you think we shouldn't be friends? Thought I was
your BFF."

She'd hurt his feelings, if his stiff response was any indication. "You are Wallace. You're a better friend than I've ever had. You stuck with me even after you found out about my 'reputation.' And when I brought jackass extraordinaire into our lives—against your advice—you stayed, and dare I say, have even started to build a friendship with him..."

"Yeah. I have. Logan's not what I was expecting. Kinda like you. The problem is my mom. She only knows what she's heard from the office gossip and tabloids. Neither exactly paint a nice picture of either of you."

Veronica certainly couldn't disagree with him there. "I don't want to cause problems with your mom, though. She can't have been happy about you coming with us today."

He cleared his throat and looked straight ahead. "Well, she doesn't know I'm with you. She thinks I'm at a study group and then shooting hoops with some 'new' friends." He glanced back to her with a sheepish twisted smile and cocked brows.

"New friends?" Logan asked leaning over the back of the seat. "Are V and I not exciting enough for you?"

"More like too exciting. No, they're fake friends and one 'cover' friend."

"Wallace." Keith sat across from them. "I'm not okay with you lying to your mother."

"I know, Mr. Mars, but she doesn't get it. You know?" Wallace's head hung. Veronica knew this was hard on him, he loved his mother and didn't like going against her. And even more than that, he took his role-model status with his little brother very seriously.

Keith nodded his agreement but didn't add anything further.

"Okay, I officially declare this a fun only zone. The last few days have been shitty—"

"Logan, language," Keith scolded.

"Um...crappy? So I say until we're back in Neptune we can only talk about fun things. Like those." Logan pointed to a paddock that had another one of Veronica's favorites: the okapi.

"God done screwed those up, huh?"

"Oh Wallace, allow me to..."

Veronica tuned them out. She'd heard the speech before. Poor Wallace was in for an interesting, if somewhat long winded, explanation about evolution. On a previous trip, Logan and her dad had bonded over their shared interest in strange animals and how they came to be. That particular trip stood in stark contrast to the first time Logan had come with them. That trip had definitely been a bit out of control as it was also the first time that they'd all gone to the Safari Park. Logan and Lilly had been dating for just over a year, and Veronica and Duncan had only been dating a few weeks.

Looking back, Veronica was still surprised her dad had decided to brave taking them.

**FLASHBACK**

"What do you mean there's no air conditioning?" Lilly whined, fanning herself dramatically with one of the pamphlets.
"Sorry, miss, this is the safari ride. When we get going there'll be a breeze but..." their tour guide trailed off, clearly having lost Lilly's attention.

Veronica gave the guide a small smile and waved him on, hoping he wasn't too upset. She was thankful that her dad stepped in and started to engage the guide in conversation about the various predators they'd be seeing. Keith always claimed they were his favorites but she knew the truth, the man was a sucker for baby animals.

Moving past her dad, Veronica climbed up into the back of the large truck and started looking for the best place to stand. She'd expected Duncan to be trailing right behind her—he'd been more or less attached to her hip lately—so when she turned and saw Logan at her side, she was more than a little surprised.

"I'm sticking with you, Ronnie. She's being impossible. Let Duncan get her under control."

"I heard that Logan!"

"See what I mean? Impossible." He rolled his eyes and leaned down to Veronica's height. "So, did you bring your camera?"

"You know I did," she said indicating the camera bag slung across her chest.

"You've gotta take some cool pictures for my wall. My mom wants to redecorate my room and there is no way I'm letting her pick the photographs. She's decided my room should have an African theme..."

"African? Which part? I mean it's not like it's a homogenous continent." Veronica pulled her camera out and considered what lens she wanted to use. "How close do we actually get?"

"Really close according to the dude talking to the Sheriff. And I know, right? I think what Mom meant was safari? Who knows. She had a bunch of interior design people wandering through the house and getting into my stuff."

"Ugh. Well, I'll do my best, Logan."

Logan's arm slid across her shoulders and his lips brushed against her ear. "I like the zebras, Ronnie."

END FLASHBACK

The pictures she'd taken that day were on Logan's wall—professionally framed and matted. Lynn had actually had a few others framed as well, though Veronica didn't remember seeing them recently when she'd been at Logan's. In addition to the photographs, Logan still had the somewhat abstract elephant statues she'd helped him pick out. Logan originally had three of them, but he'd given one to Veronica. When they'd moved she couldn't bring herself to throw it away. So she'd set it on a shelf in the living room and never commented on it again.

"You're trying to tell me that thing is some kind of giraffe?"

"Not a type of giraffe. It shares a recent common ancestor with giraffes," Logan explained. Keith nodded his agreement.

"And since when are you all academic?" Wallace asked.

"Hey! I took honors biology freshman year and AP sophomore year."
Keith turned to Veronica with raised eyebrows, and she nodded. It was true, he had, and before Lilly was murdered it had been something they'd studied for together. After...well she didn't want to think about that. They were here to have a fun day, after all.

Logan found himself completely caught up watching Veronica. Going to the zoo wasn't exactly at the top of his list of favorite activities, but seeing her so excited and young—that certainly didn't suck. She stood about fifteen feet in front of him, bounding on the balls of her feet and pressed against the rail watching one of the younger elephants playing in a kiddie pool, throwing water around and flapping its ears happily.

"You weren't kidding, Man. She looks almost gleeful," Wallace whispered to Logan.

"Right? She acts all tough, but she's a total softy." Logan leaned back against a post, watching Veronica giggle and point something out to her dad.

"A fact I've never disputed; she's a total marshmallow," Wallace said with a smirk.

Logan crossed his arms over his chest and considered Veronica. Wallace's descriptor was perfect. He'd take it a step further and say she was a toasted marshmallow. A slightly tough yet fragile exterior with melted insides. There was no other way to explain why she continued to let him be a part of her life even when he screwed up, repeatedly.

"You know how I mentioned that I might have someone I could talk to about the drugs?" Logan changed the subject, though he kept his eyes on Veronica as much as he could.

Wallace leaned in closer and scowled at Logan. "Yeah. But is this the place to be discussing it?"

"Probably not, but Ronnie's preoccupied. It's Casey. I asked him to see if he can find out if someone drugged her or knows anything about it. But, you know, subtly."

"Are you sure he's trustworthy? I mean, from what I've heard he's an entitled asshole." Wallace's frown deepened and then relaxed into a harsh laugh. "Well, I guess I'd heard the same about you. And you kind of are...but you're more than that too. Why aren't you asking? I mean aren't all those —" he held up quote fingers "—people your friends?"

"Oh sure, they're my friends all right. You've seen the video footage and the photos from the bum fight. How much you wanna bet at least a few of those were sold to the press by those friends? I should have Veronica look into that, actually. And for those who didn't sell me out, how many of them got in trouble because I'm a target?" He sighed, the frustration at not being able to protect the people he cared about weighed heavily on him. "No one else there would have attracted that level of attention. Even Duncan isn't paparazzi fodder on his own."

Being friends with Logan meant risking stalker paparazzi, unwanted attention, and unwanted exposure to his father. It was no cakewalk, and he was still surprised that, despite how he'd treated her the previous week and all of the bum fight drama, she'd come through for him. Even more shocking was that Wallace was still treating Logan like he was a human being deserving of friendship.

"I'm still kinda surprised she picked your drunk ass up from that bum fight."

"Yeah. She's—" Logan struggled to find the word he wanted...amazing, beautiful, a pain in the ass...

"You've got it bad, huh?"
"What?"

"C'mon, Man. I remember when you were explaining about why Duncan would have thought there was something between the two of you back when she was dating him. You had a thing for her then." Logan shrugged. "And you have a thing for her now."

"No!" Logan realized he was protesting too hard and softened his voice. "No. We're friends. She...no, she dated Duncan, and even as weird as he's being, he's been my best friend since we were five. There's a code for situations like this for a reason."

"Mhmm. Not a denial. Well, we can talk—if you want—when you finally realize how lame of an excuse that is." Wallace tilted his head and gave Logan a half frown, and then he moved to join Veronica at the railing.

Logan imagined touching Veronica, kissing her. It wasn't the first time—not by any stretch of the imagination—but it was the first time he considered it as a possible reality. Could he kiss her? What would she do? Would she want that? No, she wouldn't want that. Even if it weren't for Duncan, there was still Lilly between them.

He shook his head and shoulders out and then moved to join the others watching the elephants. There was no point thinking about things that would never be.

Wallace snorted as Logan tossed the last bite of his ice cream cone into his mouth. He knew from experience that if you wanted any of your ice cream, you'd better eat it quickly when Veronica was around. It was the look of incredulity on her face that had him laughing, though. She had consumed at least half of Logan's ice cream and more than a few bites of Wallace's.

Unlike Wallace, who was less than thrilled at Veronica's ice cream thievery, Logan had seemed more or less happy to comply—at least until the end of the cone.

"I thought we were sharing," Veronica said, her voice pouty.

"I did share, oh tiny blonde one. You had more of my ice cream than I did." Logan turned and winked at Wallace.

Wallace maintained a slightly slower pace, keeping himself a few steps behind Logan and Veronica, enjoying watching whatever was going on between them play out. Wallace hadn't thought to bring it up with Veronica, though he suspected he'd get a much more evasive response than the weak denial he'd gotten from Logan. From the outside it seemed pretty obvious but Veronica excelled at stubbornness and he didn't think Logan would be willing to make the first move.

Though Wallace found he had to acknowledge that he was only privy to some of the details about what had happened between Logan and Veronica before Lilly Kane's death. It only took spending a few minutes with them to recognize all the subtext hanging between every sentence they spoke. So many years of shared knowledge and experiences that even a year of estrangement hadn't dampened the connection. The Veronica Wallace thought he knew wouldn't have given Logan a second chance. So maybe he wasn't the best judge of how things might progress between them.

Veronica hip bumped Logan and then he wrapped his arm around her and whispered something into her ear.

Oh yeah, nothing going on there, nothing at all...Wallace understood Logan's concerns about the bro-code, but it was beyond obvious they both had more than platonic feelings for each other and Duncan Kane was a complete tool. But what was it they say? 'Denial isn't just a river in Egypt.'
"Do they know?" Mr. Mars' voice asked from just behind Wallace.

"Know?"

"Oh, Wallace, I'm pretty sure you're observant enough to have noticed, yes? But those two," Keith nodded his head at Logan and Veronica, "well, let's just say if you're seeing what I'm seeing...I've seen it before. That thing they share. It was there when they were twelve, and it was there when they were fifteen. Clearly it hasn't gone away. Honestly, I was always surprised they ended up dating the Kanes and not each other."

"Really? I thought Duncan was like..." Wallace didn't have a word for it. Veronica had never articulated her feelings for Duncan to him, so he was operating solely on the gossip he'd heard, which suggested they had been some kind of golden couple. Perfect.

"Duncan? No. I was very surprised when she said she was dating him. He's so...well, you've seen how he is now. Unstable. But even before, he was so bland. I know people always cast Veronica in Lilly's shadow, but I never saw them that way. They fed off each other. The six months she dated Duncan were..."

"Were what?"

"An anomaly? Veronica was different. Before she was more like she is now. Maybe less edge, but assertive—a leader. When she was with Duncan, she was much more passive. I never liked them together...Not that I'm wild about the idea of her with Logan, but..." he shrugged.

Wallace nodded. He didn't have much to offer since he really didn't know Duncan all that well, and the things he'd been told about Veronica before Lilly's death were so contradictory. Though, he realized, Keith and Logan's assessment of who she once was were very similar.

"Wallace, are things okay at home? I really don't like hearing that you're lying to your mother about spending time with Veronica," Keith asked, a softness in his voice that Wallace hadn't heard before.

"They've been better." He kicked at a loose piece of gravel and shoved his hands in the pockets of his track jacket. "V's told you my mom works for Kane Software, right?" At Keith's nod he continued, "Well, one of the guys in her division has a daughter in our class. She's said some really awful things about Veronica." Wallace had no intention of telling Keith the kinds of things that were said, especially since the pictures of Logan and Veronica together had come out.

"Aww...Yes, that'd be Alan Banks. I'm sure he doesn't have much nice to say. His wife hired me to get evidence of his affair, and Veronica may have been a little tactless with their daughter about it." Keith rubbed his head, a sheepish look on his face. "Wallace, maybe I should talk to her. I'm not sure I can be much help when it comes to Logan, but maybe if she understood a little more about what happened—"

"Thanks, Mr. Mars," Wallace interrupted him, "but you don't have to do that. She's made up her mind and I'm pretty sure I'm just going to have to live with it until she naturally reaches a different conclusion, which she eventually will."

"Okay, but if you change your mind, you know where to find me," Keith said as he patted Wallace on the back.

It was comforting having someone like Keith Mars in his life. Since his dad's death, Wallace hadn't really had another man he could look up to or go to for advice. It was nice to finally feel like a small part of what had been missing was back. Now if only he could convince his mother to get on board.
"Do they know?" Logan heard Keith ask Wallace as Veronica sharply bumped her hip in to his almost knocking him off balance. He recovered from his Veronica induced stumble by wrapping his arm around her and pulling her close.

"I still can't believe you didn't save me the last bite," Veronica grumbled, nudging him in the side with her elbow.

Logan inhaled the scent of her tropical smelling shampoo as he leaned down to whisper in her ear. "I'll buy you more. Whatever flavor you want, and I'll let you have all of mine."

"You'd better, mister!" she pushed him away, with a smug grin.

"...surprised they ended up dating the Kanes and not each other."

Logan stiffened as Keith and Wallace's words drifted up to them. He turned to see Veronica frowning.

"Come on, Ronica, let's get to the koalas." He reached for her hand and power-walked them further away from Keith and Wallace. Wallace's question earlier about Logan having feelings for Veronica had been swirling through his mind. He'd even started to consider the possibility of more between them, despite the voice in his head telling him she'd never want him. But her actions contradicted his reservations and at the small chance that she might want him as more than a friend too, he didn't want her to be scared off. It was too new and confusing and coming at them from all sides. He knew if he was feeling this off balance, there was no way she would be on any more solid ground.

Veronica's hand loosened in his and she gently pulled away. "Just ignore them, Logan. With my dad dating Ms. James he's clearly taking her 'express your emotions' stuff too seriously."

"Are there some emotions you'd like to express to me?" he teased.

"Yes, annoyance. I really wanted the last bite of your ice cream."

Logan took a deep breath, filled with relief and a little excitement. "I already promised you more ice cream. Next time I won't make such a rookie mistake."

"See that you don't."

Logan held his arm out to her and she looped hers through it. He liked that they had resumed most of their past relationship; he liked that he could be pretty physical with her and it was okay. He'd expected to feel a lot more awkward, especially in light of other newer feelings, but being close to Veronica mostly felt comfortable, safe, and familiar. Stable. Even if everything else going on didn't. He desperately wanted to cling to those feelings as long as he could, because he knew it was only a matter of time before she found out what a bastard he was. Soon she'd decide that she'd gotten it right before and want nothing to do with him.

"Logan, stop being so serious." Veronica pinched him lightly in the side.

"Ow! And I'm not being serious. Just thoughtful."

He looked down at Veronica, her shy smile that he'd only seen a few times since their reconciliation softening her expression. A breeze blew the uneven ends of her bangs across her face and an intense urge to brush them aside and cup her jaw filled him. He felt his arm start to rise when Veronica jumped.

"Oh look, we're here. Ready to see those baby koalas? I know I am." One moment she'd been
locked in an emotional stare with him and the next she was on the move and pulling away.

Logan shook off the intensity of the previous moment and plastered a smile on his face. "You know it, Mars! Take me to my baby animal fix." He followed her, cringing at the snickering coming from just behind him. *So much for not dwelling on something that won't happen...I can't even make it an hour...*

Chapter End Notes

Author Note:

If you weren't comfortable reading Cassidy's flashback here is what you need to know: Veronica teased Cassidy at a crucial moment and it resulted in him associating Veronica with the trauma of what happened to him. This interaction also included Logan and has some basis in movie canon where Veronica told Ruby Jetson to "dance better."

Many thanks to Bondopoulos and Marshmallowtasha for their supreme betaing :) And also thank you to everyone who has sent notes and left encouraging comments. I love hearing from you all and it helps keep me plugging away. Albeit slowly these days. Designing new course curricula is a bear and just eats up my time. So thank you for sticking with me!

I have another chapter of this story not too far away from ready so that'll likely be along next. I also have a story for the Five More Minutes Collection that I'm hoping to have finished early in the new year. The epilogue and third part of the Breaking the Rules series are outlined, parts are drafted it's just very slow.
Happy New Year everyone! My goal was to have this out by my birthday and beyond my surprise I've actually done it! So my birthday present to you all is the next chapter!

Wallace shouldered his backpack and waited on the corner by Veronica's apartment for his ride. She and Logan had already left to volunteer for a couple of hours at the soup kitchen, and while Keith had offered him a ride home, that would have defeated the purpose of 'Norman'.

A now familiar older Honda pulled up a few minutes later, the hook of Kanye's "Through the Wire" drifting through the open window. A definite departure from the early '80s rock he'd been listening to most of the day. Wallace reached for the handle and slid into the seat.

Cervando's fist appeared at his side; Wallace bumped it and dropped his backpack onto the floor between his feet. The stereo volume decreased as the song changed over to soft strains 'It all falls down...'

"How was the zoo, man?"

"Good. Weird. Doing family-type stuff...but, you know, not with my family." Wallace shrugged; he couldn't really articulate how he felt. Good, sad, guilty.

"The Sheriff, he's a good man. I know everyone talks shit, but I remember him always being fair. I got picked up with some of the other guys shoplifting back in like seventh grade," he said, pulling back out into the flow of traffic. "I hadn't taken anything though—cause you know my moms would kill me. So he sits me down and asks me what's going on...says he called the school and knows I'm an 'A' student. Then he tells me that he doesn't want to see me again. Sent me home." He shook his head. "I found out later, only the guys who actually had stolen stuff on them got in trouble. He got them all community service and even helped a few get jobs."

"Yeah, he's pretty cool. Thinks I shouldn't be lying to my mom but said he wouldn't tell her."

"What about your dad?"

"Died."

Cervando's head turned, revealing a frown and look of embarrassment. "Sucks, man. Mine isn't around. Cliché, but whatcha gonna do?" Cervando said, pulling up next to Wallace's house.

"Thanks. Just let me know if you need me at all this week."

"Will do. Catch ya later."

Wallace slammed the car door shut and trudged up to his house, reviewing the story of the day he planned to share with his mom.
Logan parked in front of the soup kitchen, but didn't move to turn the Xterra off or get out. He stared at the warehouse-style building, the throbbing of his pulse echoing in his ears.

"You know people show up to volunteer at these places all the time. It's going to be okay, Logan." Veronica's voice soothed him, and her small hand on his forearm caused the pounding to recede and brought him back into the moment.

He shifted and turned the car off. "Okay. You'll stay with me?"

"Every step of the way. You going to stay with me?"

Logan stared at her, dumbfounded. There was nowhere else he'd rather be than by her side. Even when she made him angry. The previous week—even if it had been less than forty-eight hours of avoiding her—had sucked. The previous twelve months had been worse. "For as long as you'll let me." A light blush appeared on Veronica's cheeks and her eyes fluttered. Logan didn't fight the impulse like he had before and reached forward to push the loose strands of hair from her face, letting his fingers linger on her petal-soft skin.

Her blush deepened and for the briefest moment he felt her press into his touch. Then she turned in her seat and opened the door. She was out of the car and out of the bubble Logan had constructed around them before he even had a chance to take a breath.

He pressed his fingers to his own cheek, feeling her warmth more closely, and then shook his head. Logan quickly got out of the car and moved to follow Veronica into the building. He jogged until he was by her side. She smiled at him and it was like the moment from the car hadn't even happened. The soft openness of moments before had been replaced with another mask—this one friendly and kind, but in no way vulnerable.

Logan nodded; he could accept that. He needed time to get his head on straight and figure out what it was he was feeling. *One step at a time.*

*What was I thinking?* The words repeated in Veronica's head as she fled the car.

She could maybe acknowledge that she was feeling things for Logan, but she was in no way ready to consider what those things were or whether he might be feeling them too.

There was only one escape, and that was getting into the homeless shelter's soup kitchen. There would be plenty of people there and they would have a clear activity that required focus.

Veronica was almost to the entrance when she heard—and felt—Logan come up alongside her. She turned and offered him a careful smile, and he nodded—a conversation in and of itself. And she knew he'd felt it too, whatever it was. But he was going to accept that she didn't want to deal with it. It was a game they'd played before.

**FLASHBACK**

A loud crash echoed up the stairs, startling Veronica from her homework. She sighed in frustration. Logan would be arriving in ten minutes and she still had more than twelve pages of reading to do, and absolutely no interest in dealing with whatever was going on downstairs. Resigned to her fate, Veronica closed her textbook on California history and headed down the stairs.

She'd barely made it to the living room when she heard a second crash accompanied by the sound of breaking glass. She quickened her pace and arrived in the kitchen in time to see her mother smoothing down her dress and staring at a mess of glass. The sharp burn of alcohol stung Veronica's
nose and eyes.

"Hello, Darling. Well, I'm on my way out. Can you clean this up for me?"

In a swish of skirts her mother was gone, leaving the mess to Veronica. She stared down at the scattered bits of glass and spreading puddle of booze with disgust, and then turned to the pantry. On the top shelf, out of her reach, were two bottles of gin. She quickly scaled the shelves and grabbed first one and then the other bottle. Determined, Veronica carried them both to the sink and started to drain them. She heard her mother open the door.

"Oh, Logan dear." Veronica heard a loud hiccup. "Soooo nice to seeeee you."

The front door shut and then a car door could be heard followed by the sound of the engine starting. Veronica sighed deeply, her mother was driving drunk...again.

"Veronica? Where are you?" Logan's voice called out from the front of the house.

"The kitchen," she said praying that fairy godmothers were real and that the mess would miraculously disappear before Logan found her. But dreams aren't wishes your heart makes and no amount of pretending would make her a Disney princess.

Logan froze at the entrance to the kitchen, and then tiptoed around the glass moving towards her.

"Jesus, Ronnie, what happened?"

After explaining her mother's inability to hide her drinking issues, Logan had pulled her out of the house with promises that the mess would be taken care of and that they were going to have a good time.

She and Logan arrived at the boardwalk and he dragged her straight to Amy's. This was the Logan she truly relied upon. He just knew what to do, what she needed when these things happened and he never pushed for an explanation.

After they were settled at a table with two banana splits Veronica realized that Duncan and Lilly hadn't joined them yet.

"When are Lilly and Duncan meeting us?"

"Lilly, never. Duncan—" he looked down at his naked wrist "—anytime now."

Veronica felt her stomach drop. Lilly had ditched them without an explanation again. It had been happening more and more frequently since the day Veronica had been waiting to meet Duncan for their date after his soccer tournament. Logan, too, had been waiting for Lilly, though she was late coming from a debutante lunch rather than Duncan's soccer game. While she and Logan waited they'd fallen asleep in the Kane family den. Things with Duncan had seemed fine since, but Lilly had been less and less present.

"I'm sorry, Logan. I feel like this is my fault," she said stabbing a banana with her spoon.

Logan shook his head, releasing an audible sigh. "Don't be. This is par for the course. She's being a bitch and she'll get over it. Besides, we have more important things to worry about."

"I don't want to talk about—"

"Ronnie, when was the last time you won a giant stuffed animal. We're at the boardwalk and it's time to act like it!"
Just as they finished eating their splits Duncan had called to let them know he was there. The three of them traversed the boardwalk with Logan making goofy faces and buying her candy, but it just wasn't enough. It was like a dark cloud had settled over her and she couldn't seem to escape it.

At first Duncan had joined Logan in acting silly and trying to make her laugh, but as time passed he seemed less and less interested in doing so. She wasn't sure what was going on but he almost seemed bored. Needing a break, Veronica escaped to the bathroom and splashed some water on her face. Duncan was used to her paying him more attention and as much as she wanted to show him that she was excited to be spending the day with him, she just couldn't muster up the pretense. She wasn't excited to be there with him. She wasn't excited about anything at all. She wanted to go hide in her room and pretend the day hadn't happened. She decided to ask Logan to take her home, she just wasn't fit for company. A nap and a good book were what she needed.

As Veronica dried her face she hoped for a moment that Logan had told Duncan what was going on so she could leave without being questioned. But from the looks on their faces as she emerged from the bathroom it was clear Logan hadn't said a word. Logan had always been much better at keeping secrets than either Duncan or Lilly, and this served as yet another reminder of his trustworthiness as a friend, even if at the moment it didn't serve her predicament.

Before Veronica could tell the boys she wanted to go home Duncan stepped into her personal space and wrapped his arm around her. "Hey, baby. Stop being so down. When you're with me you should be happy. I make you happy, don't I?" His voice was sweet but the undercurrent of irritation was grating.

Veronica wiped the moisture from her eyes and made a decision. Duncan may have been trying to make her feel bad for being a downer but the more she thought about it, the more it made sense. If she could just bury all the bad stuff she could be happy—at least on the outside. Happy on the outside seemed so much better than unhappy inside and out.

"Of course you do!" Veronica plastered a smile on her face. "See? Happy!" After that she let Duncan lead her through the attractions on the pier working hard to not let her smile slip. She just wanted things to be easy. Normal. Even if it meant ignoring the concerned looks Logan kept shooting her.

Duncan pulled them to a stop at a booth with old style milk jugs lined up. While he threw rings at the jugs—unsuccessfully—Veronica watched a little girl with her parents.

"Amber stay close," the mother said. Little Amber giggled and smiled brightly then took her mother's hand.

*I can be her, too.*

She thought about it in terms of how it had been when she was in a school play as a child. This wasn't so different, her audience was just smaller. She let herself melt into Duncan's side and tried to pretend Logan wasn't looking at her like she had sprouted horns.

Duncan left shortly after but Veronica decided that 'Amber' was someone she could be all the time. Even if she could tell she wasn't fooling Logan, he of all people would understand. So even when Duncan left she kept up her happy act, let it fill her, become her.

Logan led her into her house. The smell of alcohol had been erased and replaced with a pine-fresh scent. The whole house was immaculate, not just the kitchen.

"Thank you, Logan. It's like it never happened," she said softly and hugged him tightly. She pulled
away and Logan nodded. No words. He understood.

END FLASHBACK

Back then the façade had been that they had happy home lives, and today it was that both of them were even remotely in control of their emotions. Veronica could feel that she wasn't, but there was no way she would ever admit it and luckily Logan was willing to play along.

The door to enter the soup kitchen loomed. Veronica knew it was more daunting for Logan than for her. For her this was an escape from dealing with the emotions that were welling up in her. The drive to run away, escape, had been building all day. At least this was running away for a good reason and not as noticeable as if she were to literally run away.

"You ready for this?" Logan asked.

"You betcha! Let's get in there and do what we can to make this world a better place," Veronica said in her perkiest 'Amber' voice.

"Whatever you say, Mars. I'm following your lead here. I don't really know what the best thing to do is. Most of the people in there despise me, and I don't believe the world is a redeemable place."

Veronica reached out, took his hand, and whispered, "Liar. You're a hopeless romantic who loves movies with happy endings. Besides, they don't know the real you. Well, that part of you. Um...the person you use to...you're trying to be?" she stumbled for the right words to make him feel better.

"Right. Well, you're my buffer. Everyone likes you..."

"Ha! Come on, rich boy. No one is going to like either of us. It'll be just like at school. We should both be used to it."

Logan laughed out loud. "Guess you have a point there. Okay, I'm ready."

Falling back on their banter soothed Veronica's frayed nerves and gave her the confidence to stay in the present. She reached for the door and pulled it open. She stepped through when Logan took the door and held it open for her. Inside was dim and a bit dreary, but she could smell the pungent odor of some kind of garlic-heavy stew filling the air.

"At least it isn't the sad chicken from Friday. This smells...well, maybe not good, but you know, better?" Logan shrugged in her periphery.

"Where do we go? I guess you should lead the way."

Veronica let Logan step up next to her and waited for him to guide her to whomever they needed to speak with. He headed toward the far side of the building and then through a set of double doors.

"Frances!" Logan called out and approached an older Latino woman.

"Logan? I...well, I have to say I didn't expect to see you again. Estuardo, look who's here!"

A small Latino man appeared from behind an open pantry door.

"Logan Echolls. Well, this is a pleasant surprise. And you've brought a friend." He smiled warmly at Veronica.

Veronica stepped forward and held out her hand to Frances. "Veronica Mars."
"Mars..." the women looked her over. "The Sheriff's daughter?"

Veronica nodded. "One and the same."

"He was a good Sheriff. Fewer unwarranted arrests of our patrons," Estuardo said, accepting her hand next. "Are you here to help?"

"We both are. I really did mean what I said on Friday."

The couple nodded and Frances took Logan's hand. "We can always use the help. Why don't you both grab aprons; we'll have a full house tonight. And Logan, you should know, since you announced your father's gift to the shelter we've had more donations. We should have enough to feed everyone tonight."

Veronica smiled at the light blush creeping up Logan neck and his pinking cheeks. She felt warmth fill her. The ups and downs of her emotions may have been overwhelming her, but moments like this made the rollercoaster bearable—pleasurable even. She turned and grabbed two aprons, ready to do whatever she could to prolong the feeling.

Veronica set the last pan into the large industrial dishwasher and relaxed back against the counter while she waited for Logan to finish wiping off the rest of the prep surfaces.

"This was really different from when I was here with my dad..." Logan said, dropping his rag into the sink.

She nodded. His description from Friday did seem different from what she'd seen tonight. "I'm guessing your dad gave them instructions about what he wanted," she suggested.

"What'd you think?" He gestured at the space around them.

"Being here makes me feel like my problems aren't quite so bad..." she said, fiddling with the tie on her apron. It really did. These people were going through hell. Whereas her 'fall from grace' may have meant moving into a small apartment and being worried about having access to healthcare, she still had a home and a dad who loved her. And the other things that had happened to her...she didn't want to think about what similar things these people might be dealing with.

"I know what you mean. The kids..." Logan's eyes glistened in the fluorescent lighting. It was clear from what he'd told her that they must have really limited the number of homeless children who were present during the lunch on Friday.

"We should probably get going."

"Right. Of course." He wiped his brow, and she suspected his eyes, across his sleeve and pulled off his apron. "Well, if nothing else, I think volunteering here is going to help us both with perspective."

"No doubt about that. All right, you still owe me some ice cream from earlier, and I need the endorphins," Veronica said, removing her apron as well.

"There are some other ways to get endorphins that I'd be hap—" Veronica covered his mouth quickly.

"Nope, Echolls. Keep your perversions to yourself. Ice. Cream."

"Get your mind out of the gutter, Veronica," he teased, draping his arm across her shoulders and pulling her close to his side. "I was going to suggest we go for a run, maybe even a swim...get our
blood up..." His fingers tickled her waist.

Veronica jumped in surprise and then shoved him lightly as they reached the X-terra. "You're impossible!"

"It's good to be appreciated. Now get in. I have the whims of a tiny blonde to attend to." He pulled open the door and lifted her into the seat, bopping her on the nose just before shutting the door.

Veronica reached for the seat belt and let herself smile—let the feeling of giddiness fill her. She had definitely just flirted with Logan, and he had flirted back. Not like that first night on the beach lost in nostalgia, and not like when they were younger when it was just playful. This felt different. Would wonders never cease?

Casey sat in the hard visitor's chair in his grandmother's hospital room. There hadn't been any change in the past twenty-four hours. Of course he'd been warned that it was highly unlikely that there would be, but he'd still hoped. After her last stroke she'd woken confused and agitated, but she had woken up.

A gentle touch startled him.

"Casey, maybe we should head to the car. They've got your grandmother ready to transport. We're probably just in the way up here."

Casey turned to Holly Mills. She'd been so quite he'd forgotten she'd come with him. He nodded. "Yeah. I guess. I just...I guess I knew this day was coming I just never really believed it, you know?"

"Are you sure you don't want to call your parents? I know you've had issues with them but shouldn't they be here?"

"No. They can't know. They'll raid her home, try to take control. I'm not ready to step in and take over. I just need a little time."

"Casey, what about friends? You know we're there for you at the Collective, but I know you have other friends. Now is the time to lean on those who care about you, not to block people out."

He wished that were true. He couldn't talk about any of this with Darcy, she wouldn't understand, didn't understand. Most of his friends were too worried about getting into their top choice of colleges not the only family member who'd ever given a fuck about them dying.

"You've been spending time with Veronica Mars?"

"Oh, yeah, I have." It was a newer thing for him but if anyone could understand what he was dealing with Veronica might be just the right person. Maybe.

"I don't know, Dad. It wasn't what I was expecting."

Keith held out his bowl of ice cream, hoping she would open up if plied with her favorite food group.

She shook her head. "Logan took me to Amy's on the way home to make up for his ice cream theft earlier today. I couldn't eat more if I wanted to."

Keith had been more than a little surprised when they had gotten back from the zoo and Veronica
had told him that she and Logan were going to go do the evening session at the soup kitchen. There'd been a time when Keith would drop in there, leave his card, check in with the homeless population of Balboa County and see what issues they were facing.

"Honey, it's not easy helping others. The donation from the Echolls family, that's really going to help them."

"Yeah, I know. But the cost." She looked distraught; it was incongruous with her reaction so far.

Keith laughed. "I'm pretty sure they can afford it."

"Oh. Well, yes of course. That's not really what I meant, I guess," she finished lamely.

Keith felt, once again, like he was missing part of the conversation. It had happened several times that day—always in relation to Logan. There was something there, which wasn't exactly news to him. Seeing them together at the zoo in a few unguarded moments had only further confirmed what he already suspected, but clearly the kids weren't ready to discuss it with him. And knowing his daughter, pushing wouldn't work. Maybe manipulating Logan will be easier? He considered. Though Logan had shown himself to be quite impervious to Keith's tried and true interrogation techniques. And that didn't even begin to delve into the supposed pool side accident Logan had claimed was responsible for his back.

"Veronica?" he asked, shifting positions to face her where she now sat on the couch.

"Yeah, Dad?"

"You'd tell me if there was something wrong, wouldn't you?" Keith watched her face closely. Over the past year she'd gotten very good, almost too good, at hiding her feelings. But it was there, just the smallest twitch of her lip, a tightening at her temples, revealing that she might not. Before she could respond with the lie he saw forming on her lips, he interrupted, "Something is wrong. No need to lie, I can see it plainly enough. What's really going on with Logan, honey?"

He watched Veronica squirm and fidget, trying to buy time to make up a believable excuse, he was sure.

"It's complicated. But I'd tell you if it was more than I could handle. I promise."

He wasn't sure he believed her, but it was enough to know that there was something going on there. Now he could keep a closer eye, ferret it out. He decided to change the topic.

"Okay, Veronica. Now you mentioned that Cassidy Casablancas spoke with you..." Keith led, hoping to restart the conversation. Things had felt off—stilted—since the zoo, and he knew it was partially his own fault for teasing them about liking each other. He and Wallace thought they'd been stealthy, but apparently not.

"Oh right. Yeah. Big Dick wants to hire you to investigate his latest bimbo." Veronica hopped up onto a barstool at the kitchen island. "Cassidy is sure she's sleeping with one of his and Dick's friends."

Keith rubbed a tender spot on his head, not enough sunscreen... "What do you think? Have you met her?"

"No, but from a few comments Logan's made—" she shrugged —seems possible. She's pretty and young. Beaver said Big Dick would be coming by the office sometime tomorrow to do the paperwork."
Keith nodded. It was a strange thing. All of these rich, entitled, assholes who'd driven him out of office had no issue paying him good money to deal with their dirty laundry. *If only it came with better health insurance and a retirement package.*

"Sounds good. Maybe this'll be an exciting one. We could use something fun to investigate."

"Yeah and they're throwing a big party this coming weekend that I'm already invited to, so we could definitely do some recon...maybe even catch her in the act if she really is hooking up with one of the guys."

"That's a good idea. But maybe you should just go and have a good time at a normal party, honey?"

Veronica shook her head. "Those people aren't my friends anymore. I only agreed to go because Logan's so excited."

"You're going with Logan..."

"Well, yeah. Wallace is going to come too."

"Mhmm...I know you said you two aren't dating, but..."

"Please leave it alone. We're friends. He dated my best friend for years and I dated his best friend. Anyway, I have more than enough going on in my life. Adding a teenage romance...not high on my priority list."

Keith worked to keep his smile under control. None of it was a denial, much like Wallace had commented. He considered bringing it up with Rebecca, she might have some more insight. Or maybe not...

"Good to hear. Because I think I'm starting to like Logan again and I'd hate to have to put the fear of god in him. Now, I know what I said about him staying here and I'm not going to go back on that decision, but Veronica, I need you to be mature and responsible here. You have so much going for you. A whole future ahead of you. I don't want you to put that at risk. Okay?"

Keith expected a lot of reactions from Veronica, but not the one he got. She stood and moved to sit on the edge of his chair, her arms wrapped around his neck. "Thank you for always caring and putting me first. I love you."

He raised his arm and hugged her close. "I love you too, Veronica," he said, wishing he really had put her first more.

She stood and gave him a tentative smile. "I'm pretty tired. I'm going to hit the hay."

"I'm not far behind you. Goodnight, honey."

"'Night, Dad."

Keith stared at the muted TV, both confused and pleased. Since Logan had come back into Veronica's life he'd started to see more of her again. Not all of it was good, but at least more of her personality was showing through. Some of the softness she used to exude was showing; there was also a solemn sadness that he hadn't seen before but suspected it had to do with grieving for Lilly. So much bad had happened since Lilly's death, and he knew she never really got to go through grieving for her friend. Now it seemed that she and Logan were finally getting what they'd been missing.
Lynn poured a tumbler full of Aaron's Hayman Reserve; he'd be upset but she was past caring. She tipsily snorted to herself. No wonder Logan didn't go out of his way to not upset Aaron. Everything upset the man, so why bother.

The chimes that indicated someone had opened the front gate tinkled merrily through the room, a reminder that things were supposed to be wonderful. That everything about their home was designed to be a stage for their wonderful life. She'd spent too many nights sitting in the big, stark rooms to think it was true anymore.

Banging around followed by the sound of footsteps announced Logan's arrival, and out of habit, she widened her eyes and smiled as much as her paralyzed facial muscles would let her.

"Welcome home, darling, did you have a nice weekend?"

"Cut the act, Mom, he isn't here."

Lynn wilted under the harshness of his words; it was rare for Logan to say such things, though she also tried not to play her role when it was just them. "Sorry, I'm...

"I know. It's just been a long day, and I don't want to have to fake it."

"How was your day, baby?"

"Veronica went back to the soup kitchen with me."

Lynn moved to join Logan on the sofa. "The soup kitchen? Why?"

"I'm trying something different."

"And Veronica, what's she got to do with this different thing you're trying?"

"Everything I guess."

"You know I've always loved Veronica. Are you two friends again? I know she was here on Friday after..."

"Yeah, friends. Mom, what if there's more there? What if I wanted there to be more? I mean, Lilly..."

"Oh, baby, I know you cared about Lilly, but she's gone. And I know for all her faults one thing she wouldn't want is for you to feel bad for caring about Veronica. She cared about you both so much."

"Maybe." Logan shrugged. "I'm not so sure sometimes."

It was rare for Logan to open up about anything, let alone Lilly. Lynn, tried to think of what to say next, her lightly buzzing head slowing her thoughts. Images flitted through her mind of Logan, Veronica, and the Kane's playing in their pool, watching movies, going to school dances and filled her with a deep sadness.

"Logan, I know I wasn't around for so much of what happened between the four of you, but I know you all cared for each other—"

"I thought so too, Mom. But what do we know, you think Aaron cares about us too, fuck sometimes I even believe it."

Lynn startled, almost dropping her tumbler at Logan's harsh words.
"But you know what, Mom? Then I remember all the terrible shit I did to Veronica this past year. She believed I cared about her and look what I did to her."

Lynn reach out for Logan, taking his hand in hers. "You are not like him. Don't compare yourself. Tell me honestly, all that 'terrible shit' as you put it you did to Veronica, did you ever not care about her while you were doing it?"

He stared at her, eyes wild like the slightest movement would spook him. After several ragged breaths he said, "Never. I hated her, I loved her. I..." He stood abruptly. "I'm just really tired." He leaned over, kissed her on the cheek and bolted from the room.

Lynn swirled the clear liquid around the tumbler. She and Logan hadn't exchanged that many words with each other in she didn't know how long. It killed her that he thought he was like his father. Lynn didn't think she'd be able to convince him otherwise, but knowing that Veronica was back in his life gave her hope that he'd figure it out on his own.

She smiled to herself; Veronica and Logan friends again. It filled her with a lightness she'd forgotten was possible. Logan was always the best version of himself when he was with her. Kind, considerate, loving. Witty and sarcastic were there too, but lacking the harsh edge that did remind her of Aaron. Lynn took a sip from the tumbler and twirled a strand of her hair at the base of her neck. There were so many good things possible in the world, she just hoped Logan got to see more of them than she had.

Sitting in his SUV, Duncan watched Logan and Veronica head into the soup kitchen through his camera. Their presence at the soup kitchen left Duncan equal parts confused and irritated. He and Veronica had done a few community service project together while they were together but this felt different. There were no teacher chaperones meeting them, or other NHS students coming to volunteer. Duncan almost had a mind to follow them in and put in some hours too. But then he remembered all the ways he'd been acting off and how he needed them to trust him.

"Acting like a stalker is not going to make them trust you, Duncan," Lilly said from the passenger seat.

"Lils I told you I'm not stalking, I'm concerned about Veronica. Besides you're just a hallucination, Dr. Levine warned me about this and I'd really appreciate it if you'd just leave me alone."

"But Donut, I'm here to be your Jiminy Cricket," the figment of his imagination singsonged.

"I already have a conscience and if I were in need of a different one, I wouldn't choose you, Lilly."

"Why not? I was an awesome person! Look how much they're hurting because I'm gone." She pointed out the window at Logan and Veronica as they walked arm and arm into the shelter.

"They both hurt when you were here too. You were terrible to Logan, you lied to Veronica, you used me to lie to them both."

"Well, when you put it like that," she huffed.

"Look, I just don't want Logan to hurt her. Someday things will be different and—"

"And what baby brother? You'll be able to be with Veronica again? She's our sister. You can't be with her."

"If we were careful—"
"Like you were careful last time? You're just lucky she didn't end up pregnant. Not that you'd know if she had."

"She would have told me. No, we both agreed to never speak about it."

"So if you're never going to speak about it how are things going to be different? Take the bull by the horns brother."

A loud horn sounded across the street, a beat up truck running a red light barely missing a two tone original VW bug.

Duncan shuddered, this was a bad neighborhood and Veronica only had Logan to protect her. No, he was here too, he'd reveal himself if necessary, no matter what Lilly thought. Duncan refocused on the parking lot across the street where Logan's Xterra was parked. Logan and Veronica had long since gone into the shelter but he was sitting here arguing with—

He turned his head to acknowledge Lilly but she was gone. He shook his head and restarted the Mercedes. His mother was expecting him and would be upset if he were late.

Chapter End Notes

The accompanying flashback from Logan's POV can be found in Chapter 16.

Huge thanks to Bondopoulos and Marshmallowtasha for their help, support, and thoughtful beta/editing :)

And thank you to all of you reading and reviewing! You are all so wonderful and your encouragement is inspiring. I know updates are slow coming but I have this whole sucker outlined, so I'm just going to keep plugging away at it when I have the time :}
When the World Starts to Change

Chapter Notes

A quick and (not so) dirty previously on Time, make it go faster or just rewind: Logan gets beat for donating 500k to the soup kitchen. Veronica takes him to her house for the night since Keith is out of town. Wallace argues with his mother and is no longer allowed to spend time with Logan and Veronica - he makes a deal with Weevil for a friend his mom will approve of (Norman), who turns out to be Cervando. They all go to the zoo where everyone around them realizes and points out (much to Veronica's annoyance) that LoVe totally have it bad for each other, but they're both uncertain (for now really I promise!). LoVe go back to the soup kitchen and volunteer. Beaver approaches Veronica about finding out who his stepmom (Sadie) is cheating on his dad with. Duncan is stalking LoVe. Casey's grandmother has another stroke and he moves out to the Moon Calf Collective. Lots of subplots running here!

Duncan arrived at school Monday morning filled with excitement. Other than the short time he'd followed Logan and Veronica on Sunday, he'd spent most of the weekend bouncing ideas around with his mother about ways he could really make the most of his new role as council president. Though his best idea had been his own brainchild.

He was going to expand Pirate Points.

He'd given a lot of thought to Wanda's proposition of abolishing Pirate Points for being unfair and showing a preference for the wealthy kids. Something even Duncan could acknowledge as the truth, and that realization had planted the seed of his new plan. The sports teams and student government were heavily populated with '09ers and they were the only ones with Pirate Points. It didn't take a genius to work that one out. But rather than take it away entirely—and spark a mutiny, watching Logan and Veronica at the Neptune Homeless Shelter had given him a better idea: a presidency based on meeting the needs of his whole constituency.

His father had loved the idea. Called him a "man of the people" and Duncan couldn't deny it. He did like the idea of more people liking him over this. Duncan hadn't thought much about what the other students at NHS thought of him up to the present, but the election showed that, at least on some level, most of the school liked him. Expanding Pirate Points would likely enhance his popularity and the overall opinion others had of him. Duncan liked the contrast that set with Logan, who was popular but mostly despised. He wanted Veronica to see that, and if he couldn't get Logan to do things that would drive her away, then Duncan would do things to inspire her admiration. Maybe even bring Veronica a little closer when she saw that Duncan was the more selfless of the two.

Veronica would respect his idea. Even if she was still acting uneasy around him. In hindsight, blowing up and accusing her of sleeping with Logan had been foolish. Though he really hadn't expected it to take her so long to get over it. She'd always been so forgiving and gentle. Well...mostly.

FLASHBACK

Duncan rested his shoulders against the cool metal of his locker and let his eyes settle on Veronica's
locker just across the hall. She hadn't requested a new one after they'd all fallen apart. While Duncan's functionality wasn't at its peak by any means, he'd found a new source of hope inside himself after his special night with her. He hadn't seen her since, but she would be arriving any moment. He could feel it.

Just behind him he heard a low whistle and turned to see what had caught Logan's attention.

Logan moved toward the small blonde making her way down the hall. "Ronnie Mars!" He whistled again. "What is this?" Logan flicked Veronica's shorn locks that stuck out unevenly.

Duncan's chest clenched. That can't be Veronica?

"Wow, Mars. What dumpster did you crawl out of?" Logan's eyes burned with excitement. Duncan hadn't seen him look so alive in months. Duncan turned his attention back to the small blonde and saw that same fire reflected there.

"Yours, Logan. You know how much I like Mrs. Navarro's cookies. Gotta get what I need." She smirked cruelly and it made Duncan's heartache.

Sean Friedrich, who had been standing back by Duncan, stepped forward and grabbed Veronica's shoulder, turning her to face him. "Makes sense, this look must be one of Trina's rejects. You'd fit right in with her playing Dead Hooker #4. Right, Logan?"

Veronica visibly shrunk at his works, then her face hardened. She grabbed Sean's hand, gripping a pressure point by the look of agony on his face. "Don't fucking touch me!"

Sean twisted out of her grasp in time for Logan to grab him by the neck—no longer paying attention to Veronica. "Don't talk about my sister like that or I'll find a pressure point that'll hurt more than what Mars just did." Logan shoved Sean away and rejoined Duncan.

"You don't even like Trina," Duncan said in a low voice.

"No. But I'm the only one who gets to talk about her like that. Now get your shit, DK. I don't want detention on the first day back at school, my dad's in town."

END FLASHBACK

Duncan stopped at his locker, dropped a few things off, and turned to look back at Veronica's old locker. It had been less than a year ago when she'd practically brought Sean to his knees and fought back when Logan antagonized her. It had been like watching a stranger inhabit his Veronica, who was gentler, softer. Over the year he'd seen other versions of Veronica, but none as aggressive. At first, it had really bothered Duncan but he had different facets of himself so it made sense that maybe she did too. So long as she kept his special version of herself just for him. And so far that had been true. Duncan walked down the hall dodging the various groups of his new constituents as he made his way toward the main office.

The last time he'd seen his Veronica had been the night of Shelly's party. It had been magical. Like a night out of time. He had never brought it up, and she certainly never had. The next time he'd seen her she'd been different, and even if he had wanted to bring up what had passed between them, he found the new her kind of scary. She'd clearly put away his Veronica. He liked to imagine she'd put that part of herself away somewhere safe. To wait. Until things were different. Until her being his sister didn't matter.

Walking on autopilot, Duncan found himself at the school's main offices. He let his mind dwell on his favorite image of Veronica, like an angel in white with softly glowing hair. Then he rolled his
shoulders and put her away where he kept her safe inside him.

Once in the office, he headed for the announcements desk and took a seat. He'd be announcing the new policy for Pirate Points this morning and felt a familiar, but long forgotten tingle. Excitement.

Veronica quickly settled into her desk at the back of the room, Logan sitting next to her. He looked tired, but his color was better and he had a softness to him she was still getting used to seeing again.

The trip to the soup kitchen must have helped, she thought, opening her book and waiting for the start of day's announcements. A folded slip of paper landed on her desk with soft *woosh*. She unfolded and opened it as Duncan's voice came over the PA.

"My fellow students, it is with great pleasure that I..."

Veronica tuned Duncan out; the student council plans were of little interest to her now that the election was over. At some point, she really did need to think of a way to make Wanda pay, but Veronica needed to wait for the right moment—a moment when she could extract the most bang for her buck. With a shake of her head, she turned her attention to the note on her desk. Logan's looping print filled the small page:

*Free tonight? Studying and a movie? Maybe work on the thing?*

Next to the last question was a drawing of a lily. Logan wanted to dig into Lilly's case. Veronica felt her mouth pull into a smile. She turned to Logan, nodded her head with enthusiasm, and slipped the note into her pocket.

Well, Veronica, the way he found out about your investigation might not have been so great, but it looks like Logan is ready to help you the way he said he would. Maybe things are looking up.

Duncan's voice came back to her attention as he signed off. "I hope you all have a great day, and I look forward to being your president."

Veronica turned to Logan to ask if he had heard any of the announcements, but was interrupted by the voice of their teacher as she started her spiel on the new chapter they were starting. Only slightly disappointed, Veronica refocused on the task at hand.

"Keith."

Richard Casablancas Senior extended this hand across the desk toward Keith, who accepted it and shook firmly. Back when he'd still been sheriff, they'd had several encounters involving the kids. Usually, it just involved Dick being out after the minor's curfew with Logan and a few of the other children of the more affluent Neptunians. Even Veronica on a few notable occasions. Though one time stood out as different from the rest, they'd reported a pet missing or taken. It'd been a few years ago and had always bothered Keith, but pets went missing and sometimes were stolen. He just hadn't had the resources to investigate a case with such limited evidence.

"Mr. Casablancas, come on back to my office."

Keith led the way through the main area into his office, passing Veronica's empty desk brought him a modicum of relief that she was in school. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate her help, but he could see the experience of working on cases changing her, reshaping her view of the world. And that was just
the ones he knew about. He knew she was working off-book but didn't know how to stop her without restricting his own caseload—something their checking account couldn't afford. It was a no-win scenario, his own personal *Kobayashi Maru.*

He wasn't sure what was going to come out of this meeting but hoped he could keep Veronica out of it since it might involve people she was friends with. His detective-sense had him thinking that wasn't very likely though. Keith gestured to the open seat on the customer side of his desk and then took a seat himself.

"Really, Keith, call me Dick. Never did much care for the name Richard," Dick said, taking the seat Keith had indicated.

"So Veronica told me a little about why you'd be coming in today. Honestly, I'm kind of surprised," Keith told him, folding his hands on top of the desk.

"You and me both. Beaver informed me last night that he'd reached out to you about his stepmother, Sadie. I thought the boys liked her." Dick scratched his head, feigning confusion. Keith wasn't buying it.

"I kind of thought that was why you were here...because the boys like her too much. Or is it maybe more of a case of *her* liking the boys too much?"

"So it seems." Dick's eyes narrowed for a moment. The good ol' boy demeanor slipped slightly but was back in place in the blink of an eye. Keith shifted to full alert.

"What is it you, or your sons, think is going on?"

"Beaver's convinced Sadie is sleeping with one of their friends. His words were 'one of their famous friends,' which really limits who we could be talking about."

"Do you think Logan is sleeping with your wife?"

The act Dick had been employing dropped, but this time it looked intentional. "I do not. I'd sooner believe Aaron was the one sleeping with her." Dick's countenance darkened considerably. "Wouldn't be the first time Aaron was caught sleeping with one of my wives."

"I thought you were friends with Aaron Echolls?"

"I am."

"Okay, then." Keith couldn't pretend to understand how the interpersonal relationships of the Neptune elite worked. It made him regret yet again that he'd ever given into Lianne and moved them to Neptune instead of taking the promotion back in Fresno. "Dick, do you want me to look into this?"

"I do. You and Veronica. Beaver and Dick have both told me what a *resourceful* young woman she is. I'm having my annual Halloween party this coming weekend. I'm told Veronica will be going..."

"I'm not sure I'm comfortable bringing Veronica in on this. Especially if it turns out to be true that your wife is having an affair with one of your sons' classmates."

"Whatever you think is best. But Veronica will be at the party and I'd be happy to give you all the access you need. Here's the thing though Keith, and don't be upset, your daughter can blend at my party, whereas you cannot."
Keith nodded. It was true. He'd never blend there; no one would believe he was socializing with the likes of the Casablancas' and Echollses. Everyone would know exactly why he was there, just not who he was there investigating. From his years as sheriff and now a PI, Keith knew it could be pretty much any of them who were being investigated, and for anything from infidelity to insider trading. Almost anything was possible with the '09ers.

Veronica, on the other hand, used to be friends with most of the kids who would be in attendance. She and Logan were close again and everyone knew it. No one would bat an eyelash at her being there. Logan would be with her; she'd be safe with him. There would definitely be a discussion about underage drinking and his daughter's future but the plan had more merit than he was happy to admit. What was one more concession after so many?

"Okay, Dick. I'm going to do some preliminary work and see if I can't shake something loose. Depending on what I find, we'll use the party as a chance to observe Sadie in the wild, so to speak."

Dick stood, reached into his pocket, and extracted a folded check. He passed the check to Keith through a handshake. Dick's eyes lingered on the check in Keith's hand. "Discretion?"

With a glance down Keith replied, "Absolutely."

"Excellent, Keith. I'm interested to see what you find." With that, Dick strode out of Keith's office. A few seconds later, the bell on the main door announced his departure.

Keith sat back at his desk and unfolded the check. Eight Gs. It was more than double their standard fee and had Keith wondering what all Richard Casablancas Senior wanted him to be discrete about.

Logan strolled down the hall, underclassmen parting as he approached. It was funny, he'd never really spent that much time thinking about it but he walked through most of his life that way,— everything parting around him, requiring very little meaningful interaction. It was as though he was always just skating the surface, only truly interjecting himself when the people involved were important to him, which meant Duncan, Lilly, and Veronica, occasionally his mother.

It gave another layer of clarity and self-awareness to how he'd felt and acted after Lilly's death. Nothing was left but pain and the only reactionary outlet: the people he cared for the most. Duncan was so drugged that he was hollow, his mother had been a shell for years, and Veronica...

"Hey," Veronica said, startling Logan from his thoughts, as she fell into step next to him. "Did you catch any of Duncan's policy stuff this morning? It seems like everyone was talking about it today."

"Huh." Logan shrugged. "I guess, but who cares about any of that? Pirate Points are here to stay, ahoy..." He, in fact, had heard all about it during most of his classes.

"Um, most of our classmates..."

"Yeah, yeah. Go Pirates!" He pumped his fist in the air and rolled his eyes. "I'm more concerned about what movie we're going to watch tonight. I think I should have first choice—"

"And why is that?" she asked, crossing her arms under her breasts, creating just the slightest bit of visible cleavage that drew Logan's gaze and sent a warm shudder through him. He'd been physically reacting more and more strongly to Veronica since the trip to the zoo, but the crowded halls of Neptune High were not the place to explore how she might react to any of the advances he was fantasizing about. As casually as he could, Logan shifted the books he held to
cover his growing erection and, with no small effort, looked down the hall toward the exit.

"Well, there's the obvious: I have better taste in movies. And then there's the fact that you'd have us watch *The South Park Movie...* again," Logan said, pushing the door open on the lesser used side exit that they were taking out to the parking lot.

Veronica stepped in front of him as they walked through the door with a shrug. "I think the fact that you don't want to watch *The South Park Movie* again is more of a negative reflection on you than on me. What do you want to watch? *You've Got Mail*? And don't think I'm not aware that you cry at the end every time."

"I'm not embarrassed, that is a classic-in-the-making, rom-com, and further proof of my good taste."

Veronica snorted. Logan was undeterred, though *You've Got Mail* was not at the top of his list for the night. "I was going to suggest *Anchorman*, Mars. But now it's *50 First Dates* or bust."

"Compromise?"

"I'm listening."

Veronica stopped walking, spun on her heel, and shot him a toothy grin. "Both." She then strode off toward her car, leaving Logan staring after her with more than his heart pulsing faster. Both indeed.

Cassidy watched Logan and Veronica flirt their way across the NHS parking lot. They were almost cute—even he could admit that, and maybe in a different life he would have been happy to see people he was supposed to care about being happy. But it wasn't a different life, and he was who he was. That was just not how he was wired for amusement.

Unlike the masses gossiping in the halls of Neptune High, Cassidy had work to do. So far things were progressing nicely. He'd have Sadie out of his house and life by the end of the weekend. That would be one less set of untrusting eyes watching him. He actually did care that she was constantly trying to sleep with Dick's friends and cheating on his dad with who knew how many other men. But, more than that, Cassidy cared that Sadie had way too much free time. Sadie didn't have much of an attention span, but what little she did have was recently and inconveniently focused on Cassidy.

It really pissed him off that she was such a nosy bitch. If Sadie hadn't overheard him and Peter talking about Coach Goodman, Cassidy wouldn't have had to worry about her as a complication. But no such luck. She had to go before she created more problems.

"Speaking of problems..." he muttered to himself as Duncan Kane walked across his sightline. Duncan was proving more unstable and harder to control than expected.

Cassidy broke into a quick jog and caught up to Duncan, grabbing lightly on the strap of Duncan's duffle to get his attention.

Duncan's bright smile faltered when he turned and made eye contact with Cassidy. He recovered after a moment and stepped back. It was subtle, but Cassidy saw it. Duncan was afraid of him. Good. Maybe this part of the game would be back on track in time for the Halloween party.

"Beav, you have any input for me to take to the student council?" Duncan asked, presenting an affable air.
"No, Duncan, but I have some advice for you. Next time you want to screw with Logan and Veronica, don't. Your idiotic plan backfired and the two of them seem closer than before."

Duncan's hail-fellow-well-met demeanor broke. "It just wasn't enough. I'll prove to her—"

Cassidy shook his head. "You'll prove you're a lunatic. Can't you see it when she looks at you? You're making it worse, she doesn't trust you and, to top it all off, she and Logan are..." Cassidy waffled his hand, searching for a word that wouldn't set Duncan further off track. "They're getting too...friendly. Neither of us wants that, now do we?"

Duncan sulked. "No. What is your big plan? It's not like you tell me anything."

"And whose fault is that. You've been avoiding me. So I think, until you get your head on straight, you'll be staying in the dark on my plans. Just remember, we both want the same outcome, so stay on task. Be the normal, all-American, boy you were before... Lilly."

Duncan visibly paled, nodded, and walked away.

So long as Duncan played ball, things would be on track for Halloween. Maybe if setting up Logan with Sadie didn't work out he could use Duncan...it had potential.

Veronica pulled out her laptop and booted up the secondary partition she had created to hide her investigative files. She glanced up and saw Logan fidgeting with knickknacks and avoiding the spot on the couch next to her. It actually felt strange that he hadn't sat down too close to her. It had seemed like he was always too close. Maybe it wasn't so much too close as just close, and she missed it when his warmth and buzzing energy weren't in her space.

"Come sit down, we need a direction to start looking. There's just so much here."

Logan turned on his heel and came to the couch and sat, legs jangling, pen clicking, and jittery as a ten-year-old after an espresso. "Maybe this wasn't a good idea tonight. We could just get the movie?"

"This was your idea. It'll be fine. We just need to start putting the evidence into a context relevant to who Lilly was. Even my dad didn't really know all of it—not the parts of Lilly she kept hidden," Veronica said, resigned to the fact that Lilly must have hidden so much.

"Well, she had a secret that she didn't stick around at the car wash to tell you about. Do you know why?"

Veronica leaned back heavily into the couch. That was true. If Lilly had such a big secret to share, then why hadn't she stuck around and given Veronica a ride home? "You think she was supposed to meet someone?"

"Makes sense. We know she was alive after the TOD the coroner gave, so she didn't head straight home after the car wash. Which means she went somewhere."

"Okay. So on our list should be: checking which intersection that red light camera was from. That might clue us in to where she could have been coming from. It's coded on the ticket, but that shouldn't be hard to find out," Veronica agreed as she opened up a text file and began making a list.

"It really bothers me that the coroner's time of death can't be right."
Veronica nodded; it bothered her too. She scrolled down the list of scanned files until she reached the right one.

"The TOD was determined by a technician at the scene and confirmed at the morgue, which I think is normal from what I've heard my dad say," she added after seeing the lines of Logan's mouth set. She scanned further down the document trying to avoid the harsher parts — blunt force, possible implement found in pool. She finally found what she was looking for. "This isn't the elected county coroner. I don't know this name."

Logan's chin pressed into her shoulder as he leaned in to read the screen. "Michelle Powell, M.D."

Veronica continued to stare at the name. It didn't seem completely out of the question that they might have brought in someone from San Diego or maybe L.A.

"Do you think it's a fake name?" Logan asked, his chin digging into her shoulder with each word.

She dislodged his chin with a shrug and turned to face him. "Maybe. More likely they brought in someone from one of the nearby cities. At least that would be my guess. I'm pretty sure my dad would have caught a fake name or someone without credentials."

"Okay, so that means the person is probably legit. What do we do next? Try to find Dr. Powell?"

"That's a good option. Though if she's been paid off we might tip them off to our investigation. I'm thinking I'll run a background check next time Dad is out of town."

"Can't we at least Google her right now?" Logan asked reaching for the keyboard.

"Not a good idea," she said, shifting the laptop out of his reach. "Specific searches can actually be monitored."

"Oh, really? That's creepy." Logan shivered dramatically.

"Don't worry no one cares how often you search for 'Alyssa Milano nude,'" she teased and elbowed him in ribs.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up, Mars. So all that aside, we have a place to start?"

"We do. And once we know whether Dr. Powell lied or was mistaken we'll have a whole new direction to look. If she lied, there might be money we could trace, and if she didn't lie, then we know something was done that led both a coroner's assistant and a doctor to determine the wrong time of death."

It felt like something was finally happening—some reality breaking free from the nightmare of Lilly's murder and providing a tangible lead. A euphoric rush of adrenaline swirled in Veronica's belly.

You're really doing this, Veronica. You're really doing this.

The smooth, softness of Rebecca's sleeve brushed against Keith's as she slid her arm through his. Keith pulled her a little closer and slowed his pace as they strolled toward Amy's on the pier. A nice sweet end to another pleasant date. He let out a contented sigh. He'd really missed the comfort and warmth of being intimate with another person.

"It nice to see you so relaxed, Keith. I'm not sure you were even this mellow at Santana," Rebecca
said with a playful nudge.

"I've had a surprisingly good day, and it's ending with my special lady friend and some ice cream. Why wouldn't I be relaxed?" He looked down at her and laughed outright at the disbelief on her face.

"Laugh all you want, but last time you were able to make time in your busy schedule for me, you almost blew your top over innocent pictures of your daughter with one of her friends."

Keith stopped laughing but continued to smile. He released Rebecca's arm and instead wrapped his across her shoulders, pulling her in close against him. "Innocent might be a bit of a stretch, but I had a talk with them, and I'll be having more talks with them, don't you worry about that."

"The thought never crossed my mind. So what are they up to tonight?"

"Veronica says homework and a movie."

"Veronica says? You don't believe her?" she asked, turning out of his hold.

"Did I say that?"

Taking a step further out and facing him head on she shook her head. "No, but it was implied. What do you think they're doing?"

Keith huffed a tired sigh. This wasn't what he wanted to be talking about with Rebecca. Though for a moment he considered asking her about Logan, then changed his mind. "Are you trying to counsel me, Ms. James?"

A stilted giggle shook her small frame and she moved to tuck herself back under his arm. "Nope, nope. Not my intention, I'm not getting involved unless you want me to. I just, well, Veronica...and Logan. I think whatever's going on, it's good. They're both different. Not like before...but maybe better. I'd really like to continue to see them looking happy."

"Me too. I just don't want Veronica to lose sight of her plans. Duncan—"

"Logan is not Duncan, Keith. Okay, I'm just going to say one more thing and then we'll focus on ice cream. I think they're both grieving kids who just might finally be facing that pain and that it might be bringing some other emotions to the surface. Emotions that, as a dad, you may not be too comfortable with but should let run their course."

"I know." He looked into her face and found her lips pulled into a skeptical moue. Keith couldn't resist, he gave her a quick kiss with a laugh, then said, "I know, really I do but it doesn't mean I have to like it. And you'll be happy to know I haven't put any restrictions on them spending time together, yet."

Keith smiled down at a now laughing Rebecca, stole another kiss, and led her up to the counter to place their order. He may not always want to hear it, but she seemed to have better than expected insights into his daughter and Logan. The additional perspective was helping him cope with the future he could see building between Veronica and Logan. A future where he worried for Veronica's heart after having lost too much already.

The heat from Logan's arm sent tingles through Veronica's chest as he pulled her against him so they
could both walk through the doors into Neptune Video. He'd always been a strong physical presence. Even with the old, and short-lived crush Veronica had for him, she'd never really considered what it might be like to have his full attention, and intention, directed at her. But after the weekend, and past few weeks, she was more confident in her ability to assess his feeling, and that they were more than friendly. And she had to admit that she liked it; the hot flame of his intensity and something more that was hard to define beyond how it made her feel —giddy and almost like the girl before Lilly died, but now with an edge.

How she'd gotten that edge was the splash of cold water she'd needed to pull herself away, create more distance, even if it was only physical. With a small smile, she slid out of his grasp and strode off toward the back of the store. She heard a sigh from behind her and then his footsteps changed pace to keep up with her.

*Sorry, Logan, forgiveness isn't amnesia. And this girl hasn't forgotten.*

"Come on, we deserve a reward. That was intense going through those files," he said, coming bodily up to her but not quite touching her.

Veronica reached for the happy calm she'd felt before and let herself relax into the banter. "Ha! That was nothing! C'mon, you helped with all the scanning, that was way more intense than what we did tonight."

"Irrelevant. It felt like it took forever. Made things more real. Now I want to watch something good while getting sugar high."

Veronica let her fingers slide along the movie titles. She'd led them to the '80s section of the rental store and her attention caught on one of Aaron Echolls' early films. She snapped it off the shelf and hid it behind her back.

*I've got the perfect movie. It's got to be one of your favorites," she teased, turning to face Logan again."

"You think you're so clever, Mars. Let's see it's got to be either *Clash of the Titans* or *King of the Mountain*. And you know full well I won't watch either of those."

"I'll have you know it isn't either of those."

Logan stepped closer to her, his longer arm reaching around behind her, his chest barely making contact with her own.

Veronica pouted. "Spoilsport. Fine, we'll get something else." She turned to put the movie back on the shelf and bumped into a familiar figure.

"Hi, Veronica," Justin said with a shy smile, toe digging into the gray industrial carpet.

"Justin, hey." Logan's hand settled on her shoulder, steadying her, but it also felt possessive. She turned toward Logan and saw his typical cynical smirk, which might as well be a totally neutral expression, it could mean almost anything.

Justin's attention turned to Logan and he stuttered, "Lo-Logan Echolls. Oh man, you're friends with Veronica Mars..." Justin's expression turned from excited to crestfallen.

"You gonna introduce me to your friend, Ronnie?"

She elbowed him in the side. "Don't call me Ronnie if you're going to be an ass."
"Excuse my poor manners, Justin, video store person. How do you know my friend here?"

"Veronica found my, um...dad."

Logan's smirk faded into a softer expression as the hand on her shoulder gave a gentle squeeze and dropped. Had that been a flare of jealousy before? Over his mini-me wannabe? Must be frosted tip-envy.

"How's that going?" Veronica asked, putting Logan's reaction off to think about later.

"Great," Justin beamed. "Julia's taking me to this computer design and programming workshop at UCSD. I'm more of a graphic design guy, but it'll still be cool."

"That is great. And your mom?"

He looked down at the floor again. "Doesn't know."

Veronica nodded. That was a tricky tightrope he had to walk.

"Right. Well, we were picking out a movie..." Logan's words hung in the air.


"All the better. Zero Effect it is," Logan took the case from Veronica and handed it to Justin. "Bill Pullman called Aaron a self-absorbed pretty boy to his face, and I've been a fan ever since."

Justin gave Veronica a confused look but didn't comment. Veronica gave him a wink and a smile, which earned her a big goofy grin.

"I'll have that movie up front for you guys in just a minute."

"Thanks, Justin," she said and turned to catch back up with Logan.

"Done flirting with the munchkin?"

"That was not flirting. And if you can't tell when I'm flirting, then you haven't been paying attention," Veronica said and turned to head down a different aisle. A moment later a warm heavy arm slid across her shoulders and pulled her into a hard chest.

"I've been paying attention."

The end credits rolled slowly down the screen and Veronica snored softly against Logan's arm. When she'd fallen asleep a little over half-way through the second movie, he'd wanted to wrap his arm around her but was worried that not only would it be creepy that he'd waited until she was asleep but also that she wouldn't be receptive.

Though his belief that she would never return his somewhat-more-than-friendly feelings was being shaken, there was an understandable skittishness there that made Logan confident it needed to be her move rather than his. More still, he needed to come clean with her about having GHB at Shelly's party the previous year. There was no way she would forgive him if they advanced their relationship to more than friends without that confession being laid bare.

Then there was Keith. He was being pretty cool about all the time they were spending together. He'd
even let Logan stay over and teased them about flirting with each other. But there was a big
difference between Keith being okay with Logan "Veronica's friend" and him being okay with
Logan "Veronica's boyfriend." What sane father would want Logan dating their daughter—none.
Maybe especially Keith, since he was very aware of the sorts of activities Logan had been known to
get up to. Sex, parties, drinking...bum fights.

Logan still needed to talk to Veronica about the pictures leaked to The Smoking Gun. There was
something off about them. Something off about the whole situation. He went back over the afternoon
and the previous few days in his head and it hit him. He'd spent a lot of time at the Mars' apartment
but no other pictures had been posted to TSG.

That couldn't be right. He gently shifted Veronica off his shoulder and back onto the couch and then
reached for her laptop. A quick search revealed that the only new images starring "Logan Echolls"
that had hit the internet were from his own driveway.

"If the paparazzi found a friend of mine without privacy fences, they'd still be all over it hoping to get
more incrementing pictures," he mumbled to himself before he carefully got up from the couch to
look out the windows. Nothing looked amiss. The neighbors from upstairs were sitting out on one of
the picnic benches watching their little dog scamper about. People were coming and going, but they
all looked familiar. Logan had spent enough time at Veronica's lately to know who belonged.

"Hey, whatcha doin'?" Veronica asked groggily from behind him.

"Checking for spies," he said, dropping the blinds back into place. He turned back to face her and
was met with a skeptical look. "I'm being totally serious."

"Okay. Spies? I can't imagine the government has much interest in the Sunset Cliffs Apartment
complex."

"Not those kinds of spies, silly girl. Spies of the National Enquirer or People magazine variety."

"Oh sure, those kinds of spies. You know most people call them photographers or paparazzi. Makes
it easier to know what you're talking about when you use the most specific adjective."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, save it for class. I'm being completely serious. Have you noticed anyone who
doesn't belong here?"

"Besides you?"

"Hardee har-har. Yes, besides me, and anyway you're the one who keeps dragging me over here.
Me, I prefer my life of pampering. Here you make me help with the dishes."

"Go home if you dislike it so much," she said, a slight growl in her voice.

Now he'd done it. He walked slowly toward her, hands out, placating. "Maybe you should go back
to sleep and we can start this conversation over. See, I'm being a jackass and you keep distracting me
from what I want to tell you."

Her face softened just the barest amount, and then she settled back on the couch and closed her eyes
for just a moment. They popped back open and she restarted their conversation, "Hey, whatcha
doin'?"

Logan let out a tense breath and moved to sit next to her. "I think the Smoking Gun photos represent
a different problem than we originally thought."
"How's that?" she asked, her annoyance from earlier now fully replaced with concern.

He pointed to the window. "No photographers out there. No new photos posted of us together here."

Veronica nodded her head. "Of course. Paps would be swarming this place if they thought they could get compromising photos of Aaron Echolls' bad-boy son." She folded her hands in her lap and twisted a few of her rings. "But they haven't. What does that mean..." she trailed off and continued fiddling with her rings.

"You thought the style looked familiar?"

"I did. I think we need to spend some more time looking into who sent in the tip and the photos. We're going to need someone with skills I don't have."

A creased formed between her brows—frustration. Logan couldn't help but laugh. "Not too often something is beyond your reach, huh, Mars?"

"Only this and the top shelf in the kitchen," she said, a laugh finally breaking through her serious demeanor.

"Have someone in mind?"

"Not right off the top of my head. I'll do some scouting tomorrow. Unless you know someone."

"I'd probably ask Duncan. You know, Kane Software and all. But would you believe that kid doesn't even know how to use incognito mode on his web browser? I know you won't be shocked to find out his browser history is full of tight blon—"

Veronica's hand smothered the rest of his words. "That's more than I need to know."

Logan puckered his lips and pressed a wet kiss into the palm of Veronica's hand.

"Ewww. Now I'm all wet!"

"Not even close, but I'm sure I could get the job done," he said, giving her a cocky grin.

"Gawd, Logan!"

"Close. Less disgust and a little more of a moan and you'll have it."

"I'm going to let you have it all right!" she yelled, launching a pillow at his head followed up by a tackle.

Logan let her slight weight press him back flat onto the couch, batted away the pillow, and waited for her to realize her mistake. Her face was only inches away; he wrapped his hands around her hips then slid them rapidly up her waist to tickle her. She squirmed and thrashed and drove him crazy but he loved it.

"Uncle," she called out, her breath coming in short pants.

Logan let his hands fall away from her waist to settle on her thighs, which he gave a brief squeeze and then helped her off of him. While she was resettling her clothes he nabbed the pillow off the floor and covered his lap, hopeful that in heat of the tickle war she hadn't noticed his hard-on. If he didn't get better control of himself, she was going to notice one of his less-than-well-timed boners and totally freak out. He said it before, and he'd say it again. Being a teenage boy sucked.
"Satisfied?" he asked, giving her his best teasing grin.

"Not hardly, but maybe later."

His stomach lurched, and his blood surged south. He swallowed dryly. "Is that so?"

She laughed and stood up from the couch, heading for the TV. "No! You perv. God, the look on your face. And that pillow, really Logan?"

Great, so she'd noticed and was disgusted. "Well, would you prefer I just sit here with it out for your viewing pleasure?" he asked, gesturing like he was going to remove the pillow.

Her face turned bright red, the blush spreading in an uneven pattern across her neck and chest. It was charming and made him want to do things that were wholly inappropriate with her.

"Sorry, just give me a minute and I'll get out of your hair."

"I...um...yeah, maybe that'd be good. For now." She turned back to the TV and bent down to eject the DVD.

Logan averted his gaze from her ass and ran through his list of unsexy things. The heat receded and his heart rate slowed, control. He adjusted himself subtly and stood up from the couch, dropping the pillow back down on the couch.

When he looked back up at her, she had a thoughtful expression on her face.

"What?"

"I think I know someone we can ask for help."

Chapter End Notes

So I want to start by thanking all of you for sticking with me! I know it's been a crazy long time since I was able to update this story or to post anything really. All of your supportive comments and messages mean so much and have kept me coming back to this (and my other stories).

Huge thanks to Bondopoulos – Beta-extraordinaire, cheerleader, and friend! Thanks for fielding more than a few weird baby related questions and keeping me thinking about this story while my brain could barely remember my own name ;)

I've gotten quite a few messages asking about Part 3 of Breaking the Rules, here's what I can tell you: I've had several false starts that keep tripping me up but I am working on it Right now I'm doing Camp Nano and while I probably won't hit 50k words this month I'm definitely making some progress on a few different things, though Time seems to be where my muse is wanting to live for now. So here's hoping for another chapter sooner rather than later!
Works inspired by this one

(FanMade Cover) Time, Make It Go Faster Or Just Rewind by AlinaSorokina

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