Slipstream

by cheshirecatstrut

Summary

Veronica decides to be red satin, and creates a slipstream of shifting realities. Many things change, but a few are fated.

Notes

This story goes AU from episode 3-12 by day, and from episode 1-4 by night. And gets steadily more AU with every chapter.
Logan banged my worst enemy to punish me, because he felt unloved, and I’m the one who can’t sleep at night. The life of Veronica Mars: seldom fair.

I lie on my twin-sized water bed in my shitty apartment, a bath-needing pit bull grunting beside me,
and I clutch Lilly’s necklace, and I cry. The phone rang a few minutes ago, Logan’s left a message, but I can’t talk to him right now. I don’t have the bandwidth to spew, or listen to, bile.

I felt crazy, earlier, ranting that I’d never get past this, watching his face crumble above his half-knotted tie. Like everyone’s gonna think I’m the harpy, the caustic, intolerant, unreasonable bitch. It’s a broad joke Friends spent a season retelling: We were on a break!

Four out of five acquaintances agree: I’m psycho, he was a free agent.

They don’t know it’s his pattern…flip the bird to rejection, by hitting back where it hurts. Kiss Yolanda to torture Lilly, who fumed when minions disobeyed. Shun me, shun Caitlin, when we prove disloyal, because we crave the safety of popularity. Fuck Kendall in the room next to Duncan’s, make me listen, unsatisfied, to her moans. Fuck her again the night I need space, to process his claims of epic love. Hell, I should probably brace myself: he’s likely planning my next punishment while I lie here, pining. It’s gonna be a challenge, drawing blood this time, because the only female friend I still have is Mac. But I’m sure he’ll find some way to score and flaunt it, right in my sightline. Some way that really, really wounds.

“Did you turn him into this, Lilly?” I ask the ceiling. “Did you teach him, by example, to go straight for the throat? Was it Aaron, modeling cruelty? Is it innate? Because he’s got me doing it too, now, and I can’t seem to stop. I just keep ripping and ripping, until there’s nothing left but bones.”

I get up and slam into the bathroom. Dig through the medicine cabinet for the sticky green bottle of Nyquil. Take a couple healthy slugs, because I’m sick of my own thoughts.

I lie back down and try to make my mind blank. In my bag, the phone rings again: I ignore it. After a long swath of time, the world goes hazy, and my thoughts lose coherence. I wish I could unlearn that particular lesson, I muse, drifting towards blackness. I wish Logan and I could start again.

THREAD ONE INVERTS

The crack of knuckles against my door jerks me awake. “Breakfast, honey!” dad yells, to punctuate. “Up and at ‘em! I’ve got paperwork to do, and bad guys to collar!”

I sit up, knuckling my eyes and yawning, struggling for consciousness. I pry one sticky lid open, and that works out OK, so I try the other.

Spread in front of me, pristine in its dry cleaner wrapping, is the pink Jessica McClintock I wore to Sophomore Homecoming. It’s draped across the white desk chair, before the photo-strewn desk, in my barely-09’er childhood bedroom. This is the house we sold, after my mom took a powder, and my dad lost his job. The dress I burned, a week after Lilly died.

My breath goes, and I realize, I’m dreaming. One of those pastel-tinted Lilly dreams I had so often in high school, that’ve given way to grim nightmares this year. I touch the dress and smile, study the pictures on the desk. Lilly and I, mugging in our pep squad uniforms: Logan, running, with me tucked under his arm like a football. A strip of photo-booth photos, all four of us crammed onto the stool. A curling white Good Citizenship ribbon. I’m still a Good Citizen in this dream. It’s not too late for me.

I fling open my closet, and select from the sea of pinks, lavenders and mint greens I find there. I French Braid my long golden locks, and lace on Keds. I gather up the keys to my Le Baron, and decline breakfast, giving dad a kiss on the cheek as I pass. “Can’t stop to chat!” I tell him, breezy. “You’re not the only one with stuff to do!”
“Breakfast is the most important meal of the day!” he calls after me, but I’m not wasting this dream on pancakes.

Instead of turning right, to head to Neptune High and first period, I turn left, towards the mall. If I’m rewriting history, the first thing to go is that insipid Jessica McClintock. I’ll be rocking THIS limo party in strapless red satin. Second time around, I’ll make Lilly proud.

My savings buy me one aptly-named Miracle Bra that gives me cleavage, and matching lace panties. Four-inch heels, which raise me to the height of a normal person. A tube of blood-red Chanel lipstick that evokes Rita Hayworth, and hot rollers, for Veronica Lake waves. Also, a crimson Jessica Rabbit dress, slit to mid-thigh, which shimmers like gemstones in the lamplight.

My dad raises his eyebrows, whistles, and says, “Oh, you doll!” when I emerge that evening from my lair. My mom giggles, “Hubba hubba!” and takes 800 photos. Duncan literally gobbles like a turkey, when he knocks to pick me up: he’s distracted the whole time we’re posing for mom, his hand in mine clammy.

And Logan drops his handheld DS on the floor, and stares, mouth open, when I sashay into the Kane house. “Holy shit, Mars!” he says, the corner of his mouth curling as he shakes his head. “How did Duncan drive you all the way back here, with his brains leaking out his ears?”

I blow to shift the wave of hair hanging over my eye, grin at him. He grins back, the slow appreciative smile MY Logan gets, right before I get laid (which I’ve never seen directed at me, by this one).

He poses, when I whip out my camera to document the moment, while Duncan paces, lost in thought. But instead of clowning and showing his guns, the way he did in my memories, he keeps his hands in his pockets, and watches me. Pinning me with his knowing, coaxing, dark-brown gaze. Making it impossible to look away.

I shrink back into the shadows during Lilly’s grand entrance, smiling at the way she glows, golden with youth and health and beauty. She’s more arresting, somehow, than the average person: her vivid star power the perfect complement to Logan’s stealthy, fatal glamour. It’s incredible to me that someone as vital as her could ever die. She’s like a conscious flame.

Logan moves forward to kiss her, but she’s spotted me. Her face fills with delight, and she pecks him coyly and disengages, making a beeline. “Ooh la la, Veronica Mars!” she says, hugging me close, shimmying against me. “You’ve embraced your destiny! Lilly ALWAYS knows best!”

Celeste rolls her eyes and Duncan groans, and Logan spreads his big hand across my whole abdomen to draw me in, when we huddle for group pictures.

Four glorious hours of three-way-flirting later, Lilly and I sit on the beach in our sand-spattered finery, a bottle of champagne between us, and watch the boys splash around. Their tuxes lie discarded on the ground and they’re barely visible at the sightline, two wet heads bobbing up through the waves.

“If they crack their drunken skulls on a rock and wash up dead onshore, I’m saying I told you so,” she announces, taking a swig.

“I’m sure they’ll be sorry,” I agree. And then I ask her the thing I didn’t, when she was alive. The thing I always regretted letting slide. “So Lils, what DID you mean, back when we were telling all our deep, dark secrets? I have never not had sex?”
She huffs a laugh, shoots me a wry look out of big blue Bette Davis eyes. “Logan will be pissed. He did such a masterful job of distracting you, after I let slip.”

“By making me admit my boyfriend isn’t hot for me? Presumably, because Duncan’s a creeper? I find that disturbingly easy to believe, by the way. Why IS my boyfriend a creeper?”

“For the same reason I’ve never not had sex. Uncle Bob.” Off my questioning look, she elaborates, “Celeste’s brother. Starting when I was eight. She eventually figured it out and chased him away, but of course no charges were filed. Can’t have a sordid scandal scotching her precious’s path to the White House.” She makes a face. “And thus the family patterns were born. I act out, Celeste shuts down, Duncan disappears into his own disturbing imagination….and Jake drifts quietly away, wrapped in some floozy’s arms.”

“And Logan protects you, so it doesn’t happen again.” I realize, returning my gaze to the boys in the water. I put my arm around her shoulder, and squeeze, just to let her know I care. Because no way does she want my pity.

“We protect each other,” she shrugs, squeezing back, resting her head on my shoulder. “Or try. He keeps my secrets, I keep his. I’m not sure we even love each other, so much as we recognize our own kind. And know how to tiptoe around the damage, so we feel functional and real.”

I stay silent, staring out at the water, and she says, “You’re not going to ask?”

I shake my head. “Someday he’ll tell me himself.”

She laughs. “Veronica Mars, red satin has CHANGED you! But how much, is my question?”

“Meaning?” I quirk an eyebrow, swigging from the bottle.

She smiles just with her eyes, in that ‘I dare you’ way she does, stands, and unhooks her dress. She shimmies it off and goes running for the water, tossing a laughing glance and her panties behind her. Her approach is heralded by Logan’s whoops and Duncan’s “OH my God!” and I giggle, because this dream feels so real.

I get up too, take my gown off, and lay it carefully across the rocks. I remove my fancy matched lingerie, and I walk across the beach to join them.

The Pacific Ocean is cold, and Lilly’s a diva. So she rubs against Logan, kisses me lingeringly on the cheek (to Logan’s obvious delight): she rolls her eyes at Duncan, as he swims back to shore, and strides, boxer-clad, away: and then she’s gone, a blur of bouncing flesh and compact limbs, towards her sand-covered dress, and the climate-controlled limo. Logan’s floating on his back, gazing up at the stars. He seems peaceful, the way he always is when he swims. I watch him for a moment, and then I move to join her, digging my toes into the still-warm sand, collecting my dress from the rock.

“Ronica!” Logan calls, and I turn to face him, clutching satin to my chest.

He comes sauntering out of the sea, Surfer King of Neptune High, full-frontal and unembarrassed, because frankly, he has no reason to be. A bolt of longing shoots through me, as I stare: not so much for THIS Logan (who, although seriously UNF, is still mostly chubby cheeks, smarm and clowning, to distract from his wounded eyes). But for MY Logan. The one who aimed an empty gun at Fitzpatricks to save me, who told me our love was epic. Who says things like, “You know I only want you, Mars”, and brings me espresso in bed.

He smiles that smile, just one corner of his mouth crooking, and approaches, long sure strides across the sand. He bends down, not touching, breath hot on my ear. “That’s one more drink you’ll have to
take, next time,” he tells me. Then he wrestles his pants on, winks back over his shoulder, and walks away.

The night ticks down, all warm, drowsy pleasure, and then, abruptly, it’s done. Lilly and Duncan slink into their house, under the weight of Celeste’s glare, and my dad announces, “Logan’s coming home with us. We couldn’t reach his parents this morning, and he’s in no shape to drive.”

Logan gets a look on his face like he’s about to say, “Gee, Mr. Mars, I didn’t know you cared,” and I put a hand on his arm, and shake my head. He rolls his eyes, but lets me shove him into the back seat, climb in beside him.

“You can wear the Padres jammies I got my dad for Christmas,” I inform him, in a whisper. “And I’ll take your dad’s tux to be dry-cleaned, while you sleep off all the booze.”

He looks at me then—really LOOKS at me, intense, startled, wary. I shrug, faking nonchalance. “Duncan spilled champagne all over you because I distracted him. It’s the least I can do.”

Logan’s hand comes down over mine, where it curls against my thigh, squeezes. I twine my fingers with his, and rest my head on his shoulder, drifting towards sleep. My dad’s eyes meet mine, in the rearview mirror, and I smile.

THREAD TWO

I wake the next morning in my waterbed, with Backup panting in my face: the dream lingers in my memory, like an echo of song. I don’t feel angry, anymore. I feel….wistful.

I dig through my bag, on the floor by my bed, pull out my phone. I listen to Logan’s drunken message, once because I owe it to the boy who held my hand, and five more times, because I love the boy who left it. I press save, because as much as I hate his burgeoning alcoholism, he makes a hell of a drunken speech.

Maybe he really does love me, truly is sorry. Maybe this time he’ll wait for me to calm down and forgive, instead of finding the girl who hurts the worst, and using her to make me pay.

I don’t tell Dick what happened in Aspen, the next time we cross paths. I figure Logan needs at least one steadfast friend.

When I see him with the little girl in the elevator, her so manically cheerful, him so wrecked? And she mentions the musical travesty she radio-dedicated to me, like it’s 1982? I say, “Thank you. That was a nice gesture.” And I smile at her, and so does he, and then he turns his smile on me.

That night, I get an email from him, no subject, one line. “I would have picked Sway.”

I think for a minute, and write back, “Me too.”

When Logan visits me in jail, after the Peanut Butter Cookie Fiasco, I pose for his photo. And when he goes to leave, I call out, “Hey!”

He spins, still doing Smirk 2.0, which is about ten times less brutal than the old-school version. “Thanks,” I say. “For caring enough to show up here, and offer help. Not many people like me that much. It means a lot.”

“No problem,” he says, and the smirk turns tender. “I’ll be back later with the dynamite and the getaway van. Try not to sing like a canary, meanwhile.” He doffs an imaginary hat to me, and saunters down the hall.
“They’ll never break me!” I shout, as I sink against the bars. “I’m red satin to the bone!”

“I remember!” He calls back. I wonder when he spotted me, the night of Junior Prom.

My dad shows up a half hour later to spring me. Logan’s paid my bail.

I try to call him that night, to express my gratitude, but he’s busy, or screening. I listen to his inspirational voicemail (“Life is hard: it’s harder when you’re stupid.”) shake my head, and hang up before the beep. Yeah, it’s come to this: chastised for my sins by a recording of Logan Echolls.

Red Satin Veronica wouldn’t give up so easily, I muse, as I drift off to sleep. If she had something to tell him, she’d do it to his face.
Jealous Again? She's Just a Friend

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

THREAD TWO INVERTS

I dream I’m at the old Echolls place, the one that burned. I walk up and up the curving staircase, and Duncan follows, obedient as a well-trained pet. With a semester of Abnormal Psych under my belt, I can tell his disconnection’s not just pensive, Jake Ryan brooding: it’s Thorazine. Because there IS no medication that causes hallucination when you stop taking it, except for medicine designed to SUPPRESS hallucination. Type 4 Epilepsy, my ass. Duncan’s been having psychotic breaks.

We squeeze onto the sectional where Logan’s holding court, Yolanda perched on his chair arm like a gangster-movie gun moll. It didn’t occur to me, the first time I lived this, that they might have already slept together: I took their mutual, “Just a kiss! Not my fault!” at face value. But her pose is possessive, while his is indifferent, so it occurs to me now.

Logan passes us shots, mid-Tarantinoesque-rant, but looks surprised when I actually drink mine. Grinning, he hands me another, and I swallow that, too. Duncan frowns at me and shakes his head, and I make Logan snicker by rolling my eyes. Duncan has one drink and no more, I notice. Which is what he always does. I wonder if alcohol interferes with his meds.

When the clock strikes 11, Duncan tries to hustle me out, reminding me of homecoming like it’s my spur to never sin again. I watch Yolanda flirting, and Logan imbibing steadily while he smirks at me, and remember how good sin felt. How Logan rose naked from the ocean, whispered hot in my ear: how he snored on my couch in too-short Padres pants, and smiled when I brushed back his hair. How he mocked me over Bisquick pancakes, because I drown my bacon in syrup.

“I’m staying,” I tell Duncan, because I’m red satin this time, and I do what I want. “You go on, pacify Celeste. I’ll call a cab, when I’m ready to leave.”

He tries to argue with me, but Logan slides over another shot (half-full this time, because he’s Mr. Protective), and I take it. Finally, Duncan stands. “Walk me out?” he asks, extending a hand.

I sigh. I know what will happen when I turn my back: and I’m not prepared to watch Logan take the revenge on Lilly I’m dreading in my waking life. So I let Duncan draw me toward the stairs, out of hearing range but still in view, and then I dig in my heels.

“I really don’t think…” he starts, and I cut him off with a wave of my hand.

“You know what, Duncan? This…us…isn’t working for me anymore. I’m not as nice as I seem, and I doubt you want the person hiding under the blonde. You should ask out Meg Manning instead. Celeste would be thrilled, and Meg really IS Cinderella, inside.”

“You’re drunk,” he says flatly. Not taking me seriously, because he never does. I pat him on the cheek, figuring he’ll realize the truth soon enough.

“I promise not to stay long,” I tell him. “I just have this one thing I need to do.”

He shakes his head, kisses my hair, and I head back to the couch. Logan is watching me, slouched way down in his chair, sipping Tequila like he can actually stomach the taste.
“Trouble in Paradise?” Yolanda asks, and I pour myself one more drink, although my head is spinning.

I fix her with my best Bad Cop stare. “Just a friendly warning, Yo. Lilly didn’t actually mean it, when she said you could have her man. And if she catches you two sneaking around together, Mary Sunshine over there will throw you under the bus. Any move he’s made was about revenge, not real interest, which frankly, I’m surprised you don’t get. You seem like a girl who’s clear on her own worth.”

She turns towards Logan, who raises his eyebrows. “You here as a spy, Mars? Currying a little favor with Lils, at our expense?”

I shake my head. “If you were my opponents, I wouldn’t interfere while you made a mistake. This is sound advice, which I save for my friends.”

I toast them with my last drink, drain it. Head back to the game room to call my cab, mission complete.

I hear the door shut as I pick up the phone: turn to see Logan by the lintel, twisting the lock.

“So what was that with Duncan, earlier?” he asks, because he always attacks obliquely. He slouches, distracting, against the doorframe.

“Oh, I dumped him,” I say, putting the handset down.

“You WHAT?” He laughs, shaking his head as if to clear it. “You dumped DUNCAN?”

“He’s creepy, Logan. You told me so yourself. I used to think he was dreamy and deep, but lately his vacant stare squicks me. Plus he doesn’t get turned on, when we’re fooling around. He can never keep an erection. I thought at first he might be gay, but maybe he just loses steam when someone’s watching? Regardless, I’m not hiding my nature anymore, and he doesn’t seem to LIKE the real me. I think I might actually frighten him.”

“OK, what the hell is going on with you, Mars? Not that it’s not strangely hot, but first the thing with the tuxedo, and then saving Yolanda from Lilly’s wrath—she chewed me out and left, by the way—and now you’re dumping Prince Charming, without shedding ONE TEAR?” He gestures at me, up and down, taking in my black halter dress and hoop earrings, and general non-pinkness. “Has there been a body snatching? Did you short-circuit the Stepford wife? Are you the evil twin?”

I laugh, just drunk enough to feel relaxed and open. “Lilly told me I was red satin, not yellow cotton, the day before Prom. And I realized she was right. So I thought about what ‘red satin’ means: and I decided it’s showing people who I am, doing what I want, and not pretending I’m Marcia Brady. Also, being a true friend to those who deserve it. As opposed to treating you guys like characters in a movie, here to provide my happy ending.”

“I’m on this list?” he asks, standing up straight. “Of people who deserve friendship? Even though you just caught me messing around? I was sure you’d choose Lilly and Duncan over me, if she and I ever really split. I figured I’d lose you all.”

“Logan,” I tell him, softly, “I DIDN’T catch you. The only thing I saw was you and Yolanda sitting on the same chair, which is what I will say, if asked. And you will ALWAYS be my favorite jackass. Right on par with Lilly, who’s been driving me crazy lately, making passes.”

He fake a frown. “Whoa, there, don’t go killing my dreams, Rons. Your imaginary pep-squad-uniform pillow fights are the duct tape that holds me together.”
I grin. “Sorry. I love her dearly, but not that way.”

A smug smile creeps across his face, and I wonder if the crush I’ve harbored on him since age 12 has ever really been secret. “So no eye-for-an-eye with Lilly, that’s your advice,” he says, as if confirming. He sidles a bit closer. “She fucks everybody I love, and everybody I hate, and I just take it, like a bitch?”

“You tell her you can’t handle the cheating,” I advise, tilting up my chin to maintain eye contact. “You break things off with her, if that’s what feels right. And you have sex with people you genuinely like, who like you back, the way normal guys do, instead of retaliating in kind. You have the right to be respected, and loved, and happy, Logan. Exercise it.”

“Do I?” His eyes follow his finger, tracing the desk’s edge. “Have the right? Honestly? Because, as you pointed out earlier, I’m kind of an asshole.”

“I’d say everyone does, but we both know that’s not true.” I shrug, curve a reassuring palm around his bicep. “People earn good relationships by treating others well. Which you do, when you care. You’ve got a warm heart, despite the smart mouth, and you’re an excellent friend. Any time I’ve needed you, you’ve always been there.”

His hand lifts, like it’s floating up, and he steps still closer to trace my hairline. Tucks a wayward strand behind my ear. It’s a tender gesture, so familiar, and I close my eyes, breathe it in. A shiver moves through me.

“I should get home,” I blurt, wrecking the moment.

“Call your cab,” he says, holding out the handset. “I’ll wait with you by the gate.”

THREAD THREE

The dream-induced goodwill lasts about five hours, this time: until I head into the cafeteria for a late lunch/caffeine injection, and spot Logan chatting up Parker over tea. I can’t hear them, from where I’m standing. But he’s making the especially-adorable faces he saves for attempts to score, and she’s lapping it up, dreamy-eyed. I remember, then, that the moment of connection and forgiveness we shared last night was an illusion. A fantasy. THIS is the reality about to punch me in the face. This is what Actual Logan thinks I deserve, for my sins.

So when Parker approaches me at the help desk, decked nervously out in ‘I want Logan’ red, I know what’s coming. I am a million percent not interested in having this conversation: my eyes narrow. Four days, it took her, to succumb to the guy I’ve wanted since tweenhood. Four days, to like him better than me, when I risked my LIFE to track her rapist down. The crap she spouts about ‘keeping my friendship’ is no doubt sincere, but it makes my fists clench until I bruise my palms. Because a true friend would steer clear. Mac would never, in a million years. Lilly would never, and would cut the bitch who tried.

So when she asks if I have a problem with her dating Logan, I mentally don red satin, and I say yes.

“Look, Parker,” is what actually comes out of my mouth. “I don’t control Logan, or you. You’re both single, and thus free to do what you want. But if you’re asking whether I’m COOL with you seeing the guy I love? The guy I dumped two weeks ago, and not because I stopped caring? That would be a big, fat, gigantic no. If you want to be his rebound, I can’t, technically, stop you. But I won’t pretend that I’m not angry. And…hurt. Wow, it’s such a relief to SAY that, out loud! Who knew? Veronica Mars actually has FEELINGS!”
I put up the ‘desk closed’ sign and stride off, because, let’s face it, I shut her down. I go back to the food court, buy a pint of ice cream, and snarf every fudgy, delicious bite.

XXX

“Mars!” Logan calls, two days later, as I’m headed into the government building. I raise my eyes to the heavens, because this is Conversations I So Don’t Need, Part Two. I have to go make nice with creepy TA Tim, who frankly, reminds me of Lucky the Janitor: and if Logan says the word ‘Parker’ to me, I’m likely to fucking lose it.

Which he knows. But it’s been weeks since he got laid, so I guess he doesn’t care.

“Listen,” he says, falling in step with me in that effortless way he does, “I feel like I owe you an apology.”

Okay, not what I was expecting. “For?” I ask.

He looks down, rubbing the back of his neck, and I cross my arms and tap my foot. “For what, Logan? Spit it out, I’m on a schedule.”

“For Parker. Mac told me what she said to you, and I….look, I just want you to know, we’re not dating. We’ve all been hanging out some, Mac and Parker and Bronson and I, since that Valentine’s thing, and I’ve been extra nice to Parker, so she gets her confidence back. And I think she…misinterpreted.”

“Misinterpreted,” I repeat, face like stone. “Does she realize that?”

“I talked to her this morning. And I know you’re probably not feeling forgiving, but she’s sorry for upsetting you.”

“OK,” I say, slowly. “OK, thanks for explaining. I’m glad I don’t have to deal with Madison, part II. I’m a bit overextended, at the moment.”

“Madison?” His brow wrinkles, and he seems genuinely confused. “Do you mean Sharon?”

“No, the only girl I got near was Sharon, the massage therapist from Encinitas. You’ve never met. Ronica’s Rules #431, remember? Rebounds are about helping me feel better, not hurting you?”

“Hence the apology,” I say, voice faint. “For Parker.”

“You’re not mad that I’m hanging with Mac, right?” he asks, hesitant. “Obviously, it’s platonic on
both sides. And not the kind of platonic you and I were, sophomore year.” He smirks, and full-on
laughs when I punch his arm. “We have a website together. It’s actually making money.”

“No,” I say. “I’m not mad.”

“Veronica.” His voice turns serious. “Tell the truth. Did you ditch me and storm off because I was
dating? Or because you thought I was dating Madison?”

“Madison,” I whisper. “Because that would be a vindictive strike, designed to cause maximum pain.”

“Veronica, I can honestly say screwing Madison would hurt me more than you. For one thing, I’d
have to cede the moral high ground to Dick.” He stares at me for a minute, assessing. “Look…Mac
said Parker said….when you were arguing, you told her you still love me. And that you didn’t really
want to break up, which is such a huge…”

I throw my arms around him and press my face to his chest, and I’m not sure which of us is more
surprised. “Hey, hey…” he soothes, resting a palm in the small of my back, reaching up to stroke my
hair. “Hey, it’s OK, I get why you freaked. I’d feel the same way, if I heard you’d boned Weevil.”

“Are you dating anyone now?” I manage.

“Well, there’s this one girl I really like. Short, blonde, smells of marshmallows and…mmpf.”

I kiss him to shut him up, and he fists my hair in one hand, and the hem of my shirt in the other. He
picks me up, spins me out of the flow of traffic, and when we break apart, we’re both panting.

“I love you, too,” he says, cupping the whole side of my head with his giant hand. “Never leave me
again.”

“I’m supposed to be meeting my asshole TA right now,” I tell him, in a watery voice. “He smells like
he rolled in Drakkar Noir, and creepily resembles School Shooter Lucky.”

Logan winces. “Want company?”

I hold out my hand, and he takes it. We walk into the room together.

Logan looms behind me with a smirk on his face, the whole time Tim lays on smarm. We work well
as a team, Logan and I, because he’s comfortable being the muscle.

Chapter End Notes

So I debated this one a bit, because I personally like Parker, and I feel she went above
and beyond, standing up to her own rapist to protect V. OTOH, this is first person
subjective POV, Veronica doesn't know that, and she's upset that Parker's moving in on
her man.
I tried to be even-handed, while staying true to Veronica's voice as she expressed her
feelings. Let me know how I did.
OK, this is where the roller coaster starts picking up speed. Also, the story begins earning its rating. :-)

THREAD THREE INVERTS

“Earth to Mars,” Lilly says, and I startle into a dream that’s maybe not one, after all. Five minutes ago, I was pasted up against Logan, watching him snore under the blue glow of the fish sculpture. Now I’m in Lilly’s SUV in my pep squad uniform, and I have a Very Bad Feeling.

“Smile, Ronica, for God’s sake! Tie a knot in your t-shirt. No middle-aged perverts are gonna pay you to wash their cars if you’re not looking hot and cheerful!”

Speaking of middle-aged perverts, I think, but she pulls into the designated lot, and private time is over. “Maybe I’ll spray you with the hose,” she warns, eyes widening flirtatiously, and I follow her out the door.

I’m so busy watching for Logan’s XTerra, in order to provide his alibi, that I almost miss it when she sidles up and whispers, “I’ve got a secret.”

“I know you do,” I snap, without thinking. I turn to find her eyes as big as plums. “You’re not that good at being sneaky. And it ends today, because I love you, and I don’t want you dead.”

The big eyes narrow. “OK, just what do you THINK you know?”

I lean in close. “I know Aaron is a violent psychopath. I know he’s been abusing his family for years. I know he has a thing for underage girls. And I know how you like to punish Logan, when he pisses you off. I don’t judge your sex life, Lilly, I never did, but Aaron will murder you if you smile wrong.”

She rolls her eyes. “You’ve definitely been hanging around Logan too much. His drama queen tendencies are wearing off.”

Across the parking lot, I see the XTerra pull up beside Lilly’s car. “So you’re not going to listen to reason, then? Fine, plan B.”

I grab her hand and drag her towards the yellow beast, while Logan watches, wide-eyed, through the window. “Oh, no,” she says, and digs in her heels. But I put every muscle I have to work, and shove her into the back seat. Logan obligingly engages the child safety locks, and rolls his window down.

“You’re just the guy I wanted to see,” I tell his tear-stained, hungover face. “Open the passenger door, when I come around.”

“Is this a kidnapping?” he asks with raised eyebrows, leaning across to help me up. He blocks Lilly’s lunge with his arm.

“It’s a rescue,” I tell him, buckling in. “Is anybody at your place right now?”
“Nope. Dad’s in London, doing voice-overs, and Mom’s at a Scottsdale spa. God knows where Trina’s been, the last six months. Some crack den, probably.”

“Perfect,” I say. “Drive to my house. And you two don’t kill each other, while I make this call.”

“Sweetheart!” my dad crows, when he picks up the phone. “To what do I owe…”

I cut him off. “You trust me, right, dad?” I don’t wait for him to answer. “Of course you do, so trust that I’m sure about this. Get a warrant for felony crimes against minors, go to the Echolls’ pool house, and look in the secret cabinet behind the bookshelf. Also in the ceiling fan. Nobody’s home except the maid. I’ve got Logan and Lilly with me, and we’re headed to our place right now, to hang with mom.”

“Veronica, what the HECK is going on?”

“Dad, I’m dead serious. Logan and Lilly are in danger. In fact, you should send a uniform to sit in our driveway while you take care of this, in case Aaron hops on a plane today. And call me back, as soon as you’re done.” I hang up, before he can argue more, and switch my phone off.

“What the hell, Veronica?” Lilly yells from the backseat. “What secret cabinet?”

“Has either of you ever had sex in the Echolls’ pool house?” I ask, turning in time to see them look askance at each other. “Then congratulations, you’re a porn star. There’s a camera in the ceiling fan, so Aaron can film his extramarital escapades.”

Logan slams on the brakes, and I put my hand on his arm. “Keep driving,” I say. “Seriously. You need to be at my house or the Kanes’ 24/7, until someone locks Aaron up. I want you both protected, and effectively alibi’d, at all times.”

“Why would we NEED an alibi?” Logan asks, his tone overly reasonable. “If this scenario is true, aren’t we the victims, here?”

“What do you think Aaron would do, if someone threatened to expose him? Say you two were making out in the pool house, and Lilly spotted the camera? Say one of you confronted him about it. You think he’d stay cool and collected? Or would he bash Lilly’s brains in with an ashtray, in a fit of rage, and then leave YOU to take the blame?” My voice is getting higher, shrieky, and I can tell I sound insane. Tears streak down in sheets, unchecked, but I’ve got to make them UNDERSTAND.

“You have a documented history of instability and violence, Logan! And Lilly’s not strong enough to fight him. And you two are my BEST FRIENDS in the WHOLE WORLD, and I WON’T LOSE YOU! I can’t!”

Logan pulls the car over slowly to the curb, and I have a moment to notice we’re in front of my house before he draws me close for a hug. Lilly hesitates, then wraps her arms around us both.

“It’s OK, Ronica,” he soothes, voice husky. “It’s OK. We’ll stay right here, won’t we, Lil? Until your dad shows up, with all the answers.”

“Like you could budge me,” Lilly says, pressing a kiss to my hair. “I love you guys, even if one of you is a total dickhead.”

Nine hours of angsting and Cohen-Brothers-marathoning later, Dad finally makes it home. He turns off the TV, sets a dining room chair in front of the couch. He sits in it, looks at the floor, and runs both hands over his scalp.

Then he straightens up to face us, direct and quiet-voiced, and says, “We found the tapes. We’ll need
to discuss the contents with each of you separately, once we’ve got appropriate parental permissions. Logan, your mother is on her way back from Arizona, she’ll be here in an hour. Lilly, there’s a car waiting outside for you, whenever you’re ready to go home.”

“Did you catch him?” Logan asks. He’s got one arm around my shoulders, and a hand on Lilly’s side: she’s resting her head on his lap.

Dad sighs. “Logan, Aaron was…not in London, as he claimed. We think he drove past your house during the raid, and guessed what was happening. He then proceeded to the Kane estate.

“Logan, I’m sorry to tell you that your father is dead. And kids…” he presses his lips together. “I’m even more sorry to tell you that Duncan is in custody.”

Lilly sits up so fast her hair smacks Logan in the face. “What, why? What’s wrong with the Donut?”

Dad puts his hand on her shoulder. “Lilly, he’s catatonic and on psychiatric lockdown. I’m so sorry, honey. We have two witnesses who say Aaron and Duncan fought, and Duncan killed Aaron with a glass ashtray.”

THREAD FOUR

I wake suddenly, panting. I’m in a huge bed, in a dark room, alone. But through a crack in the door, I can see the flickering glow of a TV.

I get up, pass the chill of an open window. When I go to close it, I see the beach, night waves foaming on a grey-tinted shore. I’m in a house, then. I pick up a man’s cardigan from a chair in the corner, and put it on. It smells like Logan, musk and salt, cologne and brine, and I relax. Wherever we are, at least we’re both here together.

He’s sprawled on a sage-green couch in his boxers, drinking a beer, watching a commercial about dancing spoons. His hair sticks up in every direction, and I run my hand through it, smoothing. He catches my fingers, brings them to his lips, and I relax even more.

“What are you doing up?” I ask, circumnavigating the couch and sprawling against him. Past the media stand, the giant TV, I can see a rustic dining table under a modern chandelier, a wall of windows with an ocean view. He puts an arm around me and kisses the top of my head, tucking me close.

“It’s on again,” he says, gesturing at the TV with his beer. “Anniversary of his death, and all that. They intersperse showings with a retrospective of his shittiest work.”

“Aaron Echolls: the Untold Story?” I guess, as the TMZ logo scrolls.

“Mmm, currently gracing our screen is “The Life and Death of a Hollywood Hedonist”. It’s a TV movie. Dad is played by Rob Lowe, in brown contacts and a bad wig.”

“Who’d they cast as me?” I ask, taking his beer away and sipping.

He grins down at me. “Hayden Panettiere. And I’m Chad Michael Murray. Lils is Jennifer Love Hewitt in a blonde wig, which pisses her off to no end.”

A phone rings on the side table, and he checks the display. “Speak of the devil…” he says, quirking a brow, and puts it to his ear. “You just getting up, or just going down?”

There’s a high-pitched buzz, and he laughs. “Why, whatever do you mean?” he asks, coyly, and the
buzz gets louder. “Yeah, we’re watching it. They just had the scene where mom lays a single flower on her dad’s grave. Because, foreshadowing.”

He listens for a minute. “YES, she’s here.” More buzzing. “Of COURSE she’s here, Lils, she lives here, and it’s three in the morning.” The buzzing escalates in volume, and he covers the phone with his hand. “She wants to come over,” he says, apologetically. I smile and nod, and he looks momentarily taken aback.

“Yeah, it’s cool,” he says, into the phone. “I’ll put pants on, we’ll have a party.” More buzzing.

“Lils,” he says, sternly. “Yes, it is still a party. Because I say so. Just get your ass down here, or the show will be over.”

He hangs up and tosses the phone onto the couch, with one of his big, hands-off Logan gestures. “Inappropriate as ever,” he says, sardonically. “Come on, get moving. She’ll be here in five, and you know how she is.”

“Get moving where?” I ask, sleepy, taking another sip of beer.

“Um, to change?” He raises his eyebrows. “You want to just go back to bed? You seem kind of out of it.”

I’m dressing for Lilly? I think, but keep quiet. Because apparently I know how she is, and how she is requires clothes. So I follow him into the bedroom, where he flings open the enormous closet with a theatrical spreading of arms. I stare at the forest of fabric, his stuff on one side, mine on the other: at the walnut shelving and the embroidered bench, and the endcap wall of mirrors: and I am momentarily taken aback. I must have 30 pairs of jeans.

He strips off his boxers, tosses them half-assedly towards a hamper, and I get my first good view of (imaginary?) Logan’s body. He’s all muscles, in this slice of space/time, and I want to lick every inch. He catches me staring and winks, warning “Five minutes…” in a sing-song tone. I smile, and go searching for panties.

“Wear these,” he says, coming up behind me, extracting something black and silky from a drawer. He curves his whole nude form around me, divesting me of my pajamas, his voice a hot murmur in my ear. “These, and no bra, and those jeans I like with the hole, right here.”

He caresses the crease just below my left ass cheek, and I smack his hand away. “Five minutes is not enough time,” I say, in a mock-stern voice, and he kisses me full-on, sliding a hand between my legs. He circles my clit with his thumb, and I moan, and suddenly I’m up on the dresser and he’s sliding inside: so hot and tight, no condom, I must be on the pill. He keeps his thumb on my clit as he fucks me, devastatingly slow and deep, sucking at my throat and ear. I dig my heels into his ass and my nails into his biceps, my moans escalating in volume…and then I’m coming, and he’s slamming me. He lets out a chesty groan and spills, sticky and warm.

He checks a pretend watch, and says, “Three minutes, new record.” I curl my fingers into his hair, kiss him with everything I’ve got.

“I love you,” I say, and he smiles his most beautiful smile at me. And the doorbell rings.

“Fuck,” he mutters, yanking a pair of jeans down at random, climbing inside. He finds a t-shirt, jerks it on backwards, brushes at his hair with one hand, then gives it up for lost. “You wash off, I’ll stall,” he says, laying a peck on my lips. “Jesus, you’re gorgeous.” He palms my breast, nips at my neck, and then he’s gone, and I’m sitting in the world’s most expensive closet, messy and spent.
I hunt through the jeans until I find his favorites, select a red t-shirt to go with. I carry them into the bathroom, turn on the two-person rainwater shower, and soap myself with some liquid that smells like coconut. I know I should be worried about whatever’s happening to me, which (if any) of these realities is real: but the only thought I can focus on is, I could get used to this. My hand lingers between my legs, testing the pleasant soreness. Then I remember Lils, who’s in college while not dead, and I rush to dry off and dress.

I smile at the sight of them, side by side on the couch, throwing popcorn at each other and laughing. I saved her, I think, my throat swelling with emotion. I don’t know how this is happening, but somehow I saved them both.

“Can we restrict the food fights to the kitchen?” I ask, mock-accusing, as I circle around. I grin, and Logan looks contrite, but Lilly’s eyes narrow.

“What the hell are you doing?” she demands, and she doesn’t sound friendly.

“Telling you not to make a mess in my living room?” I take a physical step back from her venom.

“I know what you said, moron,” she informs me. “And I know you’re Logan’s latest take-home stray. What I’m ASKING is, what the hell are you doing WALKING OUT OF HIS ROOM?”

I glance at Logan for guidance, and he shuts his eyes, as if in pain. “Lils…” he says, rubbing at the crease between his brows, and somehow, that’s the substance of a full confession.

“You are SCREWING HER!” She jumps off the couch, and points an accusing finger. “Little Miss Trailer Trash Mars, the swim team’s favorite plaything. I knew you had a soft spot for her, even after she BETRAYED US ALL, but I never thought you’d stoop so low as to actually stick your dick in!”

“EXCUSE me?” I demand, losing my temper, and Logan jumps between us, as if anticipating a catfight.

“Lilly, we’ve been living together for a year,” he says, reasonably, and the sick feeling in my stomach relaxes. “What did you think it meant?”

“What you TOLD me it meant,” she hisses, dangerous. “Platonic. Roommates. One of whom has all the money, and one of whom is Oliver Twist. This is…this is…” she gestures up and down with her hand to encompass us both. “Logan. EW!”

“Lils,” Logan tries, still sounding reasonable, but also tired. “Sweetheart. Light of my life and bestest, bestest friend. You know I would do virtually anything to make you happy. But if you think I’m dumping my fiancée just because you don’t like her, you are batshit nuts.”

Wait, what?

“And also, you do not get to insult her in her own home. We have been over this. When you’re at Madison’s, sure. When you’re at Dick’s, knock yourself out. But this house is an 09’er asshole-free zone. Here, Ronica is safe. Are we clear?”

“You’re MARRYING Veronica Mars,” she says, flatly.

“With bells on,” he agrees, holding out a hand for me. I take it, but this is all going a little fast. I’m not even 20, and we just reunited today.

“I hope you demand a good prenup.” Her voice is cold. “She only wants your money. And once she
gets it, she’ll fuck your world, just like she fucked Duncan’s.”

“She can have my money,” Logan says, calm. “She gave me freedom. Aaron hasn’t laid a hand on me in 3 ½ years, and that’s a hundred percent down to her. And you know? He went to YOUR house that night, looking for trouble. If she hadn’t shoved you in my car, and dragged us to a safe zone, who’s to say you wouldn’t be dead instead?”

“Duncan was home.” She tosses her head. “We could have protected each other.”

“Lils, Duncan got the best of Aaron because he went nuts. In his non-berserker state, Duncan is the world’s shittiest fighter. I could take him down without breaking a sweat by the time we were 12.”

“Yeah, well, in my book, Duncan’s the one who gave you freedom, not HER—at the cost of his own, I might add. So you better dial that rhetoric back, and not ONE WORD, when you visit. Because HE WON the fight you spent your whole childhood LOSING.”

“Ok, that’s it,” I say, putting a hand on Logan’s chest, and pushing him gently aside. “You beg to come over to my house in the middle of the night, so you can flirt with my guy and slag me? That’s fine, I’m tough, I can take it. But you start trashing him, and you’re done. We’ve both suffered a lot because we loved you, Lilly. If you can’t be grateful for that, you need to be gone.”

“Whatever. Enjoy your little moment in your Barbie Dream House, Veronica Mars. He’ll get sick of your bitchiness eventually, and come back where he belongs. Won’t you, lover?” She pushes her boobs against him, twists her finger in his shirt. Lets it go, so it bounces back with a snap.

Logan sighs, and tilts his head skyward without answering, and she sashays out the door. “Don’t count on it,” he mutters, as it slams shut.

I crouch down in front of the couch, to pick up the spilled popcorn. “So that went well,” I say brightly. He laughs, and kneels to help me.

“You don’t mind that I told her about the engagement, right?” He does his apologetic wink-squint, looking a little shy. “I know you wanted to keep it secret from the high school crowd, but I felt like she was out of line.”

“My hero,” I purr, and he grins, tossing the last bit of popcorn in his mouth. “Take me to bed, or lose me forever.”

He tilts forward, pressing his shoulder to my belly, and suddenly he’s got me in a fireman’s carry, sprinting across the floor. He tosses me onto the big, soft bed, and climbs atop. Smirks down, with the direct, knowing gaze that will never lose its charm. “Now,” he says, toying with the snap that closes my jeans, “let’s see how well you followed instructions. Maybe you’ll win a prize.”
Hey, I just want to send a thank-you shout-out to all the readers who have commented or kudo’d to express your opinions. I didn’t realize the rapid feedback would be so addictive, but it IS! And the general niceness, supportiveness and perceptiveness of the folks here on AO3 is just blowing me away. Please, keep the data coming: it really helps me, as a writer, to know what you guys enjoy and don’t in a Veronica Mars fanfic.

So, because y’all are awesome, I give you accelerated posting of Chapter 4: Veronica flips the bird to Fate at Shelly Pomroy’s Party.

THREAD FOUR INVERTS

Sleep follows, boneless, sated sleep, and then I’m pushing through a crowd in a long, white dress. Half-blinded by the glare of fairy lights in the trees, casting streamers across an ink-black sky.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuckity fucking fuck. I’m at Shelly Pomroy’s pit-of-Hell, rape-culture-the-cautionary-tale party.

My adrenals go into overdrive, and time slows to a crawl. Flash, there’s drunk!Logan, guffawing by the bar. Flash, there’s Meg Manning, arguing with douchey Cole. Flash, there’s Dick, and Sean, and Luke, and Madison with her stupid bleached hair, primly spitting in a drink.

I clock my speed to reach the cup, just as she holds it out. I watch her press a smile from her lips, as I slide it from her grasp. I toss the contents in the nearest bush, because no one deserves to go through the hell I did. Not even her.

I take a deep breath, feeling jittery. I know it’s gonna be bad here, same as it ever was. I’m sure I’m not welcome, based on the way Lilly just acted in Possible Future Reality. She’s likely around tonight, since she’s not dead, and she’s certainly dating someone: and that someone might be Logan, so his loyalties are uncertain. Which means, step 1 is determine if I have any allies, and step 2 is destroy my enemies’ weapons. I hustle my princess-clad self over to the bar.

Logan makes a face of comical dismay when I approach, and spills his drink down his shirt. “Ronica!” he greets, brushing absently at the wet spot. “Fuck, you can’t be here.” He starts patting at pockets, as if searching for keys. “Seriously, you seriously need to get out of here yesterday. I have a car.”

“I know you brought GHB, Logan,” I say, holding my hand out. “Give it all to me. Now.”

Logan smiles knowingly, causing a weird vertigo flashback to the sex a half-hour prior. “You wanna party, Ronnie?” He bumps me with his hip. “Go to a rave? Dance?”

“I need all the vials, Logan. In my hand. Right this minute.”

“Okay okay okay, Jesus. So bossy! All right, here. But I’m just telling you, I gave most of it away. I’ve got these two, and then Sean, and, and….Luke, and Tad…”

Party at Ground Zero
“I know,” I say, patting him. “Now fork over your car keys, you’re wasted. You can have them back when you sober up.”

He relinquishes the ring, and says, earnestly, “Take my truck and leave, Ronnie. Really. Lilly and Dick would like nothing better than to make you sorry. Fuck, get lost NOW, Dick’s looking. I don’t wanna have to hit him again.”

“Thanks,” I tell him, and walk away.

I look down at the vials in my hand, and grit my teeth, remembering the years of shame and pain and rage this shit cost me. I storm into the house, into the bathroom. Fling them down the toilet, violently flush. Three down, one to go, because Sean Friedrich the druggie’s surely taken his.

Lilly moves to block my progress when I emerge. She’s decked out in a hot pink halter top, jean miniskirt and go-go boots, and she looks way too frosted-cupcake to be wearing this murderous expression. “And just who let YOU in the door?” she demands, arms folded.

“Fuck off,” I say, because I have more important things to do tonight than girl-fight. “I’m busy.”

She raises her brows. “Trolling for drunk, desperate rich boys?”

“Why, am I camped out on your corner?”

She laughs like she’s delighted, though clearly not. “Is that the beginning of a spine I see? Why Veronica Mars! You’ve finally stopped cringing when slapped!”

I roll my eyes. “You know, you were a great friend, Lilly, but you are seriously a shitty enemy. You need to go back and re-take Tormenting 101. Maybe keep better notes, this time.”

I push her aside, and she stumbles, because her heels are too high for balance. “You should ask Logan for pointers,” I toss over my shoulder, as I open the French door. “He can eviscerate with a smile better than anyone I know.”

Back out onto the patio, scene from my nightmares. There are the star lights, cheerful and deceptive. There’s the lounge chair. There’s Carmen in the hot tub, and it’s fucking too late, she’s unwrapping the popsicle. I grab her arm to stop her and she looks up, alarmed, like she has no clue who I am.

“Carmen Ruiz, right?” I ask, and she nods, giggling. “Can I talk to you for a sec? I have a…girl problem.”

“S’okay!” she slurs merrily. “It’s a girl problem! I’m a girl!” She runs a hand suggestively down her curves, winks. The pool erupts into bawdy laughter as I drag her away.

I haul her to Logan’s XTerra and shove her in, same way I did to Lilly in the last maybe-dream: the one that backfired, so badly. I engage the child locks. “Where do you live, Carmen?” I ask.

“I’m not going home!” she protests, indignant. “It’s early, I want to PARTY! Whoo!”

“Carmen, you’ve been roofied, and your boyfriend was about to videotape you fucking a popsicle. You need to go home and call a doctor. Carmen?”

I turn towards the backseat and she’s just lying there, half-smiling, staring at the ceiling. She’s got no
clue where she is, or what she’s doing.

“Crap,” I say, feeling defeated. Then I sack up, and pull out my phone. Let’s see if I have any friends in this reality, other than clandestine pal Logan (who at least isn’t HELPING his buds torment me, this time).

Cliff is in my speed dial. Dad, my doctor and my dentist. Logan, some unknown quantity named Alice. Lily, my established enemy, which, why is she not deleted? And Weevil.

I grit my teeth, punch the number, listen to it ring and ring. Finally, he picks up. “This better be a supermodel with a winning Lotto ticket, and not Veronica Mars asking for a favor.”

“You’re friends with Carmen Ruiz, right Weevs?” I ask, in lieu of a response. “Do you know where she lives?”

“In a bad place,” he answers. “A place she’d be better off out of, and you don’t show your white face near. What do you want with her, anyways?”

“It’s more what I want FOR her,” I say. “Which is protection, and a doctor. I just rescued her from a date rapist, and she’s barely conscious in my backseat. I can take her to the hospital, but I don’t have time to wait there with her, and I don’t have money to pay.”

“I’ll meet you,” he says. “Where and when?”

There’s a knock on the window, and I look up to see Logan peering through. “Hold on,” I say, and pop the locks.

He climbs into the passenger seat. “Kidnapping again, are we?” he asks with a leer. “Why is it always hot girls in skimpy clothes?”

I hold up a finger to make Logan wait. “Neptune General, emergency entrance, 20 minutes,” I say. “Who’s that with you?” Weevil wants to know.

“Logan,” I say. “I’m driving his car. Don’t worry, he’s almost as wasted as Carmen. He’s not a threat.”

“Hey!” Logan says, but Weevil laughs.

“See you in 20. Thanks for looking out for my girl, V.”

“There but for the grace of God,” I say, and switch off my phone. “Buckle up,” I tell Logan, gunning the engine. “It’s gonna be a bumpy night.”

Weevil is leaning against the wall by the entrance, arms folded, when we arrive. He rolls his eyes as Logan muscles up behind me, looming protectively: but he’s gentle, lifting Carmen from the car. Logan pulls a beach blanket out of the back to wrap her in, and Weevil cradles her on his lap while we wait for a doctor.

Once we’ve answered questions and she’s been treated, we leave Weevil holding her hand, and trail back outside. Logan seems more sober, but climbs into the passenger seat without comment.

“So where to now?” he asks, rolling his head along the leather to face me.

I look down at my hands, kneading them together. “Back to the party,” I say, but don’t start the engine.
“What? No! No fucking way!” He yanks the keys out of the ignition and folds his arms, secreting them in his fist. “I told you, it’s not safe for you there. Lils has been on the warpath, ever since your mom told that reporter you’re her sister.”

“I’m not,” I say. “I had a DNA test.”

“I don’t know if that makes it worse or better,” he replies, with a half-laugh.

“Logan,” I whisper. Clench my fingers in a knot, and meet his eyes. “I heard a rumor that Dick and Beaver Casablancas were planning to roofie and rape me tonight. And Madison gave me a drink that I think was doctored, when I first got to the party, but I threw it out. I want to go back there, and pretend to be unconscious, and get proof. I want to make them pay.”

His face goes pale. “GHB?” he asks. “Like I gave you? Like Carmen?”

I nod, and he pulls me into a hug. “Oh, Ronica,” he says. “Oh, baby, no.”

“I know it sounds awful,” I admit, feeling the tears come. “I’m scared. But I can’t let them get away with that. If it’s not me they go after, it could be someone else.”

“Ronica, look at me.” He puts his hands on my shoulders and pushes me upright, smoothing my hair. “Even if it’s true that they had something planned—even if it’s not just a nasty rumor—it didn’t HAPPEN. And no matter how justifiably angry you are…you can’t punish someone for evil thoughts. I mean, sure, make Tad pay—he drugged his girlfriend, so he could shoot a porno. I’ll be beating the shit out of him tomorrow, if Weevil doesn’t get to him first. But Dick and Beav, they’re only messed up kids with a crooked Dad. Don’t push them off a cliff because they made you angry. Just leave them alone.”

I close my eyes. The rape didn’t happen. To me, or to Carmen. I sigh, and really take this fact in, for the first time. I changed things tonight. I saved myself.

“Beaver was molested,” I say. “By Woody Goodman. Lots of kids on his Little League team were. It messed Beaver up worse than his family did, and I think he’s naturally a sociopath. He may do something evil someday.”

Logan kisses my forehead. “Then we watch Beaver. And we take down Woody Goodman. Because that’s our rule, right? Justice, not vengeance.”

“The Justice League.” I smile, and he smiles back. “We should get matching capes.”

“You’re the brains, I’m the brawn. I like it. Stick with me, kid, we’ll go far.”

I sigh. “Logan, do you think Lilly will ever forgive me?”

He leans his head back against the seat, closes his eyes. “Do you really even want her to?”

“I went pretty far to save her life,” I tell him. “Of course I want her to.”

“Look, I love Lils, and I swore a long time ago to always protect her. But she’s messed up, she truly is. More than me, and that’s saying something. And she finds it easiest to blame you, for how her life turned out. I mean, it’s just her and Celeste now, since Jake married your mom, and you know how much they hate each other. And Duncan…it’s like nobody in that family wants to admit he’s schizophrenic. The whole world’s heard about it, ad nauseum, but they still act like it’s this big secret.”
He turns to look at me again. “And you knew. You broke up with him because he was creepy, before the rest of us fully realized. I have no idea how, but you find out all our secrets. You had prison-worthy goods on Aaron even I didn’t know existed, and I thought I’d seen him at his worst. I’m guessing you’ve heard things about Lils, too. Things she’d rather keep hidden.”

I nod, and he smiles. And because he’s Logan, he doesn’t ask. “Ronnie, if you say something is true, I will always believe you, no matter how unlikely it seems. Because Aaron DID tape my sex life, and Duncan IS a creeper. There’s this aide at the mental hospital I bribe, you know, so I can keep track of how Donut’s really doing? And the reason they have him on restriction is because of this girl in the ward. She’s…she’s little and blonde, and they restrain and sedate her a lot, because she has these violent fits. And they kept finding him in her room. Once they found him on top of her. So, you see? No matter how unhappy Lilly is about it, the Donut is where he belongs.”

He holds out his hand, and I take it, twining our fingers together. “You know, I’m not loving this night, but it’s nice to actually TALK to you for a change. It’s been so rough, lately, having to keep our friendship on the down low.”

“For me, too,” I say. “How have you been, since the last time we spoke?”

He blows out a breath. “Good,” he says. “Surprisingly good. My mom, she’s acting again. She found a competent plastic surgeon to fix up the hack the last one did, after my dad bashed her face in. She’s got this producer dude who actually doesn’t suck, sending her flowers.” I laugh, and he squeezes my hand tighter. “I won another surfing contest,” he tells me. “A guy from Sex Wax approached me about a sponsorship, if I decide to go pro, which I felt was strangely appropriate.” He grins. “How about you? How’s your dad?”

“He’s…hanging in there,” I say, because I don’t know.

“That’s great,” he says. “Heart attacks are no joke. Hopefully he’s laid off the extra cheese, and he’s hitting the gym?”

My throat closes, and I feel tears threaten. Because I understand now what Lilly meant, when she called me Oliver Twist. “He’s the strongest, best man I know.”

He puts an arm around me, hugs. “Yeah, me too,” he says.

“And you’re not so shabby, yourself.”

Logan leans his cheek against the top of my head, strokes it back and forth. “Meh, I’m OK. But every day, I try to be better.”

“That’s all anyone can do,” I murmur, and we slump together in the dark.

THREAD FIVE

I wake up slowly, to full California sun, storming knifelike through the sheers. I’m in the big fancy bed again, and I feel lazy, drowsy, unmotivated to move. I can hear a pleasant, feminine voice in the other room, and lots of clicking: but I lie there for a long time, stretching, and don’t get up. It’s been days, now, of titanic adjustments, waking and sleeping: I’m emotionally exhausted. And I feel strangely peaceful lying here, watching dust motes dance in shafts of sun. My body’s heavy and luxurious, and no part of me hurts.

Eventually I ease out of bed, shove my feet into slippers (shaped like gorilla feet) that rest beside. The brown sweater is back on the chair, and I realize it’s my robe—that Logan leaves it there, just for me. I shrug it on, and hug it to me, and wander out to face the music.
There’s a compact, dark-haired girl typing on a laptop on the couch, and when she looks up and smiles, I realize it’s Mac. A big grin splits my face because look! I have a friend!

“Hey!” I say, bouncing onto the cushion beside her. “Whatcha working on?”

“And good morning to you.” She takes a sip from an espresso cup, which smells like Logan’s fifty-dollar beans, and fixes me with an amused stare. “Aren’t you frighteningly alert and perky?”

“I just slept what felt like ten hours on the Platonic ideal of beds,” I say. “What’s not to perk about?”

The amused look morphs into a full smile, showing both her dimples. “Logan’s right,” she pronounces. “There HAS been a body snatching.”

“Logan needs new jokes,” I say. “He’s lost that creative spark.”

Mac succumbs to the siren call of her screen, and I notice a large gold signet on her finger, with the initials ‘JL’. “How do you even type with that gigantic thing weighing you down?”

She actually blushes. “Look, I get how geeky it is that I love my Justice League ring. But let’s face it, you guys knew I was a nerd, going in.”

I study the ring, then the computer, which has about 75 windows open, including one for Prying Eyez. A smile tugs at my lips. “Because…you’re a member of the Justice League.”

“I told Logan ten grand was excessive for a gag gift. But really, compared to the home mortgage you’ve got on YOUR hand, this is just a splash in the pond.”

I look down, and a gigantic blue rock surrounded by diamonds stares back at me, from my ring finger. Engaged, right.

“Well, you know I like to blend,” I say, and she laughs.

The door bangs open and Logan strides in, hefting grocery bags. “OK, I got it all,” he announces, heading over to the breakfast nook. He starts setting containers on the table. “Haagen Dasz Rocky Road ice cream, size large. Cornichons, NOT sweet pickles. Sesame chicken, extra broccoli, no MSG. And Mexican Coke in a bottle.” He lifts his hands in a ta-da gesture, skip-spins into the living room, and flops backwards onto the couch. “Appropriate thanks are required,” he informs me, puckering up.

I kiss him absently, my gaze drawn back to the food on the table. Weird food. Crazy, high-calorie, not-matching food.

Oh, shit.

I check out my stomach, which appears normal. My breath comes faster. I had untreated Chlamydia for TWO FUCKING YEARS, and there was scarring. The doctor said…

Wait. No rape. No Chlamydia. No condom, last night.

My brain zeroes in on three possibilities, none of which I’m prepared to handle. One, am I losing days of my real life? Because two, no way would I be having cravings yet if I just GOT PREGNANT yesterday. And three, Logan seems way more excited about impending fatherhood than either of us should ever, ever be. I mean, for fuck’s sake, we’re 19!

Aren’t we?
Oh my God, I am totally losing it. Please, Jesus, don’t let me have gone all Lost Highway, and be strapped hallucinating in a nuthouse bed somewhere, while Duncan lurks in the corner.

“I have to go back to sleep,” I say, abrupt. I stand and march into the bedroom, and slam the door, while they presumably roll their eyes and sigh, behind me.

XXXXX

God damn it, I’m wide awake. I’ve been lying here for half an hour, staring at the ceiling. Running my hands compulsively over my abdomen, which is, in fact, hard and convex in a small, but not-unusual, way. I heard them muttering out there for a while, but now it’s silent. The only sound is my own panicked breathing, interspersed with the occasional sob.

I’ve managed to calm myself by the time Logan eases in, but I’m still frustratingly alert. He flops timber-style on the bed beside me, making me bounce, and props his chin on his hand.

“I can feel you admirably restraining yourself from making hormone jokes over there,” I say.

“Nothing easy is worth doing,” he replies. “Or, in this case, saying.”

“What if I’m the world’s shittiest mother?” I ask. “What if I’m just like Lianne?”

“What is it you always tell me, when I go into one of my doomed-to-Aaronhood, three-day fugue states?”

“You should be more worried about turning into Lynn?” I guess.

He laughs. “No fate,” he corrects.

“Sarah Conner,” I say, rolling to face him, “Is NOT a parental role model.”

“She was willing to give her life to protect her kid,” he corrects. “That makes her more like Keith than any of the other three.”

I want to ask about Dad giving his life, but I just can’t face knowing, at the moment. “Why are we all lounging around this late in the morning, anyway? Don’t we have things to do?”

“It’s Saturday,” he says. “I surfed and did my Powerpoint before you even woke up, and you don’t have class until Monday morning. Give yourself a day off from fighting crime, and put your swollen little feet up, why don’tcha?”

“I want my phone,” I say. “I have to check my calendar.”

He reaches across me, opens my nightstand drawer, extracts my phone, and sets it on my chest. I wince, because apparently now my boobs hurt.

I turn the power on, and check the date. No days lost. In this reality, I’ve been pregnant since well before I started dreaming. I take a look at my schedule, and the only thing on it is ‘library-paycheck’.

“I’ve gotta handle the library paycheck thing today,” I say.

He rolls his eyes. “Yeah, because no way can we wait ‘til Monday for THAT money.”

“What will you do, if I stay put?” I ask.

“Devote myself,” he kisses my temple, “to making sure” he kisses my chin, “you are completely” he sucks the spot at the juncture of my throat and shoulder, then bites, and I shiver all over, “happy and
satisfied”. He kisses my mouth, to punctuate, and I put my arms around him, hold on tight.

“Honestly?” He looks over at me, and I quirk a brow. “When you called in that raid on Aaron, while screaming ‘You’re my BEST FRIEND!’ in my face, and sobbing. I mean, I wanted you for years, beforehand. But that was the moment I knew no other girl could compare.”

“But you didn’t tell me, then.”

“Well, my girlfriend WAS sitting in the back seat.” He picks up my hand, running his thumb over my ring. “It took me a while, you know, to feel like I deserved you. And to be sure you loved me back.”

“And when were you sure?”

“That night on the Nautilus,” he smiles. “When you said, ‘I don’t regret a minute’.”

Fuck. This tells me nothing.

“And when did you know dad was the best parent since Sarah Conner?” I ask, biting the bullet.

“When he stepped in front of the knife.” He shakes his head. “Bravest thing I ever saw. I will ALWAYS be grateful.”

“How grateful?” I ask, tears in my eyes.

He rolls his. “Like I haven’t busted my ass to be someone he could admire, every second since.”

“So is this hero worship?” I tease. “You want to be dad, when you grow up?”

“I want to be YOUR hero,” he corrects. “And you can be mine.”

“Just stay,” I say, pressing a kiss to his chest. “Be here for us. That’s what the hero does.”

“You couldn’t get rid of me if you tried,” he tells me, bringing my hand to his lips.

Sighing, I press my face into his shoulder. I feel calm, now. I could maybe even…..
I’m clutching a stack of notebooks to my chest, and I’m walking down the hallway at Neptune High. I’m wearing knee-length motorcycle boots, which means Junior year, and I’ve got my English text, which means first period. I’m so focused on figuring out where and when I am that I’m jerked off balance when someone grabs me, and drags me into the girl’s bathroom. I stumble, notebooks spinning to the less-than-sanitary floor, and fall against Logan.

He rights me, shoving the stopper under the door with his foot, and I realize who’s standing next to him.

“Wallace Fennel?” I shriek, and I’m not sure which of them is more surprised.

Logan’s eyebrows are near his hairline. “You KNOW him?”

“Um, YEAH,” I cover. “He’s one of the highest-scoring high school basketball players in the U.S. How do YOU know him?”

“I cut him down from the flagpole this morning. The PCH’ers stuck him up there, because he reported them to your dad for theft. We need you to do some of your Weevil-manipulating magic, and get him off the hook.”

I cross my arms over my chest. I’m supposed to cut Wallace down from the flagpole. He’s MY best friend.

Is it wrong that I wish Logan was just a little bit more of a jackass, in Alternative! Reality?

“Pretty please?” Logan tries the looking-up-from-under-his-scrunched-brow face, which makes me roll my eyes and sigh, and do whatever he wants. I roll my eyes and sigh.

“Fine,” I say. “I’ll check into it. But you BOTH owe me AND Weevil one, if I pull this off. And I get to collect whenever I choose.”

“Done,” Logan says, holding his hand out to shake. I take it, and he presses my palm to his heart. I shove him, and he laughs.

“Who ARE you?” Wallace asks. “Man, when he said he knew just who could save me, I thought he meant some biker!”

“THIS is Veronica Mars,” Logan says proudly, with a flourishing wave and bow. “She hears EVERYTHING, and she is the most dangerous person you will ever meet.”

“Mess with me at your peril,” I warn, narrowing my eyes. Wallace laughs, but he seems a little scared.

“So I assume the clandestine bathroom meeting means this whole deal is super-secret, and we dare not speak its name?” I ask Logan, sarcastic.

He mimes zipping his mouth shut, throwing away the key, pulling the binds down over his eyes, and hiding his face.

“I’m getting really tired of being your dirty secret,” I threaten. I point at Wallace. “YOU associate
with me in public, or no deal. We don’t have to be buddies, but you’re not allowed to act like a
dick.”

“I wouldn’t!” Wallace protests, indignant. “What did you ever do to me? You’re helping!” He
smiles. “Besides, you like my moves. You’re not friends with any cheerleaders, are you?”

“Only if by friends you mean enemies,” I say. “Later, jackass. Things to do, people to bribe.”

“You light up my life, Ronnie!” Logan calls, as I kick free the stopper. “You give me hope to carry
on!”

I flip him off as I walk out, and I can hear him laughing in the hall.

XXXXX

I emerge into the courtyard, carrying my lunch tray, and I can tell things haven’t changed that much,
since the last time I lived this day. The outsiders ring the periphery of the patio: art geeks at table 1,
Wanda Varner and Goth Boy at table 2, stoners at 3, PCH’ers at 4, mocking and throwing food. In
the center, at the good spots with umbrellas, the 09’ers eat takeout. And grin while Logan holds
court, an indulgent Lilly by his side. For a second I wonder why they’re still the alpha pair, before
the pieces click into place. His dad’s the murder victim, not the murderer: his mom’s a movie star.
Her brother’s a minor and mentally ill (meaning sealed court records), her dad’s a billionaire.

Directly across from the 09’ers, one table sits empty. My Throne of Shame. My shoulders slump, and
I head on over.

I manage to catch Weevil’s eye while I pick at my meatloaf, and eventually he slouches up and
sprawls beside me. He gestures with his chin at the in-crowd. “How you manage to eat while
watching that, I’ll never get.”

“Suffering makes us strong,” I say, shoveling in a disgusting bite.

“You summoned?” he asks, after a minute. “Cause I got plans that don’t involve your whims.”

“What do you want to leave the Fennel kid alone?” I ask, my eyes on Logan’s gesticulating hands.
Wallace is on the other side of him, giving him a laughing shove, and I have a lump in my throat.

Weevil looks at me until I turn to face him. “Why do you care?” he asks, deliberate.

“I deal in favors,” I say. “Of the mercenary, but non-sexual kind.”

“Uh-huh,” he says. “I got eyes, V.”

“Then read my lips. What do you want?” I do pretend sign language to accompany my words, and
he chuckles.

“Videotape from the Sac ‘n Pac of my guys shoplifting beer,” he says. “Your dad’s stashed it in
lockup.”

My dad, I think. Oh God. My dad, who had a heart attack at some unspecified point in the timeline,
and is still Sheriff, is not dead. I wonder about Leo, Lamb and Sacks.

“You want me to steal evidence from my DAD?” I ask, setting my fork down.

“It was just beer,” he argues. “You think they deserve jail for a couple Colt 45’s?”
“If I get it, you owe me two,” I say.

“You ask, I help,” he tells me. “There ain’t no more earning my friendship, after what you did for Carmen.” He gestures with his eyes at the 09’er table, but doesn’t look. “And Ashley Wilkes over there doesn’t get his face beat in, like he mostly deserves. That’s our deal.”

“Please. Logan is Rhett,” I say, smirking.

“Then Rhett’s an idiot,” he scoffs, bumping me with his shoulder as he stands. “Call me when you got it.” He saunters away.

I pick up my fork again, and turn back to my own personal Telenovela. Logan is taunting Lilly now, holding something up high so she can’t reach, poking her in the sternum. She jumps for it, laughing, and he yanks it away. Then he leans forward, and kisses her, and sets it in her hand. She wraps her arms around his neck, and presses close, and I realize I spilled my drink all over myself, when I jerked in shock.

Because after the Yolanda thing, and Shelly’s party, and that moment on the beach….after the Justice League, and him falling in love with me when I called in the raid…after she cheated with probably Weevil, and definitely with his EVIL, ABUSIVE FATHER….

She’s my best friend, and she’s back from the dead, and I want to rip her face off. Because Logan Echolls is fucking MINE.

He wouldn’t be with her, either, if he knew. If he saw cold, hard video proof of what she’s done.

And I have to break into the evidence lockup, anyway.

XXXXX

I sit in fourth period photography, staring, fulminating, at the wall. Plotting mayhem. I wonder briefly if this is what Logan went through, watching me with Duncan, senior year. Then I dismiss the idea, because (despite many arrests) he’s never actually committed murder. I’m not sure who I want to kill most, at the moment: right now, only the fact that he bought me pickles and ice cream is saving him. Fucker. Listening to him banging Kendall in the next room was NOTHING compared to this. Lilly’s MEAN to me, and he’s DATING her, and he’s keeping our friendship a SECRET. The betrayal feels like….knives. In my gut, slashing. It’s like….

Argh. I’m going to find out which part of my brain creates dreams, and stab it with an icepick.

The bell rings. I get up and walk across the hall to journalism. Logan’s sprawled out over 3 chairs, twirling a quarter across his knuckles and smirking, and I have never hated him more.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in,” he snarks, and I draw back my foot and kick him, as hard as I can.

“What the FUCK?!” he yells, jerking his leg away from me, and then I’m slapping at him, and crying, and screaming “I hate you!” over and over, while the rest of the class ogles us, and he tries to grab my hands. And then the gym teacher’s yanking me off of him, and I’m kicking and yelling and writhing in his grip. Everybody’s murmuring in shocked undertones as the guy drags me out the door, and down the hall towards Clemmons’ office. And, oh God.

I’m gonna get suspended, and they’ll call my dad.
I’m sitting by the display case, waiting for Clemmons’ summons. Shaking my hand, because I bent one of my fingers backwards, when I was swinging at Logan like a crazy person. I feel even shittier than I did before. Because he’s an ABUSE VICTIM, and he’s my FRIEND (even if it is secret), and he TRUSTS ME, and I HIT HIM, which was SO, SO WRONG. And now he’ll HATE ME FOR REAL, and we won’t be ENGAGED ANYMORE when I wake up…

At this point I start sobbing, sheets of tears rolling down my face, and it takes me a second to register that someone is massaging my sore hand.

“You have to keep it moving,” Logan explains, gently testing each finger. “Otherwise the muscles seize. This one’s swollen, you should ice it.” He looks up from his careful examination of my middle finger, with an apprehensive expression, and I fling my arms around his neck.

“I’m SO SORRY!” I sob, into his shoulder. “I HIT YOU, which is the WORST THING that I could POSSIBLY DO!”

“Um,” he says. “You weigh 80 pounds, and have fists like a six year old. I think I’ll live.”

“But you’re somebody who should never, ever be hit. By anybody, for any reason. And I WAS SO MAD, and I FORGOT!”

“Veronica,” he says. “How many fights have I gotten into over the last year? 30? I get pissed off and punch someone like every week. I still kind of have a black eye.”

“YOU KISSED HER,” I hiss, and then I squeeze my mouth shut, because no way was that supposed to come out. “Oh, God. I’m as crazy as Duncan. All the stress finally did me in.”

He’s silent for a long minute, staring down. Then he looks at me, and I have rarely seen his eyes so serious. “Are you telling me you care who I kiss?”

I tilt my chin up, my wet gaze locked with his. From above, I hear the clearing of a throat.

We turn together to look at Vice Principal Clemmons, who’s manfully repressing the urge to roll his eyes.

“Miss Mars, Mr. Echolls,” he says. “My office, please.”

“Mr. Echolls,” Clemmons begins, when we’re all seated. “I don’t involve myself in the personal lives of my students, because they are none of my business. However, just because I don’t interfere, doesn’t mean I’m unaware of the relationships between you all.”

“Your point?” Logan asks. He’s leaning back, one foot bouncing on the opposite knee, in a pose that could best be described as negligent. Then again, he practically lives in here, so I guess he’s no longer impressed.

“I am prepared to let this incident slide. Provided I am NEVER required to adjudicate another one involving the Sherriff, your mother, and Celeste Kane.”

“Done and done.” Logan hops up, and theatrically dusts off his knees. “Always a pleasure doing business with you, Van. Mars, let’s blow this popsicle stand.”

I take his hand and get up, smiling uncertainly at Clemmons. He steeps his fingers and gazes back, from beneath lifted brows. “Miss Mars,” he intones, with that subdued sarcastic lilt I kind of love.
“May I suggest anger management?”

Logan drags me out of the office and down the empty hall, straight into the janitor’s closet. He pulls the string to turn the light on, locks the door, and leans back against it with his arms folded. “So this caring who I kiss thing,” he says. “How long has this been going on?”

“Uh…” I tilt my head back to stare at the ceiling, unwilling to meet his penetrating gaze. “Always?”

“ALWAYS?” He stands up from his slouch and takes a step towards me, then runs his hands through his hair. “Always, always? Like since we met?”

“Pretty much, yeah. I mean, once you started being…physical with girls, I knew I didn’t stand a chance, because I knew I wasn’t ready to be…physical like that. And honestly…” I point my thumbs at myself. “Sherriff’s daughter. Waiting ‘til I’m 18. But after all the stuff we’ve been through together, and all the things we’ve said, and you secretly being my friend, even though you pretend…” I feel the tears coming back. Jesus, I’m not even pregnant at this moment. “It’s getting really hard to act like I don’t care that you’re running your purity points down to single digits, with Lilly Kane and who knows who else. I want to cut anyone who touches you.”

He laughs, nervous. “I feel lucky, now. I got off with slaps and kicks.”

“You should,” I say, very seriously.

“Yeah, well, don’t worry. As soon as Norris gets back from suspension, and hears about our little altercation, I’m sure my luck will run out.”

“As soon as who what?” I ask. “Norris CLAYTON? Has he been beating up people who look at me wrong again?”

“Well, YEAH,” Logan says, in his ‘duh’ voice. “Norris CLAYTON? Has he been beating up people who look at me wrong again?”

“Well, YEAH,” Logan says, in his ‘duh’ voice. “But that’s his right. I mean, he IS your boyfriend.”

THREAD SIX

I wake up in the pitch dark, Logan still naked beside me, ring still on my hand. I feel over my belly carefully—yup, hosting the alien life form. The clock reads 4:30, so I don’t bother getting dressed. I just throw on my sweater and gorilla slippers, and head out to the living room.

“I can’t believe I DATED Norris Clayton,” I mutter, absent. “Seriously. Was he was the only guy other than Weevil Logan couldn’t intimidate away?”

I scout the bookshelves, peering at bindings in the dim light, until I locate photo albums. Dingdingdingding, score! There are five!

I haul the stack to the kitchen table, get all the food Logan bought me out of the fridge, and inhale calories as I page through.

The top one, I recognize. Baby pictures, mom and dad. Birthday parties and Fourth of July. My first pony ride: the time I caught a fish and cried, because it was sharp instead of soft. Lilly and I, turning cartwheels. My formal picture with Duncan, at the 8th grade dance. Then the artsy black and whites I favored, when I got a camera for my 13th birthday, and decided I was Diane Arbus.

My foot. A candle flame. My dad mugging in an Al Gore mask. Lilly, blowing a kiss. And interspersed with all these, Logan, smirking, doing a handstand, arms across his knees at the beach,
gazing pensively into the waves. Dick Casablancas, tongue out, eyes crossed. A starfish, cradled in a big hand, festooned with band-aids. Logan, holding me balanced in a Superman pose on his shoulder, cheek pressed to my side.

The second album starts in tenth grade, and at first, it’s a natural progression. Lilly and Duncan in Halloween costumes: he’s a knight, she’s a cat. Dad, crossing his eyes and making a face, while Deputy Sacks pretends to punch him. Logan carrying Lilly piggyback, she’s kissing his cheek. My mom, holding puppy! Backup, and laughing as he licks her face. Photos from the beach-Prom limo party (in which Logan almost always has a hand on me, somewhere). Lilly’s eyes peeking over a Cosmo, twinkling and mischievous.

And then, everything changes.

For a while, there are only art photos: the beach at sunset, a fruit stand in the rain, Backup chewing a ball, with a goofily deranged look on his face. There’s one of me staring into a mirror, eyes hard, hair pulled back tightly in a braid. A homeless man, slumped against his cart, gazing at a flower.

Then a few familiar faces come creeping back. Dad and Cliff, playing cards, clearly talking smack. Me, in a pastel blue bridesmaid’s dress, sporting a smile that means the opposite. Me with my mom and Jake in wedding finery, both of them ignoring me as they beam at each other. My dad, grilling steaks, glancing up at the camera with tender eyes. Logan, sprawled across a bed, looking intense and emo and impossibly young.

Two pairs of feet in biker boots, mine and a guy’s. Me, posed like a boxer in a white wife beater, blowing a strand of hair out of my eye. Norris Clayton laughing with a mouthful of something, pointing a fork at me. A whole section of what is, apparently, my life, which I don’t remember at all.

“I’m loving this look on you,” Logan says from behind me. He displaces me from my chair and resettles me on his lap, kissing my shoulder. “Very fashion forward.”

“Says the man not wearing anything.” I smile up at him, and he glances at the photo page.

“Ugh,” he says. “Taking a stroll down memory lane?”

“I still have a hard time believing I dated Norris Clayton.” I shake my head. “I mean, he was nice—to me—but he made you look like a choirboy.”

Logan pulls a face. “Yeah, he definitely had some anger management issues.” He takes the album away. “Let’s just skip this problematic little section of our lives, and get to…ah, yes. Fiji. The best vacation any human being has ever had.”

He spreads the book open to a shot of the two of us, covered in sand. I’m in a green bikini and a baseball cap: he’s in tropical swim trunks, and one of those ridiculous straw hats with frayed edges. He’s grinning down at me, and I’m grinning up, our arms around each others’ waists. Behind us, Lynn, minus the tragic duck lips, is photo-bombing with an expression of exaggerated delight.

The next page is a group pic around a restaurant table, which sports a central fire. It features me and Logan, in full on sarong and (unbuttoned) Hawaiian shirt: Dick Casablancas, embracing a grinning Meg Manning (!): Wallace with a marshmallow on a stick, roasting it over the flames, to everyone’s delight: a blonde girl and a suave-looking dark-haired man I don’t recognize: Lynn: and what looks like Kate Capshaw.

Then there’s me, in a black strapless formal with a poofy skirt. I’m lying back on my elbows on a bed, with one knee up, giving the camera a come-hither smile. Logan traces a finger down the
picture, making a growl-purr in the back of his throat, and I figure I know why this vacation was so special.

The next picture is dad, with his arm around a short-haired blonde. They’re at a table at Mama Leone’s, checkerboard cloth and wine bottle candle, her hand reaching past his shoulder to entwine with his. Both of them are smiling, dad manically: and on their hands, I can just discern matching wedding rings.

The woman is Bettina Casablancas.

Which means I have a wicked stepmother, and am related by marriage to Dick.

“Oh, ugh!” I yell, slamming the book shut. “We didn’t skip far enough!”

Logan bursts out laughing. “We have talked about this, Ronica,” he warns, mock stern. “One big happy family, remember? You, and Lilly, and Dick. Just like the Brady Bunch!”

Well, I think, no longer sure I’ll keep down the six pounds of food I just ate: at least that solves the mystery of why I live with Logan.

Wait a minute, Logan didn’t mention Beaver. Holy shit, is Beaver my stepbrother, too?

I put my hand over my mouth, and run for the bathroom. Alicia Fennel, I have never regretted championing mom for dad more.
I Know What Girls Like, Girls Like Me

Chapter Notes

I kind of love this chapter (possibly because it's mostly smut and mayhem). Hope you do, too.

THREAD SIX INVERTS

I’m standing at the bar in the Casablancas’ kitchen, wearing a floor-length blue-green formal, holding a drink that smells like whiskey. Beside me, Norris, in a tuxedo, leans backwards on his elbows, his feet crossed in front of him. He’s contemplating the ceiling with what looks like resignation.

I figure I’ll need it, so I go ahead and drain the glass.

“Why do we come to these things?” He asks the skylight. He turns to regard me, serious, and I’m struck by how gigantic he is. More than a foot taller than me, and bulky, with hands the size of Virginia hams. Fuck. I really do have a bad-boy fetish.

I shrug and mimic his pose as best I can, considering my elbows don’t reach. “Duty? Fatal curiosity?”

“I thought for sure you’d say Christmas spirit,” he tells me, reaching for what looks like club soda.

“Christmas spirit,” I parrot, and he cracks what’s almost a smile.

I survey the crowd, trying to figure out why I’m here, and which emotionally pivotal part of my life is about to happen. Then I spot my dad dancing by, with a smiling brunette. I grin, point him out to Norris, and move to intercept: because I haven’t seen dad in any reality since the night Aaron Echolls died, and I just want to squeeze him until he pops.

“That’s the most beautiful girl in the room,” Dad murmurs in my ear, as if confiding a secret. I pat his cheek.

“Good genes,” I whisper, and he smiles.

“Your boyfriend doesn’t seem too happy to be here,” he observes, twirling me. I glance back at the bar, where Norris remains unmoved, and notice Sacks beside him, nervous in formalwear. I frown.

“He’s not the champagne and chit-chat type,” I quip, and dad snorts. Because surely he’s aware of Norris’s troubled past.

“I heard a rumor,” Dad says, hardboiled-style, out of the corner of his mouth, “that there’s a card game going on in the pool house. Kids your age, and reasonably clean fun, and no need to put up with old fogies. What say you saunter out there, try your luck?”

He spins me again, and this time I notice Lamb, checking the cuff of his tux by a bay window. “OK,
no way did you just encourage me to illegally gamble. What the heck is going on?”

“Probably nothing,” Dad says, overprotecting me in that way that used to make me secretly insane. “But I’d feel better if you and Tiny over there were off the immediate premises.”

My brain spins. Christmas party. Poker game. But Dad’s Sheriff, not detective, and Aaron’s already dead. Different house, different pool house, no Duncan, no diary. Lilly’s not dead, Norris is my boyfriend, I know Wallace and Weevil but probably not Mac, and I am likely not yet related to Dick.

God, I need to start keeping a spreadsheet.

“You know the brush-off just makes me more determined to solve this mystery,” I say, and he sighs.

“Pool house, Veronica. Stat. And don’t come back in here until I show up to fetch you.”

“Aye-aye, Captain,” I retort, mock-saluting. “But remember, if you die, I’ll kill you.”

“Duly noted.” He spins me off the dance floor, and over to Norris: then strides away, pretending to glad hand, but clearly on a mission.

“So,” I say to Norris, wondering how to work him into a gathering of likely hostile 09’ers, “how do you feel about a stroll in the moonlight?”

He looks down at me. “I could stroll,” he says, and takes my hand.

I lead him out by the pool, which is big and majestic, but not as big as the Echolls’, and gesture at the sky like a game show host. “Moonlight!”

He leans towards me, clearly interested in the romantic part, and I spin away to locate the gambling. “Oh, look!” I chirp, feigning nonchalance. “Nefarious activities are afoot!” I point at the pool house, which is packed and emitting rap music and laughter, and he frowns down at me.

“Veronica,” he warns, clearly aware that I’m up to something.

“Dad says I have to,” I tell him, apologetic. He sighs, and gestures for me to precede him.

We approach with caution. The pool house is a two-room affair, and sure enough, in one of those rooms, a poker game is in progress. And of course, Logan sits at the head of the table, a cigar in his mouth and his bow tie dangling down, like he’s Casablanca Bogie. I want to tackle him and fuck him on the felt, and I hope it doesn’t show.

Sitting around the table, like a gathering of America’s Most Wanted are: Lilly, by Logan’s left, in an electric purple dress that plunges to her navel: Drunk!Dick, smirking at me like I’m less opaque than I think: Carrie Bishop, dressed in black and smoking, even though nobody smokes anymore: Conner Larkin and Shelly Pomroy, both tipsy and patently bored: Sean Friedrich, coked up into an ill-concealed rage: and an almost-out-of-patience Weevil. I immediately begin scanning counters and tables for empty bottles of Mickey’s.

“Veronica Mars,” Logan says smarmily, shifting the cigar to one side of his mouth. He spreads his arms out over the chair back. “And her faithful hound. To what do we owe the pleasure?”

“I heard there was a sucker game in town, and mama needs a new pair of shoes.” I figure this is a safe thing to say, since my mom’s married to Jake, and I’m proved right when the sycophant portion of the table erupts into laughter. Norris squeezes my hand in warning and I squeeze back, hopefully communicating that he should back the hell off.
“You want in?” Logan asks, waving his hand at the pot. “Sean and Shelly are out of chips, they’re just taking up space.”

“Why Mr. Echolls, we’d be charmed.” I yank on Norris’s hand, and he reluctantly follows. But he’s glowering at Logan, and I figure it won’t be long before he’s taunted into losing his cool.

I’ve clocked the bottle with the money in it now, and I use Norris’s bulk as cover, while I knock it into my evening bag. It’s my ace in the hole, I figure: because there’s no way this gathering won’t degenerate into mayhem.

Sean and Shelly vacate, her gratefully, him fulminating, and we take the empty seats. “Grand each buy-in,” Logan says, and Norris extracts his wallet, throws a wad of bills on the table. I remember then that his dad helped invent streaming software, and I suddenly realize: Norris and I ARE 09’ers.

I close my eyes, and breathe through becoming the thing I most hate.

“What are you up to, V?” Weevil mutters as I organize chips. Logan shoves our cash into a cigar box, without looking.

“You’ll see.” I whisper back. “Wait ‘til winner takes all. And keep an eye on Sean Friedrich, we don’t want him leaving.”

He leans back in his chair, arms crossed, amused now, interested in how it plays out. Logan pretends indifference, but Lilly’s watching me too. I wish she was stupid or liked me more, because she’s kind of a loose cannon.

Two hands in, I’ve got everybody’s measure. Lilly could give a shit if she wins, but she wants to stay in the game, so she must be here for the drama. Dick’s not the idiot I took him for, but he patently, gleefully could care less. Carrie Bishop is a phenomenal player with a phenomenal poker face, and she knows what I’m up to: she crooks the tiniest smile, when she catches me watching her. I remember how steely she was about taking out Mr. Rooks, and wonder if there’s any way to enlist her as an ally.

Norris is a competent and undramatic player, but he clearly has no interest in gambling, and is rapidly getting bored. Conner is exactly the idiot I took him for, and he’s been cheesily hitting on Carrie all night. Weevil’s good, but not as good as he thinks he is. And Logan, with his wheels within wheels behind a goofy, cocky grin, is a dangerous species of shark.

His deadliness makes me want him even more.

Conner is out of the game within half an hour: the level of play’s too high for him, and he’s been drinking a lot. Lilly’s been losing steadily for a while, but when she’s down to a couple of chips and lacks funds to call, she smirks and ups the ante. Reaching below the table, she wiggles around for a minute, and comes up with a pair of rhinestone-encrusted Jimmy Choos. She plops them on the felt with a flourish, and looks straight at me.

Logan laughs. “And the game just got a THOUSAND times more interesting,” he announces, polishing off his scotch. He stands up, locks the door, and closes the blinds. “What happens in the pool house stays in the pool house,” he clarifies, and sits back down.

Yeah, Logan’s drunk. Jealous, frustrated mean-drunk, looks like. And who can blame him?

I wonder what’s up in the home proper, and if it’s safe to come out yet.

Weevil looks at Lilly for a long moment, then at me. He sighs, throws his cards down. “I’m out,” he
says, shoving his chips towards the center of the table. “I’ll keep an eye on Friedrich for you,” he murmurs in my ear, as he stands.

Logan locks the door after him, and surveys the room for a minute. “Three guys, three girls,” he intones, “willing to get naked for sport. And everyone HATES each other.” His eyes brighten gleefully, and he spreads his arms wide. “ANYTHING could happen!”

Dick throws a poker chip at his head. “Deal the fucking cards, bro.”

“Okay,” Logan says, putting the cigar back in his mouth. He sits down, and winks. “But the river’s gonna get you.”

Play becomes heated. Norris has doubled down, which doesn’t jibe with his personality as I know it: I expected a storm out / ‘Are you coming, Veronica?’ by now, or maybe just him lunging for Logan’s throat.

Frankly, Norris is a problem. Because I know all these people well, in Original Timeline! Reality, but he’s a virtual stranger. Whereas here, I’m his girlfriend, on terms of presumptive intimacy: and it’s my job to predict and defuse whatever he tries to do.

Wait, WHY am I still his girlfriend? Didn’t Logan and I confess all in the janitor’s closet, last time I turned up in the past? Shouldn’t we be done with the pretend hate, and the dating other people?

Ugh, keep your head in the game, Mars, or you’ll end up naked in front of Dick Casablancas.

Forty-five minutes later, Logan’s got every chip, and refuses to release them back into circulation. It’s strip poker all the way, now, and things are getting real.

Carrie sets her cards neatly down, and smiles that barely-there smile again. Only this time, it’s directed at Logan. “Take it off, Echolls,” she says, and I’m not sure how she sounds both gleeful and calm.

He smirks back at her as he removes his tuxedo shirt, revealing a wife beater underneath, which Jesus Christ. My eyes narrow, because IS SHE HITTING ON HIM?

I have no clue why Norris is still playing, even though he’s supposed to be my boyfriend. But I’m crystal clear on why I’m still playing.

Because both of these bitches want Logan, and I am going to TAKE THEM OUT.

Dick starts laughing, and when I glance up, he’s looking at me, and I can tell he knows. I amend my plan. I am going to take these girls out, and them I’m going to punch Dick’s FACE IN. And then I’m going to shove Logan UP AGAINST A WALL somewhere, and I WILL MAKE HIM PAY.

I’ve lost my earrings, my necklace, my bracelet, my shoes. Lilly’s down to an Agent Provocateur bustier and g-string, which look like they cost the earth (not that Lilly’s fazed). Dick’s still got a necklace on, but he’s in his boxers anyway, and Logan’s a shoeless Streetcar Brando. Carrie’s wearing a grey silk slip that’s just as elegant as the dress she had on over it, and Norris has played conservatively, and is mostly dressed.

Logan throws a straight down, and then he looks my direction. His eyes are glittering the way they used to, back when he hated me and wanted me at the same time. I feel like biting him.
“You lose, Mars,” he says, leaning back with his hands behind his head, preparing to enjoy the show. “Time to pay.”

I stare at him, and I feel the way I did on Prom Night at the beach, watching him walk out of the water, shielded only by my dress. Like I wanted him to SEE me, and all the ways we were the same: like I could care less who caught us, or knew I was turned on. It’s freeing in a way I never experienced, back in Original! Reality. I don’t have to be NICE to anyone, this time. I can be ME instead, and live the thrills and chills I once pretended to fear.

I reach for the tie behind my neck, and work at the knot, while Dick hoots approval and Carrie raises her brows, and Lilly cackles. And then Norris puts his hands flat on the table, stands up, and says, “No.”

Everybody turns to look at him, like he’s a piece of furniture that spoke. Logan’s the only one who smiles.

“Check your rulebook, Clayton. She lost, she pays.”

“You’re a piece of shit,” Norris opines, and he sounds even, calm.

Logan laughs, tilting his head sideways to crack his neck, and rises. He’s got that anticipatory look in his eye that never means anything good. “Ah, but I’m the piece of shit she wants,” he says, and everything goes to hell.

Norris vaults the table to get to him, scattering chips and cards, his movements focused and precise as an MMA fighter’s. But Logan’s like a cat with a Mensa IQ, and he’s already plotted the sequence. He gets Norris with a fist to the center of the face, all his weight behind it, Norris’s momentum increasing the force. There’s an audible crack as it arrests Norris’s progress, and sends him sprawling back: and Logan dances free, to an area devoid of girls. Drawing the fight away from the vulnerable.

Norris is up and on him in a second, blood streaming from his nose. His lips are pulled back from his teeth in a snarl, and it’s like he’s lost it, because he hits HARD. And Logan…he’s Muhammad Ali. He dances and dodges, and twists and quips, and then he feints one way and punches the other, like a high-speed train. Someone’s gonna end up in the hospital, because these two won’t quit.

I dig through my bag for my taser, and my hand closes, reassuring, around its stem. I switch it on: and I can feel it arc in my hand as I march forward, and plant it in the small of Norris’s back. He jerks upright, electrified, and then topples sideways, a majestic oak going down.

“That’s us, breaking up,” I say, to his twitching form.

I turn back to the staring crowd, and smile. “Sean Friedrich stole the money from the cash box,” I announce, extracting the bottle from my purse, and setting it on the table. “No one drinks Mickey’s Big Mouses because they like the taste.”

“So…great game!” I congratulate Logan, with a lift of my eyebrow. “Carrie…and maybe even a little bit, Dick….I won’t be underestimating you again.”

I switch off the taser with a snap, scrape my jewelry into my bag, grab my shoes, and make my exit. I don’t even have words for how amazing I feel.

I’m halfway past the pool when Logan catches my arm. He drags me—literally drags me, stumbling, backwards, over to the side of the house, where the bushes screen us from the ambling crowd. Then he pushes me up against the wall, and kisses the living hell out of me.
“THAT was the hottest thing I have ever SEEN,” he pants, when he has to break free for oxygen. He lifts me up farther so he can grind against me, his face dropping down to bite my shoulder: I wrap my arms and legs around him, and hang on. “Oh my God, I’m so hard right now it actually HURTS.”

I laugh as his hands close over my ass beneath my skirt, and he begins to work us against each other, tauntingly. I have no idea if I’m a virgin in this timeline, or how far Logan and I may have previously gone, and I realize I don’t care. Because I’m pulsing with adrenaline, and it’s just SO GOOD. “I told you, I’m red satin now,” I manage, and he shoves up against me, and comes.

“No shit,” he mutters, and then we’re both laughing. I say, “Dick’s right, I really am a Black Widow,” and we laugh even harder.

“You can bite me any time,” he tells me, pressing kisses all over my face and throat. “Consider this an engraved invitation.”

So I lean forward, and I open my mouth on his pectoral, and I do.

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We stumble out of the bushes after a half-hour of fooling around (during which he never once tries to remove my clothes, but manages to get me off anyway). He leads me to one of the lounge chairs near the pool, and kneels at my feet to strap on my sandals, with his bruised and scraped-up hands. “So does this mean we’re going steady?” I ask, toying with his every-direction hair.

He looks up at me and smiles, and it’s the devilish smile, not the boyish one. “Are you prepared for the volume of shit that’s about to hit the fan?”

“Bring it on,” I say.

“Then yes.” He grins. “But let’s avoid the pool house for the time being. Contrary to popular opinion, I do not in fact have a death wish.”

He leads me around the side of the house, and up to a bedroom, which, based on the number of ‘Alyssa Milano in bikinis’ posters, belongs to Dick. He digs a pair of jeans, and a green t-shirt that reads ‘chicks dig me’, out of a drawer, and gives me That Look. “Watch or don’t,” he says. “I have to rinse off, and put on something not-bloody, before I inadvertently freak out my mom.”

I lock the door, lean against it, cross my arms, and watch.

He strips, lobbing his clothes in the direction of the laundry bin, not taking his eyes off me to notice that he misses. “Showering now,” he says, and walks into the bathroom.

I want to join him. Like, really a lot. But back when I was in high school for real, it was a big thing for me to wait until senior year: to be an adult, before I was intimate with someone. I stood by that decision in my original life, even though Beaver and Duncan tried to steal my right to choose. Even though I lost Logan, and the connection we shared, before the date arrived. I have to respect that wish here, too. Me, mentally experiencing this moment, is an adult with a long-standing sex life, familiar with Logan in bed. Me, physically present, is seventeen. And, despite his precociousness, so’s my sexy boyfriend.

Oh God. I remember the agony of practicing self-control in the XTerra backseat, while he tried his best to make me lose it. I’m looking at months of insane frustration, my will pitted against one that makes Disraeli look like a kitten.
Stupid morals. No wonder I used to feel safer repressed.

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Dick’s waiting in the hall for us, when we emerge from his room, arms crossed, one foot up as he leans against the wall. He takes in Logan’s wet hair, the band-aids I’ve plastered all over his hands, and grins.

“Dude, that was the best sucker punch I have ever SEEN.”

Logan smirks, and they do some complicated handshake, and then Dick drapes his arm over my shoulders, laughing down. “And Ronniekins. Who knew you’d be the comic relief? I was like scared and turned on and laughing my balls off, all at the same time.”

“Where’s Norris?” Logan asks, pointedly taking my hand, and placing himself between me and Dick.

“Had security throw him out,” Dick says, casually. “Woulda called the cops, but they’re already all here, in civvies, downstairs.”

Oh, right. My dad’s ‘nothing to worry about’ operation. I can’t believe I forgot.

“And Lilly?” Logan asks, with a grimace.

“Yeah, she’s grinding on Enbom, making a scene.” Dick shakes his head. “Like she couldn’t see this coming. We ALL saw this coming.”

“You did not,” Logan says. He jerks a thumb at himself. “Unpredictable and inscrutable.” He points at me. “Loose cannon.”

“Man, there was a POOL.” Dick laughs. “Carrie had tonight, and damn if she didn’t make it happen. Friedrich had to pay up TWICE, and he’s off with that cholo you’ve got housetrained, having a ‘conversation’. “

“I told you, Mars.” Logan extends a palm, as if checking for rain. “Shit,” he says, then rolls the hand elaborately towards us, “fan.”

“And there’s a police sting going on downstairs, which I was specifically warned to avoid,” I tell them. “Maybe we stay up here, play some video games?”

“Now where’s the fun in that?” Logan asks, eyes lighting up. He takes a skip step forward, then turns to face us, inviting. “Whadda ya say we go stir the pot?”

I look at Dick, and he looks at me. I think about how nothing actually happened to me at this Shelly’s party, how Madison’s drink may have just been soda and spit. I think about my dad’s arm around Bettina’s shoulders, and the way Dick patched up Logan, last time I fled my emotions in terror. I think about Beaver jumping, and how wrecked Dick was after, because he felt responsible. I decide to cut him a tiny, and experimental, bit of slack. “I take left flank, you take right?” I ask.

“Get your taser ready,” he says. “There’s gonna be carnage.”

I know surf punks, so I’m sure Logan and Dick just want to fuck shit up. But personally? I’m hoping I can use this time, in this house, to figure out what’s going on with that nasty little pocket psychopath, Beaver.
“Unf,” Logan says as I roll on top of him, and begin feverishly sucking his neck. “Good….morning?”

“I dreamed about that fight,” I say, working my way down his torso, licking and nipping and tugging at the hair. I’m wearing pajamas, but he’s wearing his customary nothing. Which makes this all so much easier.

“Um…what fight?” he asks, as I lick at the juncture between his hip and thigh. Then I take him into my mouth, and he quits talking.

I tease him until he’s fighting not to thrust, and then he disengages and flips me, pinning me with his weight. “What fight?” he repeats, firmly.

“You and Norris, at the poker game,” I say, and his face relaxes into a knowing smirk.

“Ah. THAT fight.” He begins to leisurely unbutton my top, ignoring my struggles to shift my hips, and achieve friction. “I always get spectacularly lucky, when your thoughts drift that direction.”

“Well you would if you’d quit crushing me,” I say.

He finishes unbuttoning, and surveys my actually-heaving breasts. Almost casually, he bends to scrape his teeth along one nipple. “I learned something very important that night,” he confides, lifting a hand to massage the other breast. He gives a nip, and then a lick, and I moan.

“I’d been so earnest with you, for eight endless months.” He mouths the underside of my breast, his hand drifting down to toy with the drawstring of my pants. “Being your crime solving buddy, keeping a million tawdry secrets, following every one of your endless rules.” He slides his hand into the back of my pants, and adjusts me, so his cock and my clit align. I wind my legs around his, writhing.

“And then I get you alone in a closet, and you tell me you’ve always wanted me, and I figure FINALLY I can make my move. But when I go to kiss you? Total cock block.” He runs his hands down my throat, across my shoulders, along my arms, and spreads my hands wide. He slides my shirt completely open, and climbs abruptly off me to lick my navel. I whimper, and he laughs. It sounds dirty.

“‘I have a boyfriend! I can’t!’ you say,” he mimics me, “and you run off, and the next day said boyfriend tries to send me to the ICU. So I quit fighting fair, and I paste him. And while I’m nursing my wounds with a bottle of whiskey, I decide I hate you.”

He tugs the pants down, and sucks at the placket of my g-string, pushing his tongue against the crease. “You’re a tease,” he looks up at me here, eyes twinkling, and smirks, “you’re myopically justice-obsessed, and uptight. And I have a perfectly willing, if unreliable, girlfriend I can ease my frustrations on, for hours and hours and hours.” He runs his teeth along the area he just licked, and a noise issues from the back of my throat that makes him smile.

“But then you show up at Dick’s poker party,” he continues, rising up to rest on his side next to me, chin in hand. His other hand trails between my breasts, down my stomach, to the area he’s just abandoned. It eases past the scrap of lace: he pushes two fingers inside me, deep, and my hips rise off the bed.

“And Lilly’s there, and she wants me.” He’s whispering into my ear, circling my clit with his thumb. “And Carrie’s there, and SHE wants me. And you’re there, and you look murderous, and then
CLOTHES start coming off.”

He adds a third finger, and I’m so wet now his hand is making sounds. He bites my neck, shifts to thrust his cock against my hip. “And then you lose your last hand, and you’re looking right at me as you untie your dress, and I realize…it turns you on when I’m an asshole.”

He withdraws his fingers and pushes my panties to the side, and then he’s in me, looming over me from the full distance of his flexed arms, thrusting hard. I lock my feet around his waist and grip his forearms tight, my head thrashing: then he pulls out again, and goes down on me. I completely fucking lose it, when his tongue slides inside. He uses his mouth and both hands, one in, one not, and I’ve come three times and am sobbing for breath when he penetrates again.

He cradles my face with one wet hand, rocks sinuously against me, both of us rolled to our sides now, slippery with sweat. “When Norris came after me,” he says, “your oh-so-important boyfriend, you fucking tased him. And then you let me drag you off into the bushes, and lick you through your panties until you came. Ah, God.” His grip tightens on my ass, fingers sinking into the crease. My head falls back as he screws up, impassioned, into me, and then we both, helplessly, release.

“I love you,” he says, when he can talk again, his forehead pressed to mine. I laugh, breathless, and kiss him: arch down onto him, where he’s still half-hard inside me.

“I love you more,” I say. “Jackass.”

He laughs, and draws a heart around my clit with his fingertip, and I settle back to let him wear me out again.

“See,” he whispers, as I’m drifting off to sleep, much later. “SPECTACULARLY laid. You’re the best I’ve ever had, Veronica Mars. Got to put a ring on it, make sure the supply never dries up.”
Adrenaline Shoots Your Nerves to the Sky

THREAD SEVEN INVERTS

I’m in a car with Dick Casablancas, I’m covered in blood, and he’s driving really fast. The shift from post-orgasmic torpor to adrenaline overload is jarring, to say the least: I shriek and grab the oh-shit handle, because what the FUCK is going on?

“I’m not gonna kill us, Ronnie,” he says, taking a corner on what feels like two wheels. He doesn’t look at me. “I’d tell you to relax, but I’m not sure you can, even under normal circumstances.”

“Where’s Logan?” I ask, because he’s in his tux and I’m in my green formal. I guess we stirred the pot more than we bargained for.

“Got in the ambulance with his mom,” he says. “Didn’t you see? It’s right up there ahead, I won’t lose them.”


“And Dad?” I grit out, heart pounding.

“I dunno. They were driving off with him just as I made it outside. But it’s the same hospital, Ronnie. I’ll get you there.”

We spin through a few more red lights and blind corners, and then he’s squealing to a stop at the emergency entrance, and I’m out the door. Lynn’s on a stretcher that’s unloading from an ambulance, and Logan’s beside her. I scan her rapidly for abdominal wounds: but she’s awake and alert, and other than a bandaged right arm, she looks OK.

Logan glances up at us and smiles faintly, then follows the stretcher inside. Dick puts a hand on my shoulder. “Come on, let’s find the Sherriff.”

Dad’s in surgery when we finally track him down: but we’re told he’s just getting stitched, and his life’s not in danger. I remember how he looked after he pulled me out of that fridge, all the terrible burns, and the grafts they required. I pray, silently, that this is less bad.

We settle in the waiting room. After a while, a young Pakistani doctor who sounds British appears, and guides us into a hallway. “Your father has a stab wound in the right shoulder, six defensive knife wounds to his forearms, and injuries to the palms of his hands, where he,” the doctor grimaces, “appears to have grabbed the weapon. All the trauma was muscular, except for some possible nerve damage to the left hand: there were no tendons or major blood vessels severed, thankfully. He’ll need physical therapy, and there may be some minor loss of sensation to the hand in question, but he’s not in any danger.”

“Can we see him?” I ask, taking my first deep breath since the car.

He nods. “Follow me. He may remain sedated until after visiting hours end, but you can watch him sleep.”

He leads us to a room, where dad is out cold, looking smaller than normal in the big steel bed. Both his arms are bandaged, like a mummy’s, but his vital areas are untouched. The doctor checks the chart and machines, moves to leave, then pauses by the door. “Your father’s a very brave man, Miss
Mars. Not many people could muster the nerve to do what he did. He likely saved Mrs. Echolls’ life.”

“He’s a hero,” I agree, clenching my jaw to fight back tears. The doctor pats my arm, and goes.

Dick sits with me, even though I don’t ask him to. After a while, he wanders off, returns with two cups of coffee and some cheese crackers. “Logan’s down the hall with his mom,” he informs me. “She’s gonna be OK. He said to tell you the EMS guy complimented your tourniquet.”


I laugh, because it really is. “Can I ask you something?” I venture, after a while. “Or actually, two somethings?”

He shrugs. “No guarantee I’ll answer.”

“Remember Shelly Pomroy’s party, last year?”

He grins, gazing off into space. “How could I forget? You and Lilly were both hella scary.”

“Did you have GHB that night?”

He rolls his head to look at me. Not defensive, but not confiding. “Why do you care? Is this about Carmen?”

“No,” I say. “Carmen was dosed by Tad. He wanted to make a home movie.”

“Nah, man, no drugs. That was all Logan, Luke and Sean. They were planning to go to a rave after, but Logan disappeared with the car. To be honest, I didn’t even stay long, the party majorly blew. The only good part was when Friederich bet Lilly a grand she wouldn’t make out with Shelly.” He sat back, drinking his coffee. “So, I’m curious now. What’s your other question?”

“What’s your brother up to, these days?”

“Who the hell knows?” He shrugs. “Watching weird TV and not banging French chicks, probably. He went to live with my mom like six months ago, after Woody Goodman got arrested. He didn’t want to testify, and I guess she found a maternal instinct, somewhere. Why, you miss him?”

“Not even a little,” I say.

“Yeah, I gotta admit, I don’t miss Duncan much. I know everybody was all mad at you and shit, when that went down: even I was kinda mad, because you got Logan’s dad fucking killed. But I always thought the Donut was weird. Plus, boring as fuck. I’m surprised you didn’t dump him sooner, ’specially now I’ve seen the kind of guys you really dig.”

“This from the person who dated Madison for years.”

“Hey, say what you will about that chick, she is NEVER boring.” He opens his cheese crackers and offers me one: I take it. “I had my doubts about you, you know. When Logan first started mooning over you all hardcore, and pretending he wasn’t, even though he explained how you ending his dad did him a favor. You may not realize this, Ronnie, but you kind of come off as an ice bitch.”

I level a cold stare at him, and he laughs. “You majorly had his back, though, tonight. You made some big-ass statements about where your loyalties lie, in front of everyone. So, like, you and me,
we’re not besties…but I guess what I’m saying is, if you’re really on his team, you’re on mine, too.”

“You want to be on my team? Stop spouting sexist bullshit constantly in my presence.”

“What’s wrong with being sexy?” he asks, and I look at him, and he grins.

“Dick,” I muse, swallowing the rest of my disgusting coffee, “I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

“Whatever,” he says. “You gonna eat your crackers?”

THREAD EIGHT

I’m awakened by the buzz of an alarm, and by Logan, prodding me. “Up,” he says, rolling me over, and when I play dead, rolling me back. “Up, school. And don’t hit the snooze again, or we’re gonna be late.”

I moan, and he climbs on top of me. “I know I fucked you into a stupor last night, Ronnie,” he says, in my ear, “but I didn’t realize it’d last this long.”

“You’re just that good,” I tell him, through a yawn.

“Why thank you, I was inspired. Now UP!” He yanks all the covers off me, and opens the curtains. I sit and blink at him: he’s fully, if sloppily, dressed, and gilded in pale, beachy light. He hands me a cup, which excites me until I realize it’s herbal tea.

“I miss espresso,” I whine, and he throws a t-shirt at my head.

I dress in the clothes he’s laid out on a chair, like I’m five years old, and follow him to the car (which is a Range Rover, same as he drove in Original!College, only this one is forest green). He hands me a paper sack, and I dig out a chocolate croissant, a sausage kolache and an apple (the last of which he filches). Then there’s only eating, and sipping hot drinks, and watching the sunlit ocean slide from view, as we turn inland, down the highway.

“Where’s my phone?” I ask, and he points toward the backseat, where two backpacks and a steel-grey messenger bag rest. I snag the bag, dig out a pair of sunglasses. Then I scroll through my calendar for the day, thanking God I’m a Type A anal-retentive.

Photography at 8:30, Abnormal Psychology at 10:00, library time—1 hour!! at 11:30, ‘History of the American Underclass’ at 2:00. I page through my cell photos, and sure enough, there’s one of my class schedule, showing all the teachers and halls. Damn, I’m good.

“Lunch at 1:00?” I ask, and he says, “Josie’s?” I nod, figuring I can Google it. Logan turns, parallel parks effortlessly, makes a ta-da gesture, and leaps out of the car.

He always was disgustingly chipper in the morning.

I open my door, and he holds out a hand to help me down. I glance around blearily as he settles my pack on my shoulders. Then, not so blearily. “Wait, where are we?”

He lifts his eyebrows. “Um, school?”

Shit, I think, as he kisses my nose, salutes me with two fingers, and saunters off, whistling.

Because the campus I’m standing on isn’t Hearst.
So guess where I go to college now? Come on, wild guess. Stanford? UCLA? San Diego State?

Nope. Berkeley. With the hippies. Where I’m apparently a criminal justice major, while Logan studies sociology. I’m not working very hard, either: I’ve got three classes per day, no job as far as I can tell, and a social calendar that consists of ‘lunch-Mac’ and ‘shopping with Alice’.

(Note to self: figure out who the fuck Alice is, before next week’s ‘shopping’.)

My morning classes, I manage to locate with the help of a map from the information center, and a friendly physicist. I skate through them, despite my lack of preparation, because, well, I’m me. Then, yeah, I spend ‘library time’ Googling.

I search for me, and find 47 feel-good articles about Jake and Lianne Kane, and their many charities: also, three about Sheriff Keith Mars, winning a landslide re-election. I search for Logan, and discover he has a fan club…that must burn him something fierce. In addition to being a ‘hot-hot-HOTTIE’, he’s apparently a Dean’s List student, a semi-pro surfer, and an ‘airplane enthusiast’, which, I don’t even want to know. He’s mentioned in a zillion Aaron and Lynn Echolls articles, but there’s no sign of the infamous Larry King interview: I guess his public outing as an abuse victim has vanished into the slipstream. There’s no mention of him in my media, or me in his, other than this tidbit: “When asked about his love life, Logan grinned and said, ‘definitely off the market’.”

I search for Trina, and she comes up in the cast list for a straight-to-video movie about killer polar bears, so I guess some things never change. I search for Lilly, expecting wall-to-wall Lindsey Lohan style paparazzi shots, and instead get more charity spiels. I realize, then, that all three of us have been scrubbed: because duh, Jake and Wiedman are tech security geniuses. Convinced that Googling has been a massive waste of time, I turn my focus to finding Josie’s.

I’m not sure what I expected: but the restaurant’s an upscale Thai place, lots of primary colors and wooden carvings, piped-in flute music with rippling trills. Logan’s waiting at a table when I get there, and has coconut bubble tea and egg rolls at the ready, which makes my heart do a funny lurch. He’s wearing my (his?) brown cardigan, and hops up to kiss me. I press my face to his chest and breathe him in, and hope this part of my life will never change.

“How’d the presentation go?” I ask, as he sprawls back over the two chairs he’s claimed, and takes a slug of condensed milk and coffee.

“Enh,” he does a see-saw motion with his hand, and I narrow my eyes. “Nailed it,” he says, with a smirk.

“And there’s the Dean’s List student I know and love,” I praise. “When are you done for the day?”

“Whenever you are.” He snatches an egg roll, laughs when I bare my teeth at him. “I need to park somewhere with WiFi, do some reading for English. You can just find me after Weird History is over.”

“You want to hang at the library? I have to pick up my paycheck anyway.”

He sighs. “If I must,” he says, unenthusied.

Hmmm. I prepare to probe further, but a waiter sets a plate of lemongrass beef and a dish of mango pudding in front of me, and I lose my train of thought. “You ordered for me?”

He rolls his eyes. “Like you don’t get the exact same thing every.single. time.” He digs into his own
vermicelli, gestures with his chopsticks. “Eat up. Feed the alien piloting your appetite, and then you can escort me into the pits of Hell.”

“The library is really that bad?” I ask, through a giant mouthful of ambrosia.

“I guess it’s more like purgatory,” he concedes, glum. “Mind-numbing boredom, resentment of the many rules. Penance for my sins. Thank God you showed some sense and quit.”

I frown, but I’m too starved to focus, and before I know it, I’m kissing him goodbye in front of a nondescript beige building. Then, king-sized, to-go bubble tea in hand, I head off to find out just how weird Weird History is.

Answer? Very. The topic is The Living Conditions of Ellis Island Immigrants, and holy cow. After an hour of photos of ethnically-based gang murders, starving kids with gruesome factory injuries, and the perils of tenement living (accompanied by a top-volume, spittle-slinging rant) I’m numb. I emerge blinking into the sunlight, figuring the library will be a breeze by comparison.

At least, I think so until I get there, and find Logan staring at the ceiling, wearing his ‘I’m about to verbally eviscerate Gia Goodman’ face. While Piz sits across from him, leaning forward on his elbows, monologuing earnestly about God knows what.

They turn when I approach. Logan’s eyes plead ‘save me’, and Piz’s whole face lights up. “VERONICA!” he squeaks, grinning from ear to ear. “You CAME BACK!”

Fuck me. No wonder I quit.

“Never again,” Logan warns as we leave the library, pointing a finger at my face. “I mean it. I’ve gotten better at tolerating idiots in general, but that guy is a bridge too far.”

I glance down at the check for $315.94 in my fist, and honestly, it doesn’t seem worth his agitation. “Come on,” I say, with a weak smile. “He’s nice.”

“Sure he is, if by ‘nice’ you mean ‘passive-aggressive, attention-starved omega male, with no discernable social skills’. Do you know what we, or rather he, discussed for 45 minutes? Celtic folk music and its impact on early U2. I am not even kidding!”

“It could have been worse,” I say, grabbing his gesticulating hand with both of mine. “He could have spent the whole time rhapsodizing about me.”

“Don’t even joke,” Logan says, entwining our fingers. He kisses my hand. “I have enough trouble not beating the shit out of that jerkoff as is.” He chirps open the locks on the car. “I’ve got no idea how Wallace puts up with him. The man is a saint.”

“Headphones, most likely,” I say, and then my phone rings, distracting me. “Mars crematorium,” I lilt, into the speaker. “We grill ‘em, you spill ‘em.”

“And here I thought going away to college would make you MORE mature,” my dad intones, voice warm.

“Pops!” I grin. “Come on, ‘away’? It’s Berkeley, not Jupiter.”

“Half a world apart, for a doting dad,” he says. “You still coming down for the party this weekend?”
“Party?” I mouth at Logan, and he gestures for me to hand him the phone.

“Hey Mr. Mars,” he says, then rolls his eyes and laughs. “Fine, whatever, dude. We’re all carpooling Friday after class, just wanted to ask you about the surfing thing. YEAH, I think she’s ready, I just want to make sure SHE thinks so. And you know she doesn’t always tell us…” he laughs. “Okay, then. Fine, we’ll bring the boards. Yeah, looking forward to it. Wait ‘til you see what we bought him. OK, here’s Ronnie.”

“Hey dad,” I say, as Logan hits the garage door opener, and parks the car.

“You didn’t get anything too extravagant?” he asks, and I say, “Now that would be telling,” because I have no clue.

“I am an officer of the law,” he warns. “I ferret out secrets for a living.”

“Oh look, it’s that urgent thing I have to do,” I say. “Right now. Urgently. Later, Daddy-o!”

“Veronica…” he protests, but I hang up.

“You almost spilled your guts, didn’t you?” Logan asks, laughing at me.

I squeeze my eyes shut. “I could picture his Disappointed Dad Face,” I admit, cracking one eye open. “It breaks me every time.”

“Funny, Aaron’s Disappointed Dad Face always made me faintly nauseous.” He hooks an arm around my shoulders, and kisses the top of my head, opening the door to the house. We’re greeted by the sound of yelling and explosions.

We find Wallace and Dick sprawled out over most of our living room, playing Halo. The coffee table is littered with beer cans and bags of snack, and Cypress Hill is playing loudly enough that it doesn’t qualify as background music.

“Dude!” Logan says, vaulting the couch and inserting himself between them. He yanks the controller away from Dick, and smacks him in the back of the head. “I can’t believe you started without me!”

“What’s up.” Dick gets up and circles the couch to plant a kiss on the top of my head. I cringe, because let’s face it: I may not loathe Dick in this timeline, like I do in my own, but we will NEVER EVER be on head-kissing terms. “At least Ronnie’s glad to see me, aren’t you, Rons? Hey, you got any of that chorizo queso from last time in the freezer?”

Mmm, Dad’s chorizo queso, I muse, momentarily distracted. “Maybe if you get OFF me, and turn that music down to a level that won’t give us nerve damage.”

“See?” Dick asks the room in general. “Boundless affection.”

A series of groans issues from the screen, and Wallace yells, “HA!” throwing his hands up and the controller down. “THAT’S what I’m talking about!”

“Dude, you only beat me because I took over Dick’s avatar,” Logan says, throwing a handful of chips at him.

“You keep telling yourself that,” Wallace says, standing up to stretch. “Hey, Dick, come school Logan for me, man, my eyes are crossing. I’ll keep V company while she pretends to cook things in the kitchen.”
“Oh, ha ha,” I say, but I follow him in, and go hunting through the freezer. Because, queso. There’s nothing already prepped, but we have cream cheese, salsa and chorizo, so I hunt up a skillet.

“You ready for the big get-together at the family compound?” Wallace asks, leaning back against the counter. He selects a grape from the fruit bowl, and pops it in his mouth.

“Um,” I say noncommittally, and empty sausage into the pan.

He laughs. “Yeah, there seems to be a lot of advance work involved. Which reminds me, Dick was looking for you guys earlier—something about which hat to buy—but neither one of you was answering.”

“Must have been when we were at the library, getting my paycheck.” I finish washing my hands, and reach for a towel. “I didn’t hear the phone.”

He stares at me. “You did NOT take Logan there.”

“He handled it,” I say, smirking at him. “I mean, he clearly wanted to strangle Piz after a 45 minute musical dissertation, but he controlled himself manfully.”

“Are you CRAZY?” he demands, reaching over to shut the kitchen door. He lowers his voice to a hiss. “Man, you’re gonna get Piz KILLED!”

“What? Why?” I ask, separating sausage with a spatula. “We were in a neutral public place on a business errand. It’s not like we showed up for group bowling, only to find Piz had asked me on a date.”

He crosses his arms. “You didn’t tell Logan, did you?”


“That Piz KISSED YOU!” He throws his hands up. “I can’t BELIEVE you, V! I kept my mouth shut because you said you were gonna handle it, and that you’d already figured out the right words to say, and that you’d quit the job, and never speak to Piz again. And this was your solution? To pretend the whole thing didn’t happen?” He shakes his head at me, and I cringe a little under the weight of his disapproval. “I don’t appreciate being put in this position, Veronica. Piz is my roommate, but Logan is my BEST FRIEND!”

Okay, that hurts. Logan cutting Wallace off the flagpole is the WORST thing about this timeline, hands down.

Well, except for the fact that Piz KISSED me. Because, EW. As if.

“What did Piz have to say about this alleged kiss, anyway?” I ask, turning off the burner. “What’s his version of the story?”

He’s staring at me, penetrating, and his frown deepens. “That you were crying about something, but you wouldn’t tell him what. And he figured it was your quote ‘Neanderthal boyfriend’.” He holds a hand up as I sputter, to silence me. “And the light was shining on your hair, and you looked like an angel, blah-de-blah-de-blah, you know how he gets. And then he told you he would do anything for you, and you could come to him, and he would protect you, and you just looked at him with big wet eyes, and whispered, “I have to go”. And ran. Then he asked what Logan would do when he heard, and I said, “Kill you.” And he turned white, and made this squeaky sound, and locked himself in the bathroom for twenty minutes.”
“Oh my GOD!” I say, and start pacing. Because I am SO mad. SO. MAD. I want to grab the car keys and drive back to the library: tase Piz until he pees himself, and can’t stop twitching.

“I am ENGAGED!” I grit, through clenched teeth. “I am PREGNANT! I would not willingly kiss that jellyfish, FOR ANY REASON EVER. THAT FUCKER!”

I punch the wall, hurt my knuckles, and make a dent. “He’s like Homer Simpson, only seeing what he wants to see. God, I’ll KILL HIM!”

“Wait wait wait wait.” Wallace holds up a preemptive hand. “Back up the truck. You’re PREGNANT?”

“YES,” I say. “Was I not supposed to tell you?”

“If Piz knowingly kissed a pregnant, engaged woman?” he announces, deliberately, “I’ll kill him right along with you. How many weeks gone are you?”

We both look down at my stomach. “Three months?” I guess.

He paces to the end of the kitchen and back. “Ok,” he says. “Ok. Man, but we REALLY gotta tell Logan everything now, or I’m afraid he’s gonna kill ME.”

“Fine,” I say, turning back to the chorizo to cover my nervousness. “Ask him to come help me in here. And distract Dick.”

“Thank you, V,” he says, and takes off through the door.

Logan enters a minute later and looks down at me, and I fold in on myself defensively. “You summoned?” he asks.

“Wallace says I have to tell you this, or he will,” I blurt. “Piz kissed me.”

“I know,” Logan says. “You kicked him in the nuts three times. I can’t believe he doesn’t curl up or flee, at the sight of you. Why are we talking about this again?”

“Piz told Wallace I gave him MELTING LOOKS and then ran off to ‘think’, like a romance novel heroine,” I say. “And I got SO MAD I may have punched a hole in the wall.”

Logan searches out the dent, and the corner of his mouth turns up. “Is your hand OK?”

“It hurts,” I admit. He takes it in both of his, examining, and my eyes well up. “I am SO SORRY I made you go there today!”

“I thought it was a test,” he confides. He looks up at me, smiles faintly at the expression on my face. “To see if I could keep it together, under extreme pressure. Since I’m gonna be a dad and all.”

“I would NEVER,” I say, very seriously, and his smile becomes genuine. “You’re gonna be the BEST DAD. Well, tied for best. I honestly didn’t think. You know how focused I can get, and other guys... just don’t register, sometimes.”

“To me either,” he says, mock-seriously, pulling me in for a hug. “I promise to never even LOOK at another dude.”

“What a comedian,” I mutter, and kiss his chest. “Now, can you please tell Wallace that he’s not trapped in the middle of a fiasco anymore?”
“Nah, I’m gonna make him sweat,” he says, dipping a chip into the salsa, and laughs when I smack him. “What?” he protests, fake-innocent. “HE didn’t say anything about this situation to ME.”

“Yeah, but he’s your best friend,” I scold, turning back to the stove.

“So he claims.” Logan bends over me, kisses my cheek. Whispers in my ear, “Personally, I think he likes you more.”
You Let Me Liberate You

Chapter Notes

So this chapter is about 80% FunnySmutFluff. Because I felt like it, that's why. :-) 

THREAD EIGHT INVERTS

I’m doing homework at a desk that isn’t mine, in a red and gold room that looks my style (on a huge budget), but ditto. It’s calculus, ugh, and Garbage is playing quietly in the background. There’s a Husky puppy in a green rhinestone collar sprawled, snoring, on the floor.

The door opens, and I glance up as Logan walks in. He spins, back to the king-size bed, flops down, covers his eyes with his arm, and peeks out at me from under it. “I need your help, Veronica,” he says.

I let go a breath. Finally, something familiar.

“Tell me more,” I invite, flopping down beside him.

“See, I have this problem,” he confides, rolling on top of me, smiling. He brushes the bangs out of my eyes.


“So big I don’t know if you can handle it,” he says, grin intensifying. He settles in, fitting himself between my legs.

“Never underestimate me,” I warn. “I can handle ANYTHING.”

He laughs and kisses me, deep, and he’s hard against me. I relax, accept him, hooking my heels around his knees, spreading my fingers, gently, through his hair.

“Mmmm,” he says, after a while. He presses his face into the crook of my neck, breathing deeply. “Parental unit in the next room, and I actually did come over here for an important reason.”

“More important than ME?” I ask, kittenish and mock-coy, and he groans and kisses me again, pressing me harder into the bed.

“You really are the most dangerous person I know,” he tells me hotly. He nips at my earlobe and sits up, and that’s when I realize it’s serious.

“Somebody’s been using mom’s credit cards,” he says, settling himself out of reach with a wry smile. “The bank called her, and shut them down, but she wants to report the theft to your dad. Thing is, based on the stuff that’s been purchased, I’m pretty sure I know who’s doing it. And I think that person’s in trouble.”

“Trina?” I ask, and he laughs and nods. “Dingdingding! Cue balloons and confetti. Yeah, she does drugs and hangs out with asshole losers,
same as always, but these are BIG charges. Like ‘pouring money into a black hole of a movie that will never get off the ground’ charges. Mom thinks if Trina takes a fall, it might teach her responsibility: she’s sick of bailing her out. Because, you know, Trina was Aaron and Pamela’s kid, not hers, and meant to be their problem. Only she’s an orphan now, and she’s still my sister. I hate to think of her starving in some alley somewhere, just because her next trust fund tier doesn’t kick in until 25. I feel like I should at least try to get her into rehab.”

“I’ll help you look,” I say. “But if it gets too dangerous, we take this to my dad. I mean, for all you know, she could be making meth. Or porn. Or, like, Porky’s 9: The Porkening.”

“Agreed,” he says. “Since all are well within her wheelhouse. I’ll email you the history of charges in the morning, and we can start there. Now, as for tonight...can I interest you in dinner, a brief stop at Enbom’s birthday party, and a long, leisurely exploration of the back seat of my car?”

“Oh, quit, you big romantic,” I say, play-swatting him. I retreat to my desk. “I have to finish calculus first. And I have a curfew.”

“Since when?” he asks, quirking an eyebrow. “And who does calculus on a Friday night? Not my red satin girlfriend, that’s for sure.” He prowls around behind me, and squats at the back of my chair. Begins nibbling my nape, and running his hands all over me, in a way guaranteed to make sure I get no work done. I huff with frustration, turn to kiss him, and he picks me up bodily and carries me to the door. The puppy lifts his head, barks once, half-heartedly, and drifts right back to sleep.

“Purse,” Logan says, setting me down. “Food. Party. THEN you get to have your wicked way with me, Miss Impatient.”

“You are EVIL,” I accuse, narrowing my eyes. He laughs, holds his fingers apart an inch to indicate ‘a little bit’, and ceremoniously opens the door.

I sail past him, still feigning indignation, and stop short. Because Jake Kane is sitting at the kitchen table, in a giant, open-concept living space. He’s got two laptops running, and a bunch of silicon wafers spread around the microscope in front of him: he’s barefoot, drinking a soda, and looks completely at home.

“Hi Veronica,” he says, smiling in the easy way of his that stockholders love. “Going on a date?”

I gape, and Logan intercedes. “Gotta wine and dine her,” he says, putting a protective hand on the small of my back. “Make sure she feels appreciated.”

“It’s nice to see how much you’ve matured, Logan,” Jake says. “I think Veronica’s a good influence.” He raises his voice to call, “Hey, Lianne?”

My mom comes fluttering into the room, saying her goodbyes to someone on the phone. She’s in a blue dress that’s all gauze and frills, and her hair’s up: she looks a lot younger than I remember, and she doesn’t seem trashed.

“Logan’s taking Veronica on a date,” Jake says, with a twinkle. He then goes back to work, clearly feeling his duty is done.

“Oooh, where?” Lianne gets a thrilled look on her face, and I realize, with an inner cringe, that she’s got one of her ‘soft spots’ for Logan. The biggest advantage of her being a lush was, she quit shoving me at the rich, popular kids all the time. “Somewhere FANCY?” She asks, hip-checking me as she flirts up.

Logan grins his smarmiest grin, and winks at her. “Only the best for my sugarplum,” he says. “In
fact, we’re gonna miss our reservations, unless we hit the highway. And you don’t even WANT to know what I had to do to score them.”

I can’t help but smile at his dickishness. “Oh, you’re a keeper,” I say.

“Isn’t he?” mom agrees, and gives me her ‘we’re just two girls, gossiping’ hug. “Have fun, sweetie! Don’t do anything I wouldn’t!”

I clench my jaw to hold back the retort, and drag Logan out to his car.

“Ugh!” I vent, as soon as we lock ourselves inside. “Thank God I can’t ACTUALLY die of embarrassment.”

“It’s hard to believe you’re related to her,” he agrees, starting the engine. “Other than looks, do you have ANYTHING in common?”

We both run away when things get tough, I think. But don’t say, because I won’t BE that girl, this time around. “I can’t believe she got custody,” I mutter. “I guess Jake bought the judge.”

“Well wouldn’t she?” Logan asks, seeming genuinely confused. “I mean, I’m clearly no expert on normal families, but don’t moms usually? Plus she’s rich, and happily married, and does charity work all day long. Whereas your dad’s a single workaholic, with a tiny apartment. Besides, it’s not like she mistreats you. Or really, imposes any rules whatsoever.”

“Yeah, she’s the ‘cool mom’. She wants to be BFF’s forever,” I say snidely, as much to punish the adoring tween I once was, as to cope now. Because seriously, she was an adulterous drunk who left my dad. I’m pissed that she hasn’t PAID.

“Hey, my mom’s Blanche DuBois,” he says, with a half-smile. “No pity.”

“Oh, you win the fucked-up family sweepstakes, hands down,” I say. “It’s amazing you’re so functional.”

“I’m not functional,” he denies. “I’m just an excellent faker.”

“I KNEW your moans seemed insincere!” I exclaim, with a dag-nabbit snap. “Should I up my game, I wonder? Or should I find solace in the fact that you make nice, platonic arm candy?”

He hooks a sudden right, then a left. Pulls up behind a darkened donut shop, screened from the road by trees. He looks at me, and his dark eyes are intense, measuring. “Get in back,” he says, with a jerk of his head. “I’m ready for whatever you’ve got.”

I do, smirking, and he scrambles after me, pulling me onto his lap, kissing me full-throttle. His hands creep under my skirt and squeeze, grinding me against him, and oh, I remember this. Agony and ecstasy at Makeout Point: frantic, panting mouths, the abrasion of denim that chafed for days.

I unsnap his jeans and shove my hands inside, and he groans… begins that slow undulation of his whole body towards my skin that drives me insane. He works his fingers frantically at the crotch of my panties as I grip and stroke him, eating out the inside of his mouth, and then he arches and spills in my grasp. I grab his wrist, shove his hand inside my underwear, and he makes a nervous, excited sound, and gets to work.

“I want to push my fingers into you,” he says, breathless. “I want you to feel like I’m fucking you. I want to take off all your clothes, and lay you out on the hood, and….”
I come, hard, a series of gasps and sighs, and he pulls me up against him tight, wrenching us together damply. “God,” he says. “I can’t take it. Even without sex, it’s always so good.”

“Yes,” I say. “Of course. I love you.”

“You…” He cups my face in his hands, searching my eyes, and then pulls me into a hug. “Are you drunk?”

“No.” I frown, thinking fuck, did we JUST start dating? All the different Logans are beginning to meld together in my mind, and it’s difficult to contain myself with any of them. I was supposed to keep my hands out of this one’s pants, for instance. But I lost my head when he LOOKED at me that way.

“You LOVE me?” he persists, like this is crazy talk. I sigh and say, “Yes,” because I do, and he starts peppering kisses all over my face and throat, until I’m gasping and laughing and squirming in his grip.

“Quit it!” I demand, giggling hysterically, and he says, “No way, you love me, get used to it,” and keeps going.

Eventually he winds down, and we hold each other, snickering, in the dark. “This is the best date ever,” he pronounces, into my neck.

“So far,” I say, and he snorts with laughter. “Quit cackling and feed me,” I demand, with one last kiss. I climb into the front, adjust my skirt, fasten my seatbelt, and glance back at him primly. He salaams, amused, and grimacing, fastens his pants.

“Burgers?” he asks, when he’s settled in the driver’s seat, cranking the engine.

“Drive thru,” I confirm, checking my makeup in the flip-down mirror. He salutes, and pulls out, turning smoothly onto the road.

“Hey Veronica?” he asks, as we slow at a red light. I look up from trying to restore order to my hair. He leans very close, and whispers confidingly, “I love you, too.”

Then he winks at me, and takes off with a squeal, humming a Faders song.

XXXXX

Logan’s skipping around like a tween girl with a secret when we get to the party, wanting to chat with everyone, whereas I feel pleasantly like napping. So I slump on the couch with my obligatory cider, and stare at the ceiling fan, and daydream.

After a while, Dick slumps beside me, draining his beer can, then crushing it as he belches. “Ronnie,” he says, tossing it backwards over his head.

“How’s things in Casablancasland?” I ask, not taking my eyes off the fan.

“Ah, you know. Palling around with my lonely, lost-youth-seeking dad, while he staggers through a bad divorce, and develops an obsession with guns. You?”

“Trying NOT to pal around with my pathetic, youth-seeking mom, while she moons over the rich dude she stole from Celeste, and pressures me to be similarly gold-diggy.”

He grins. “You mean you’re NOT with Logan so you can be Perez Hilton’s front page?”
“Sorry,” I say. “I’m in it for his body. I could care less about the trappings.”

“I heard that,” Logan interjects, sinking down between us. “Quit gossiping, you’ll ruin my reputation.”

“Relax, sweetcakes,” I soothe, patting his knee. “I promise I’ll respect you in the morning.”

“If you two start making out, I’m filming it with my camera phone,” Dick warns, holding his hand out. Logan puts a beer in it, and they both pop their cans open and drink.

“This party sucks,” Logan says after a while, during which we all study the fan and sip. “It needs, like, explosions or strippers or something.”

“I’d be offended that you’re jonesing for strippers in front of me,” I say. “But this party really does suck.”

“How’s your mom, dude?” Dick asks, replicating the chug/crush/belch.

Logan shrugs. “Making a movie about forty-something women reclaiming their power, with Meg Ryan and Goldie Hawn. Presumably there will be boomer music and tipsy revelations, and fat, balding has-beens playing the romantic interests.”

“Makes me glad my mom lives in France,” Dick observes.

“Man,” Logan says, “I don’t care if she embarrasses me, as long as she’s happy.”

“You are SO much more Zen than I am,” I say. “I HATE it when my mom embarrasses me.”

“Yeah, that’s Logan,” Dick says. “A Buddhist inspiration. Except, you know, when he’s punching the fuck out of someone, for looking at him wrong.”

“Well, sure, obviously not then,” I agree, and we all smile at the fan.

I’m headed upstairs to find a bathroom when I see Lilly.

She’s curled on a loveseat in a secluded reading alcove, drink in hand: she looks pensive, gazing out the window at the ocean and hills, with faraway eyes. I think about passing by. But she’s my BFF 4-ever, and she’s not dead. So I pause next to her, and try.

“What are you doing up here by yourself?” I ask. “Why aren’t you in the middle of the action, making your patented brand of mayhem?”

“Hmmm….” She takes a drink and rolls an ice cube in her mouth, thoughtful. Shoots me a sideways look. “My boyfriend’s downstairs with his new girlfriend. And it pains me to say so, but it hurts my stomach, watching them grin at each other all the time, like idiots.”

I study her for a minute. “That bitch,” I say finally, sitting beside her. “What’s she got that you don’t?”

“I know, right?” Lilly widens her eyes in fake outrage. “She’s brittle and flat-chested, and she doesn’t even put out. And he was MINE, for so long, even if I wasn’t faithful. He’s the only person who ever truly loved me.”

I watch her finger trace the lip of her glass, and so does she. “No, he’s not,” I say.
She shoots me a lascivious glance. “I always thought you were a closet dyke, Veronica Mars.”

I smile, just a little. “Lils, you know if I swung that way, it would have been, proudly, you.”

She cocks her head to one side, considering. “Well, Logan IS kind of girl-like, with his constant talking about feelings, and his readiness to go down. Don’t you think?”

I remember his heft in my grasp as he moaned. The way his hands spanned my whole ass, as he dragged me closer. The way he curled around me, twice my size. “Not really, no,” I say, sardonic, and for some reason this makes her laugh.

“He’s totally NOT,” she agrees, with a naughty inflection, and we both crack up. A vise I didn’t even know I had around my heart eases a little.

Logan comes up the stairs after a while and finds us together, sharing sips of the drink and watching the waves. He pulls the ottoman even with our feet, and sits down, surveying.

“So neither explosions nor strippers have appeared, in your absence,” he says, with a flash of his one-sided smile. “Anybody up for a trip to Cape Crescent?”

“Bonfire?” Lilly asks, languid.

He rests his elbows on his knees. “Natch.”

“Well, it has to be better than here,” she pronounces, setting her glass down with a clink. “Come on, Veronica, you can ride with me.”

She sashays off, hair swinging, and Logan fixes me with a bemused look. “You really CAN handle anything,” he observes.

“I told you not to underestimate me,” I remind him, giving him a kiss and a pat on the cheek. “See you at the beach, Surfer Boy. Save me a spot in the sand.”

THREAD NINE

When I emerge from bed the next morning, Dick, Mac and Lilly are sprawled around my living room in various poses of neglect, watching, for some reason, the Super Mario Brothers live-action TV show. I wonder briefly if my house is the hipster crash pad for everyone I’ve ever met: then I stumble into the kitchen, in search of sustenance.

Logan is there, scrambling eggs. He’s wearing red plaid boxers, a Cake concert shirt with a giant abdominal hole, and animal slippers of the elephant-foot variety. His hair looks like he stuck his finger in a socket.

“Morning sunshine,” he says with a smirk, as I pull an orange juice container out of the fridge and drain it.

“Feed me,” I moan, and he gestures theatrically at the table, indicating I should sit.

He puts a plate in front of me, deposits bacon and a chocolate-chip pancake on it, and goes back to the stove to fetch eggs. He scrapes some out into the last free corner, kissing the top of my head.

“Why is everybody we’ve ever met in our living room, on a school day?” I ask.

“Because we’re playing hooky,” he says. “It’s like senior ditch day, only with irresponsible adults.”
“Glad we cleared that up,” I mutter, and fall on my breakfast like a wolf. Through a mouthful of bacon I ask, “Mind telling me where we’re going?”

“Out on the yacht.” He ferries plates out into the living room. In a minute he’s back, setting two Sunkists on the table, and joining me with his own breakfast. “Do some seal-spotting, maybe lunch at the Cliff House. We’re just waiting on Wallace and Jessica. And Troy.”

I choke on my eggs. “Troy VANDEGRAFF?”

“Yes?” Logan pats me on the back. “He’s Lilly’s latest boy toy. She says he’s just reformed enough.”

“We’re not gonna get stopped by the Coast Guard, are we? If we bring him along?”

“Okay, what do you know?” He sets his fork down.

“Well, he used to be a drug dealer, on a scale that made Weevil and Friedrich look like pikers,” I say. “I’m talking distribution, and kilos. Not sure how positive I am he’s changed his spots, either. Trouble follows that guy around.”

“Then he’s definitely Lilly’s type,” he says, grimly. “Should we refuse to let him in, or just frisk him before he goes on the boat?”

“Hey Veronica,” Dick calls from the living room. “Do you got any more syrup?”

“Why does he always ask me?” I demand, yearning for caffeine.

“You’re a tender and nurturing earth mother?” Logan guesses. I smack his arm.

“He gets any syrup on my couch, and he’s buying me a new one,” I warn.

Logan laughs, snags a squeeze bottle, and heads back out.

I polish off my last slice of bacon, and wander away to shower. When I return, Lilly’s at the kitchen table with coffee, reading ‘The Betsey’, Dick, Logan and Mac are missing, and Wallace is on the couch, shoveling pancakes into his mouth. The blonde girl from the Fiji photos is curled up beside him, channel-surfing with her head on his shoulder.

“Hey Veronica,” the girl says. She looks like someone I’ve met, but I can’t put my finger on it.

“Hey…Jessica,” I greet her. “Where’s Logan?”

“Went to get beer,” Wallace informs me, through a mouthful of food.

I sit next to Lilly. “THAT looks like an educational read,” I chirp, lusting for her coffee.

“Golden showers, Veronica Mars,” she tells me gleefully, marking the page with a finger. “And the family patriarch seduces his young wife by DRINKING HER BREAST MILK!”

“Ah, the 70’s,” I sigh. I give in and grab her coffee, enjoy a heavenly sip. I consider taking her to task for unsafe Vandegraffing, but hey, Logan’s turned into a model citizen: maybe Troy can, too. Besides, it’s not like I didn’t have a crack at him myself, back behind door number one.

Ugh, I had the WORST taste in men, in Original! Reality. Thank God for this never-ending series of traumatic dreams, or I’d probably be shacked up with PIZ.
“So what class is this for?” I ask instead, sarcastic. She grins.

“What’s studies!” she surprises me by saying, because I was totally kidding. “Can you believe it? We have to read all these potboilers from like 1980, Andrew Greely and Jackie Collins, and something called ‘Sweet Savage Love’. There’s a film list, too, with stars like Pia Zadora. My teacher is DEMENTED!”

I shake my head, because this must so be Lilly’s favorite class. At least she’s getting her perverse thrills vicariously these days, instead of literally. I hope.

Crap. I forgot how emotionally taxing it is, worrying Lilly will go off the deep end. At least Logan gave up his charter membership in the Crisis of the Week Club.

I hope. Fuck, I’ve only been living this reality for like 4 days, I shouldn’t take such things for granted. Logan, MY Logan, had the Platinum Premium Lifetime Membership, featuring penthouse, groupies, and all the Jack he could chug.

OK, pregnant, angst level rising, not a good combination, Veronica. Deep breaths. Calm blue ocean. Fingers crossed I dream about Kendall Casablancas tonight, because I really need to PUNCH somebody.

The doorbell rings, and I get up mechanically to answer it. Troy is lounging in the doorway, and no way is he in the same leaning league as Logan. Also, his Biggus Dickus haircut looks stupid.

“Well well well,” he intones, smarmily. “If it isn’t the beautiful and vivacious Veronica Mars. May I say, it’s an honor AND a privilege?”

Oh, look. Punching now.

Troy goes down like a sack of rocks, blood streaming from his nose, and everybody in the room stops what they’re doing to stare at me.

Yeah, red satin, hormones and stress. Not the best cocktail.

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Logan, coming up the stairs, takes one look at Troy laid flat on the ground and bursts out laughing. “Nice!” he says, crouching to inspect the damage. “I didn’t know you could reach that high, bobcat.” He sets the grocery sacks he’s carrying down and grabs my hand, to inspect it. “We’d better ice this,” he decides. “You’ll have bruises on top of your bruises.”

“What the HELL?” Troy splutters, coming up to sitting. “All I did was say hello, and she DECKED ME!”

“Musta been the way you said it,” Logan tells him. He raises his voice. “Hey Lils, your piece-of-garbage, drug-dealer boyfriend has a broken nose, over here. Come show some feminine compassion or whatever.” He points at Troy. “And you, don’t bleed on my floor. C’mon, Ronnie.” He picks up the beer, and hauls me off to the kitchen.

“So,” he says, once he’s tenderly rinsed my hand, and blanketed it with a bag of frozen peas, “way to get the party started.”

“I can’t believe I did that,” I say. “Maybe I need a warning label.”

Three hundred pounds of badass in a hundred pound bod,” he muses. “I like it.”
“You’re the one who’s supposed to be hitting people all the time,” I tell him. “I’m the brains, remember?”

“Babe, if you want to punch every guy who tries to scam you for the rest of our lives, you have my blessing.”

“Not babe,” I contradict, pointing at him.

“Sugar lumps? Snuggle bear?”

“Those would be acceptable.” I tilt forward, and press my face to his chest. “We need to tell everybody I’m knocked up. I have no other excuse.”

“Ronnie, I hate to break it to you, but everybody in that room has had your number since you tased Norris Clayton for defending your honor. Well, maybe Jessica still harbors illusions. But not for long.”

“Fuck,” I say. “I forgot about that.”

“That makes one of us,” he murmurs. “SO hot.”

“Come on,” I urge, unenthusiastic. “Red satin doesn’t hide in the kitchen.”

Troy is sitting on the couch, with an ice-filled highball glass pressed to his nose. Lilly stands beside him, arms crossed, an identical but booze-filled glass in one hand. She’s listening in amusement, not empathy, as Dick (elbows on knees in the armchair opposite) interrogates.

“Dude, did you hit on her?” Dick asks. “Seriously, never EVER hit on her. She will take you OUT, and that’s if you’re lucky. Because when Logan punches, he leaves fucking HOLES.”

“I said HELLO,” Troy protests, at a loss. “I said it NICELY.”

“But not suggestively, right?” Lilly’s eyes twinkle at us, as we pass through the doorway. She’s just giving him shit.

“I barely know Veronica,” Troy argues. “We’ve never even had a CONVERSATION.”

Oh no. Has this reality diverged so far from mine that the dirt I have on everyone is now useless? Because that was my ace in the hole.

“YOU may not have talked,” Mac says, emerging from the bathroom. “But she left a nice, long note in your bag of smuggled steroids, after you set Luke Haldeman up to take the fall.”

Oh thank God. So scared, there, for a minute.

Troy sends her a glance of pure loathing. “That was NOT my idea. My ex-girlfriend Shauna was the mastermind. I was just her dumb, besotted pawn.”

“I remember Shauna!” I say brightly. “She was like, totally bitchin’! What’s she up to, these days?”

He closes his eyes. “Jail,” he says.

“Instead of you?” I ask, wide-eyed. “What incredible luck!”

“Want me to Prying Eyez him?” Mac asks, picking her laptop up from the coffee table.
“Please,” I urge, crossing my arms.

Mac types for a minute, points at Troy, and says, “Lying liar who lies. Two more drug convictions after the steroid decampment. One involving jail time. And three months ago, he was arrested on suspicion of rape.”

“That wasn’t me!” he yells, as Logan, Dick and Wallace all stand up. “That was Mercer Hayes, and some dude he was using as his S&M gimp!”

“Mercer Hayes, Neptune High class of ’04,” Dick informs Jessica. “He was Valedictorian.”

Lilly nods. “He was stuck on himself, but he always had the good drugs. Right, Logan?”

I turn my glare on Logan, and he covers his face with his hand. “Thanks so much for that, Lils,” he says. “Really.”

“If you EVER,” I threaten, “BOUGHT GHB FROM MERCER HAYES, you will WISH you got off as easy as Troy!”

“I never,” he starts, “ever ever ever would do such a thing. Not ever. Except for that one time. And I gave it all to you.” He realizes how this sounds, and backtracks. “I mean, the sealed vials. In your hand. For purposes of disposal.”

“When I knocked on that door over there, did I stumble into a soap opera?” Troy whines, and Dick smacks the back of his head.

“Logan’s under pressure,” Wallace opines, from where he’s gone back to eating on the couch. “I’d shut up now, if I were you.”

“DO YOU KNOW HOW MANY GIRLS MERCER HAYES DRUGGED WITH GHB AND RAPEP?” I scream, and Logan winces.

“Oooh, I read the answer to this one,” Lilly offers. “32. He is NEVER getting out of jail.”

“THIS IS NOT THE FRESHMAN DITCH DAY I WANTED!” I yell.

Logan closes his eyes, rolls his neck, flexes his hands open and shut, exhales. “Okay, that’s it,” he says, with resolve. He points at Troy. “You have 30 seconds to get shut of my neighborhood, or I will beat the ever-loving shit out of you.”

Troy stares at him for a beat, scrambles up, and makes a run for it, leaving the front door open.

“And you,” Logan says, pointing at Lilly, “Quit stirring the pot. Because you know full well that I’m the one who turned Mercer in.”

“You DID?” I ask, and fling my arms around his neck.

“Logan and Dick knocked him unconscious, and left him handcuffed to the door of a police cruiser,” Wallace confirms, reaching for his soda.

“Aaargh, I’m not hearing this!” Jessica cries, covering her ears and running into the kitchen.

“Jessica has to maintain plausible deniability,” Wallace confides to Mac. “On account of she’s too high-profile to be involved in y’all’s criminal shenanigans. Hey baby, are there any more pancakes in there?” he calls, to punctuate, and follows her through the door.
“When Mac told us about the rapes, we knew the guy was probably getting stuff from Mercer,” Logan says, putting an arm around me. He gestures at Dick and Lilly. “I mean, we ALL knew, because that was where you went, if you wanted exotic shit you couldn’t buy from Friederich. It was actually Lils who put us on to the idea that he WAS the rapist.”

“He never hit on me,” she confides. “EVERY guy who isn’t gay, or Donut, hits on me eventually. And he was always going off on these rants about how dating was a waste of time, when he had too much to drink.”

“Your dad totally knew it was us, too,” Dick says. “Even though we cleverly wore masks. That’s what that vigilante justice lecture was about, at the last family dinner.”

“And you guys froze me out of this whole case?” I demand. “You didn’t even let me analyze clues?” There’s an uncomfortable silence.

“It was dangerous, sugar lumps,” Logan offers, manfully stepping up. “Like threat of major physical trauma to small, gorgeous blondes.”

Like Lilly? I think, and then I get it, and sigh. “You all know, don’t you? Every single one of you knows about the baby.”

“Veronica,” Mac says gently. “You just punched Troy Vandegraff in the face for absolutely no reason. Your hormones are out of control. How could we NOT realize?”

“Don’t look at me,” Jessica says, towing Wallace back in from the kitchen, Perrier in hand. “I just found out about 5 minutes ago, myself.”

I put my hands on my hips, and consider declaring war on my entire social circle.

“Wonder Woman doesn’t defeat every supervillain solo,” Mac tells me, arms crossing, because she has my number. “Sometimes Batman and Superman get a turn.”

“And who am I in this scenario?” Dick asks. “Superman or Batman?”

“Aquaman,” everyone answers, and now his arms are crossed, too.

“Ooh, I want to be the blonde in the black bustier and fishnets,” Lilly says, flopping Logan-style onto the couch. “Who’s that?”

“Black Canary,” Mac tells her. “Good choice, she’s even smarter than she is hot.”

They smirk at each other, and Logan bends down to whisper in my ear. “So does this mean you’re gonna wear the Wonder Woman costume?” he asks. “We could take turns tying each other up with the golden rope.”

I picture myself saying “I’d do it to make you confess your million evasions and lies”. I picture him retorting, “Ooh, pot/kettle. Between the two of us, who’s the bigger withholder?” I picture him storming off to the garage to decimate his therapeutic punching bag, and me laying into all of them, for interfering with my detecting. Me, marching off down the beach in a rage, because NOBODY CONTROLS WHAT I DO.

And then I realize…they all colluded to keep me safe from Mercer the Rapist because they CARE.

In Original!Reality, I don’t have truly intimate relationships with any of these people (not even the
one who’s been physically inside me). We joke and snark, they do me favors I rarely reciprocate: but I’m too brittle and self-absorbed, too frozen and obsessed with paybacks, to really give unselfish love.

But that one innocuous choice I made, that donning of a red satin prom dress, was like a butterfly flapping its wings in Tokyo, creating an expanding circle of chaos. Changing everything, changing ME. It gave me the self-confidence to be THERE for these people, who are now here for me: all their diverse natures somehow cohering into a team. I EARNED this life, by being who I am, and saying what I want. I blossomed, the way Lilly hoped I would.

And now I’m going to enjoy my reward, because fuck if I don’t deserve a ditch day.

“I let you tie me down, and you’d better live up to your nickname, Man of Steel,” I whisper to Logan, and he actually wriggles behind me, like a delighted puppy. I give him a big smacking kiss, because I can.

“And as for the rest of you,” I say, pointing a finger around the room. “Gather up the gear, and get your asses on that boat. I was promised a super fun outing this morning, yet here we are, burning daylight.”

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The yacht isn’t the Aaron Echolls monstrosity, with the full bar and mirrored cabins and dance floor, which sold, long, long ago. It’s the sleeker, smaller racing boat Lynn bought Logan last summer, so he could tool around the coastline with his friends. We discuss a stop at the Cliff House: but the water’s so calm, and the sunshine so balmy, we just drift, eat, drink and chat, enjoying an angst free day.

I’m reclining between Logan’s knees, my back to his chest, his arms wrapped loosely around me. Dick lies on his side by our feet, chin on hand. “Admit it Ronnie. You forgave us all for Mercer because you loooove us,” he coaxes, making kissy lips at me, and I shove him with my foot. He falls onto his back.


Lilly settles to my side, head on Logan’s shoulder, and hands him a beer. He drapes a companionable arm over her, and kisses her temple. “So now that you know that I know,” she says, rubbing her hands together, eyes dancing. “Can I touch it?”

“It’s not very big,” I say. “Nobody moving around in there yet, or anything. But sure.”

She slides a hand carefully under the hem of my shirt, spreads it across my abdomen. “There’s no give,” she says, softly. “It’s like you’ve got a plastic shell, under the skin.”

Logan bends, kisses my cheek, and she shoots him a devious grin as she moves her hand away. “You chose well, boo-boo,” she tells him, ruffling his hair. “This one’ll be a lioness, protecting her young.”

She twists up, sinuously, departing, and Logan wraps both arms around me, tight.

XXXXX

“Hey Logan?” I ask. We’re back at the house, sun-baked and sleepy, eating ice cream on the couch. The ocean rolls, ceaseless, outside the wall of windows. “Do you think Lilly is outgrowing her self-destructive whatever? Do you think she’s happy?”
“She’s FABULOUS,” he says, flashing a little grin, and I smack him with my spoon. “I don’t know, Ronica, it’s hard to tell. She’s a better liar than I am, and I could go pro.”

“Novelist?” I guess, sucking strawberry-buttermilk off my spoon.

“Politician,” he corrects. “Although I might be too scandal-ridden even for that morally bankrupt crowd.” He takes another bite—his pint is green tea, which, frankly, I don’t get. His face is contemplative. “I haven’t seen her with many boyfriends in the last year or so. And the few she’s brought near me were a lot like Vandegraff: pretty rich dudes, vaguely smarmy. Which, to be honest, kind of burns me. Because it means that’s her type, and I’m lumped in.”

“You’re in a whole different cocky-asshole league from that guy,” I tell him, with a pat. “Your sarcastic dick game is virtually unparalleled.”

“Aw, quit, I’m blushing.” He makes a big show of licking his spoon clean, and dips it into my pint. “Why are you asking me this? You worried she’s getting dangerous strange on the side again?”


“Well, this is just my opinion, pumpkin,” he tells me, scooping up another spoonful of my ice cream, and presenting it to me, “but she led on Vandegraff all morning, just for laughs, and tried to entice us into a threesome all afternoon. So I doubt she’s got anything deliciously self-destroying in the wind, at the moment.”

“Like you didn’t enjoy her shenanigans as much as she did,” I scoff. “I was sitting between your legs when she was feeling up my belly, remember?”

He laughs, and I’m amused to note, actually blushes. “If you had any clue how much time I spent in tenth grade, fantasizing about deflowering you with Lilly’s full permission, you would not be shocked by this,” he says. “Seriously, I jerked off to that visual so many times, anything remotely similar guarantees a stiffie. It’s like an autonomic response, at this point.”

I cover my mouth and widen my eyes in faux shock, and he shakes his head at me. “She and I both had the same fantasy, I think,” he says. “Being the first to make you unravel. I mean, it’s not like Donut would have. But neither of us ever tried, for fear of upsetting the status quo. And threesomes are one of those concepts that seem good in theory, but aren’t built for speed.”

“I’m not even going to ask how you know that,” I decide.

“I will quote Sinead O’Connor if I have to,” he says, and off my look, “Nothing Compares 2 U? Come on, Ronica, branch out. There is music from decades other than this one. Some of it is good.”

“Says the man who owns every CD Marky Mark ever made.”

He sighs. “See, this is the dark side of marrying the girl you met at age 12.”

“You don’t ever miss being with Lilly, do you?” I ask. “I mean, not like I think you don’t love me. I know you love me.”

He smiles. “Look, don’t laugh. But I saw myself, once, as Lilly’s knight in shining armor. I swore all these vows to her, when I was 13, about how I would protect her from harm. And SHE swore she’d find ways to keep me out of Aaron’s hair, and we cut our wrists, and made a blood pact. It was all very over-wrought, very painfully sincere. But you know, I actually meant it. And I did protect her, as best I could. Even when we realized our competing dysfunctions were dragging us down, as a couple, and we’d have to cut each other loose, we still kept those vows.”
I study him, his post-Lilly rage in Original! Reality coming clear. I split them up, out of jealousy and spite: and in doing so, I made him break his vow. No wonder he hunted up every excuse in the world to hate me. Logan lives to play hero for all the wounded birds.

“You kept those vows because you’re a good person,” I say. “And so is she.”

“You know…” he leans his head back, gazing at the ceiling, as if debating whether to continue. He rolls to look at me. “About a month before Aaron died, he quit hitting me. Just totally hands-off, like he hadn’t been since I was maybe nine. I didn’t get it then, although you better believe I was grateful. But later, after Duncan killed him, I started to wonder. Why DID Aaron go to the Kanes’, if he was freaking out about the tapes being found? What could he have been looking for? Like, did he think Jake would save him? Why didn’t he lawyer up, or flee?” He takes my hand, thumb tracing over my knuckles. “And it came to me—maybe he went there for Lilly. To confront her about exposing him, or to convince her to run away. What if she was using him to destroy herself, in the cruelest possible manner, and keeping her vow to distract him, at the same time? Not that she’s ever admitted anything. But it seems to fit, yeah? It sounds exactly her style.”

I put his hand to my lips, kiss it. “If that’s true, he’s lucky he had her to deal with, and not me. Because if I’d known sooner he was hurting you, I’d have made him suffer ten times as much as you did, for ten times as long. I’m talking torments of the damned, here.”

“Yeah, she’s Aphrodite, you’re Athena. Her weapon is sex, yours is war. And turns out, an ass-kicking, justice-demanding goddess is exactly what I need. If it weren’t for you and your unswerving ethics, I’d be a drunk slut right now. Or in jail. Or both! Hey, that sounds fun!” He smiles down at me, a little shyly. “Or, you know, I might be dead. So thanks for keeping me in line.”

“You’ve heard that story ‘The Snow Queen’, right?” I ask. “About the princess who’s so lonely her heart turns to ice? I guarantee, without you to love me, that’s how I would have turned out. I think, all things considered, we’re even.”

“I am fully prepared to warm you up, anytime,” he says. He checks my container to make sure it’s empty, stacks it under his to throw away. “Fortuitous, huh? That my favorite fantasy involves making you melt?”

“It’s like we’re soulmates,” I say, and the joy in his smile is one of the best things I’ve ever seen.

“So what did you do to me?” I ask, after we’ve made out for a while, and watched half a movie. I’m tilted against his shoulder, inclining towards sleep. “In this well-worn fantasy of yours?”

“You know what I did,” he says smugly, kissing the top of my head. “You’ve lived it.”

“I mean the specific details, dork,” I retort, smacking him. “Every porny little nuance, please. In case you haven’t heard, pregnant women are insatiable.”

“You’ve lived it,” he repeats, and he’s definitely suppressing a grin now. His eyes are dancing. He leans in close to my ear, whispers hot. “The first few times I had you, I did it all. Every last thing I’d been wanting to, for years. And you LET me. And you LOVED it. When I said you were my dream come true, I totally wasn’t kidding.”

“You are a TEASE,” I huff, kneeling up to wrap my arms around his neck.

“You’re just now figuring that out?” He pulls me onto his lap, and adjusts me so I’m flush against his cock. “Wow, I’m not the detective you are, but all evidence here points to you enjoying this about
“I like it better when you QUIT teasing, and put out,” I inform him, sotto voce, tugging at the hem of his t-shirt.

“Hmmm,” he says, blocking my efforts. “I don’t think so. I have a headache.”

I pout, and turn on my best Lauren Bacall. “Is there ANYTHING I could do to change your mind?”

His lips quirk as he looks at me. He shrugs.

“You’re not the only one who can tease,” I warn, shoving up his shirt, nipping at the hollow in the center of his chest. I repeat the action mid-abdomen. His head tilts back, and his hands fall limply to his sides.

“I’m not sure it qualifies as teasing if you go straight down…” he starts, and then I’ve got my hands around the bulk of him, and my mouth around the tip, and he gives up. “Ah, God, whatever. Semantics.”

He starts doing the undulating-but-trying-not-to thing, tangles his fingers in my hair, and if I wasn’t turned on before, I am now. I don’t know why it is, but I really get off on blowing him. Maybe it’s the musky guy-smell of him, clean and earthy, even under 70 Hugo Boss toiletries. Maybe it’s his overwhelming response to being kissed, pampered and touched, because he full-throttle adores the attention. But it makes me feel sexy and powerful to turn him to jelly, and I’m sad that I wasted so much time, once, acting inhibited and afraid.

“Ng,” he says, after a few long, panting minutes. “Ronica. I want to fuck you now. I want to see your face.”

I release him with a pop: he grasps himself and watches me, half-lidded, as I strip and climb on top. I take him in slowly, head thrown back at the delicious, heavy pressure. Then I look into his melted-chocolate eyes, and put my hands on his shoulders.

“Headache better?” I ask, and he grabs my hips and shoves up into me, hard, making me gasp. Again he goes, again, setting a rough pace. He bends to suck at the juncture of my neck and shoulder, topping from below.

I moan, and he slides a hand between us, one finger on either side of my clit, teasing again. “Oh, man, you SUCK,” I say, twisting my hips, trying to get that little bit of pressure right where I want it. He laughs and relents, pounding me some more as he gives me just what I need. I come so deeply, with every inch of him inside me, that my vision blurs white; and the whole time he’s staring at me, and I’m staring at him. I know exactly when he loses himself, because we’ve become one.
Understand that We're Fighting a War

Chapter Notes

This one's short, but it packs a punch. Trigger warning for non-graphic violence and non-canon drug use.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THREAD NINE INVERTS

We’re idling in a neighborhood of crumbling adobe, vinyl siding and dead palm trees. There’s nobody in sight, unless you count a stained, cracked lawn statue of the Virgin Mary, standing in a circle of beer cans. I’m getting a Very Bad Feeling again.

“I don’t like the looks of this,” Logan says synchronistically, drumming on the steering wheel in a rare show of nerves. “Letty Navarro lives in a better area. Are we sure Trina’s here? Because all that stolen money should have bought more style.”

I look down at my hand, which clutches a sheet of paper. On it is written ‘Dylan Goran, 6633 Las Palomas Way’. I show it to him, and his knuckles turn white.

At moments like this, I really miss Backup. I hope he’s still with my dad back in Original! Reality, filling up on Milk Bones instead of dinner, and slobbering in sleeping faces.

“Backup,” I say, snapping my fingers. “We should have some, on standby.”

I dial my dad, and he answers with, “What’s up, honey? Kind of in the middle of something, here.”

“Ooh, I hope you’re the good cop,” I say. “Listen, Logan and I decided to check on his sister, and she seems to have come down some in the world. Nothing’s wrong at the moment, per se. But we’re in a bad part of town, and she’s shacked up with a bad guy, and I’m getting that funny tingling at the base of my skull.”

“I know the one,” he says, grim. “You want me to send a car?”

“Would you?” I ask. “Have him knock, if I don’t call in about 15 minutes? Address is 6633 Las Palomas Way, boyfriend’s name is Dylan Goran. History of restraining orders, and straight-to-video exploitation films.”

“Be careful, honey. And tell Logan deep breaths.”

“Thanks Dad. Make sure to do the intimidation face with the v between your brows. I always know I’m in for it, when I see that one.”

I kiss at the telephone and hang up, hold my hand out for Logan. He takes it, squeezes, and leads me from the car.

Through the flimsy door we can hear loud Metal music, and a man yelling, but nobody answers the bell.
Logan looks down at me, dark eyes inscrutable. “Smash it open?”

“I can pick this lock with a paperclip,” I say. “If I have one, in my bag.”

I paw through, and hey, there’s my lock-pick set, plus a ring of master keys. I guess I’m not that good a girl in this timeline, either. It takes me about six seconds to get the door open: he half-smiles as I wink at him, and swing it wide.

The music slaps us, a wall of sound, although the yelling has abated. The place is a pigsty, dingy 80’s décor stained and burned, littered with fast food wrappers, chunks of decaying bun. There’s a bong on the coffee table, about an ounce of weed, and the room reeks of old bong water, dust and rot.

“Nice,” Logan mutters, going left towards what looks like the kitchen. But I figure fighting couples will be found in the bedroom, so I head right.

Yeah, I wish I hadn’t.

Trina’s got one wrist handcuffed to an old iron bed, her clothes in disarray. She seems half-conscious, and even from this distance, I can see the livid-bruise track marks on her arms.

Dylan Goran’s standing off to one side: as I watch, he fastens his pants, fishes a cigarette out of a pack on the nightstand, and lights up. “You hated those other tapes so much, let’s see what you’ll pay for this one,” he taunts, pointing at her with his cigarette. Her head shakes, almost languid, back and forth.

And that’s when I notice the video camera on a tripod, just beyond the footboard.

I ease away slowly, shaking my head just like Trina, and bump into Logan. I gasp, spinning. He cranes to see around me, and I grab his arms.

“No,” I whisper. “Logan, no, the cops are coming. Let’s get out, let’s get out now.”

“What?” he asks, and sets me aside, and then he sees. Everything drains out of his face but rage.

“What the fuck are you DOING?” he shouts, and his voice is low-pitched and hard, and really, really scary. “What the fuck are you doing to my SISTER, you fucking piece of GARBAGE?”

He’s across the room and on Goran in a second, and he literally throws him, into a wall. The guy bounces off, like it’s a cartoon, and goes sprawling to the floor. He scrambles backwards, as Logan advances and kicks him in the kidneys, and then he’s out the door running, and Logan’s giving chase.

I follow, scrambling through my bag for my taser, breath coming in harsh pants. I can see through the screen that Logan’s caught him a couple houses away: he’s got the guy on the sidewalk, and he’s kneeling atop, fist coming down as rhythmically as a freaking pendulum.

“Stop!” I scream, running forward, and God, Goran’s mouth is a bloody mess. “Logan, you’ll kill him! The cops are coming! Stop!”

He looks up at me, and his face is calm, grim: he seems determined, more than angry. He glances down at Goran, who’s not moving, gets up. Dusts off the knees of his khakis, with measured, focused flicks. “Come on,” he says, heading for the house. “You unlock Trina, I’ll grab the tape. I don’t want to be arrested until I have her safe.”
I’ve got a universal handcuff key on my ring, and I use it to free her. She’s crying now, looking both out of it and frightened. Logan picks her up, cradling her, and she’s like a junkie Raggedy Ann, her dyed red hair turned to straw.

I take the tape from his hand and stick it in my bag, and he carries her out to the car, stepping carelessly over Goran, who can’t even manage to crawl. I see a cop car appear in the rearview, just as we turn the corner.

Logan gazes down at his hands as I drive, examining, flexing. After awhile, he tucks his sleeves over his knuckles, and shoots me a sideways glance. “You scared of me now?” he asks.

“ Nope,” I say, switching on my blinker, slowing to turn. “Mad, a little: you’ll be in trouble soon, because of that trash. But he deserved what he got, and more. Where to?”

He looks back down at his hands, very faintly smiling. “Neptune Grand?” he offers. “Book her a room? We can use the concierge service to find her clothes, and me a first-aid kit, and I can get cleaned up.”

“I don’t think he hurt anything but your knuckles,” I say, wry, but I drive there anyway, and use his black Amex to rent a room. We carry Trina in through the back, to avoid attention.

She can walk, when we get her upstairs, but seems spaced. So I lead her to the bedroom, tuck her in, and hold her hand while she drifts off. I’m sure one of the rich people we know has a doctor who makes house calls: I’ll check with Logan, once he’s patched.

I find him in the bathroom, shirtless, but with a robe over his khakis, hair wet from the shower. His right hand’s a mess, and he has scratch marks on his neck, but he’s otherwise unscathed. He meets my gaze in the mirror: his eyes are sad, but they soften as he looks at me. I take a tube of Neosporin out of my purse, and use a tissue to dab it on his wounds.

“We should erase the tape,” he says, voice low. “Buy a degausser.”


“I can watch it,” he offers, and my heart breaks a little. “I can testify.”

“That never works in real life.” As I’m saying it, my phone rings.

“Honey,” my dad murmurs, when I answer. “I’m downstairs at the Neptune Grand. I’m by myself, and I’m headed up to your room.”

“What, are you tracking my cell again?” I ask, even though I know the answer. “We’re all here. Trina needs a doctor.”

“I’ll call someone,” he promises, and hangs up.

“Dad’s coming,” I say, sitting beside Logan on the couch with a sigh.

“Great,” he replies, eyes closed. “Well, I’ve enjoyed being allowed to interact with you.”

“I’ve had the time of my life,” I say, and he smiles when I take his hand.

Logan gets up and lets Dad in when he knocks, knotting the robe tightly together first, in an endearing show of modesty. He waves Dad in, shuts and locks the door, and leans back against it, hands flat along the wood.
“What injuries have we got?” Dad asks, crossing to sit beside me on the couch.

“Trina’s on something,” I say. “Heroin, maybe. We think she might have been raped, but we arrived after the fact, and we haven’t watched the tape.”

I go to extract the mini-cassette from my bag, but Logan pulls it from the pocket of his robe, holds it out. “I was going to erase this,” he admits, matter-of-factly. “But Ronica says you need it for evidence, if we want that piece of shit to pay. I’m trusting you, here, to make sure this never hits the web.”

“No one saw Aaron’s tapes,” Dad replies, equally calm. “No one ever will. You have my word, I’ll treat this with the same care.”

Logan nods. “Can we wait for the concierge to show up, before you cuff me?” he asks. “He’s bringing a clean shirt.”

Dad shakes his head. “You’re not under arrest, Logan. There weren’t any witnesses, and so far, Mr. Goran hasn’t expressed a desire to press charges.” He smiles. “However, ‘someone’ did fracture his eye socket, bruise his kidneys, and break his jaw, so he’s a little indisposed. We’ll see how it goes after he wakes up and smells the money. Also, after I watch this, and determine what charges I can bring to bear.”

“Okay,” Logan says, slowly. “So you’re here to get your daughter the hell away from me, then?”

“Logan,” Dad admonishes. He stands up, walks over, and puts a hand on Logan’s shoulder. “I don’t approve of violence, or any type of criminal activity, no matter how petty. I will certainly not tolerate threats, disrespect, or the slightest hint of aggression towards Veronica. But if I had walked into that house, and found my daughter on that bed, I would have felt what you felt. So while I don’t condone the actions of whoever beat Mr. Goran, and I won’t protect you from the consequences, should you be indicted… I understand. I even, to some extent, sympathize. And provided you continue to be an upstanding citizen in all other respects, I won’t ban you from Veronica’s presence.”

Logan shuts his eyes. For the first time today, he looks close to tears. It occurs to me to wonder how often he’s been treated with respect and kindness, by someone in a position of authority. “Can I hug her goodbye?” he asks.

Dad nods at me, and I go to Logan, putting my arms around his waist, and my head on his chest. He embraces me, tight, presses his cheek to my crown, and I kiss his pectoral, where Dad can’t see. “I love you,” I whisper, a breath of sound, and his hands clench on my lower back like he won’t ever let me go.

But he does, and I step away. Dad says, “The EMS techs should be here within 15 minutes to check on your sister. They’ll be discreet, no uniforms or sirens blazing.”

“Thanks, Sherriff,” Logan says, and Dad leads me away.

“Do you think, sweetheart,” Dad asks, slinging an arm around me as we wait for the elevator, “that this weekend we could go to the zoo? I know you’re too big for that kind of outing, these days. But I could really use some uncomplicated daddy-daughter time.”


“And don’t you forget it,” he says, out of the corner of his mouth, pulling me close.

THREAD TEN
I wake to the sound of thudding and grunting: at first, I think I’m still dreaming of the fight. But then I surface, and it continues, and I realize it’s happening inside my house.

I get up and follow the noise to the garage, night lights plugged at intervals down the hall guiding my way. Logan’s converted one side into a home gym, so I’m not alarmed as I crack the door open, and peer through.

He’s shirtless, shoeless, wearing nothing but gym shorts: he’s going after the punching bag with total focus, lips peeled back from his teeth. He’s bathed in sweat, it spatters from him as he moves, and he’s not just hitting, the way MY Logan does. This one knows some kind of martial arts, and he jumps and ducks and weaves, landing kicks that make the bag judder and sway, right hooks that connect with a crack. It’s mesmerizing. I mean, he was always graceful, but this is like a dance. No wonder he’s so muscle-y.

I don’t think I move, but something I do catches his attention. He stops, peering through the dimness at me, wiping sweat from his brow with one forearm. “Did I wake you?” he asks, tugging at the laces of a glove with his teeth.

I shake my head, and go to help him. “Bad dream,” I say, drawing the glove off, unwinding the tape beneath.

He grimaces as it tears free, flexing his fingers. “Yeah, same. Maybe it’s too hot in the bedroom or something.”

“Sure is hot in HERE,” I retort, removing the other glove.

He laughs, putting his bare hand on my shoulder, stroking my throat with his thumb. “You always did have a kink for watching me hit things.”

“Yeah, I think that’s a trait we share.” I uncover his right hand, and dig my thumbs into his palm, massaging. He groans and lets me, head falling back.

“At least I put on gloves first,” he chastises, cupping my jaw in his palm. “You’re a bare-knuckle brawler, sugarplum.”

“You wouldn’t like me half so well if I wasn’t wild and dangerous,” I flirt, with a toss of my head. He kisses me, deep and earnest and sure.

“It’s your job to be a force of nature, Ronnie. It’s mine to keep you safe. And I am utterly focused, and devoted to my task. Nobody’s gonna get to you and Peanut, not while I’m breathing.”

I stare at him, sweaty and strung out, still panting: this guy who leaves his bed to fight demons, changes his whole body to keep me safe. Then apologizes, for waking me. It’s the bedrock of how he loves, I think, this unspoken and undemanding devotion. Underneath the jibes and lashing out, the attitude, he’s been putting himself on the line for me, all along. And I NEEDED that, depended on it, even as I took it for granted.

“If I have ever seen anything sexier than you, right this second,” I say, “I’m totally blanking on when.”

He laughs, hooks an arm around my neck, bobbing his eyebrows. “You should get a load of me on the gun range,” he murmurs, suggestive, and I give him my best feline growl.

“I love you,” he says, and I say, “Come back to bed.”
“Okay, Ronnie. But just so you know, I’m pretty wiped. I may have to lie there, while you do all the work.”

He picks me up, belying his words, and carries me inside, kicking the door shut with his foot. And I decide, as we lose ourselves in each other, that accepting our mutual fundamental violence is the only sane course of action.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, question for those of you with encyclopedic knowledge of canon (for the chapter I'm currently writing). Were we ever told, in canon, what Lynn's maiden name was? And did canon say anything about her father, other than that he died in Korea when Logan was 5, and was a POW? Was any of the rest of her family mentioned?
Becoming a Man

Chapter Notes

IDK if the San Diego Zoo has Common Chimps, or just Bonobos. For the sake of this story, we're pretending.

THREAD TEN INVERTS

I’m at the San Diego Zoo, navigating the Lost Forest. I’m walking on one side of Dad, and Logan’s on the other. Dad’s rambling about renovations, over-excited like he always gets, waving his cup of Starbuck’s around so some sloshes out the hole. Logan’s got a green wad of cotton candy, which makes my mouth water, but he’s just picking at it, disinterested. I don’t know if he’s ill-at-ease, intruding on daddy-daughter day: or if he’s having a Logan Echolls, Drama Queen sulk, because life sucks, especially his.

I reach across dad and steal a handful of spun sugar, eat it with exaggerated relish. Logan musters a faint smirk, and smacks my hand.

“Wanna go see the chimps?” I ask, because dad’s fascinated with the smart animals. He can watch them for hours on end.

Dad grins and puts an arm around me, steals some cotton candy too. Logan sighs, and theatrically holds the cone out of reach.

“You’ll like this,” Dad decides, shoving Logan’s shoulder in a way that seems almost…affectionate? “They’ve got an interesting group. The alpha male kinda reminds me of Nixon, and he has this big, dumb buddy who does everything he’s told.”

Like Logan and Duncan, I think, but am wise enough not to say.

Dad makes himself comfortable on his favorite bench, and we settle in, again on either side. “Chimps are our closest relatives, you know,” he informs us, warming up to his monologue. “99% of the same DNA. You can learn a lot about people, why they act the way they do, watching these guys.”

“The old, skinny one knows how to flip tourists off,” Logan drawls, sprawling his arms along the back of the bench, his long legs out in front. His cotton candy lands in my lap, in the process. “And does it, whenever someone holds up a camera. A chimp after my own heart.”

Dad rolls his eyes but doesn’t comment. “You ever hear of Jane Goodall?” he asks, instead. “She studies the wild ones, out in Africa. Says their culture is a lot like ours. The groups have territories, and the males form gangs to patrol them. If any strangers wander in, they do their best to kill ‘em. The females vie for power, too: some of them are pretty Lady Mac Beth, with what they’re willing to do to win. But you know, they’re also loving and heroic. They form life-long friendships. They play, and they grieve.”

Dad sips his coffee, and I realize he’s going somewhere with this. I think Logan knows too, because he says, as if to keep the story rolling, “Sounds a lot like Neptune High.”
Dad smiles. “It’s the same at all high schools,” he says. “Human beings are chimps without fur.”
He’s silent for a moment, pondering. Then he continues. “You know, when I was sixteen, I tried to
blow up a romantic rival’s car with a Molotov cocktail.”

Logan chokes on a laugh, and I do a double take. “EXCUSE me?” I demand.

Dad shakes his head, a reminiscent smile on his lips. “I ended up burning my own car instead, but
that’s beside the point. I hate to tell you guys, but I was a rowdy kid. Lots of fistfights, lots of
shenanigans. We didn’t have much money, and I was touchy about my honor.”

He carefully doesn’t look at Logan, but Logan’s openly staring at him. Both sets of dark eyes are
unreadable. “And now you’re the hero Sheriff who saved the movie star,” Logan says. “The most
honorable man in the whole damn town.”

Dad glances at him, smiles wryly. Goes back to watching the chimps, sips his drink. “I’m a good cop
because I understand why people do bad things,” he says. “I understand the frustration about not
getting a fair shake, and the temptation to settle conflicts the old-fashioned way. I get how it’s
possible to lose your head with passion or grief, and do something you later regret. If I’d been a
holier-than-thou kid, always making the right choices, I couldn’t handle this job. I’d be judgmental
and arrogant. I’d be unfair. I like to watch these animals so much because it reminds me—we all do
what we do for very primal reasons. We dress it up in our heads, with rationalizations and logic, sure.
But we’re beasts. And we should recognize that, and give ourselves a break. And use the knowledge
of our potential weaknesses, to make ourselves stronger.”

“Huh,” Logan says. He turns back to the enclosure, a softness around his mouth and eyes he seems
determined to repress. “You’re right. You CAN learn a lot about people, watching chimps.”

I smile, and lean into Dad, kissing his cheek. “So which one is Nixon?” I ask.

He points. “Over on the jungle gym, looking surly,” he says. “Probably plotting.”

I remember Logan tricking Duncan into running for student council, his smarmy ridiculous campaign
video, and I can’t help but laugh. Logan looks at me over dad’s head, eyebrows raised, and I mouth,
“That monkey is YOU.”

He flattens his lips, exasperated, then slides into showmanship, making a comical “Who me?” face,
hand to heart. Dad shakes his head, amused by our shenanigans.

“So who wants funnel cake?” Dad asks, slapping his knees and standing.

“Oooh, me me me!” I shout, hopping up to clap, then jumping up and down. Because seriously, my
father’s the BEST, and I love to entertain him.

Logan slouches to standing, muttering, “How you guys can eat so much…”

“Hollow leg,” Dad says, patting him on the back. He points, telling us, “Stand’s right over there,”
and strides off.

“That was a weird conversation,” Logan informs me, draping an arm over my shoulders, stealing
back a bite of cotton candy. “I will never look at the Sheriff the same way again.”

“I think it explains a LOT,” I counter. “Like why he’s SO obsessed with me being good, when
genetically, I’m clearly NOT. And also why I’m infatuated with you. They say girls always fall for
boys just like their dads.”
“Are you saying your DAD is Nixon monkey?” he demands, hiding his mouth in fake shock. “You think Sheriff Mars is weaving SCHEMES?”

“It’s a chimp-eat-chimp world,” I tell him, hooking my arm through his. “You’re either Nixon monkey, or you’re a big dumb dupe. I know which one I’d rather be.”

THREAD ELEVEN

“Ronnie,” a voice croons in my ear. I crack an eyelid, see messy morning Logan, and close it again. He kisses me, just above the lash line.

“Roooonnnnnieeee…” he kisses my other eyelid, and my chin, and the back of my hand. “We have an ultrasound appointment in 45 minutes. Don’t you want to meet the Peanut?”

“We were at the zoo,” I say, and he kisses my nose.

“With your dad?” he asks, and I nod. “When he started his Sisyphean project to mold me into an upstanding citizen?”

“I think that lecture was meant as a lesson for us both,” I murmur, stretching languid beneath his attentions. “So we wouldn’t turn into Natural Born Killers, out of sheer native wildness.”

“Aw, you’re no killer,” he says, running his hands from my shoulders to my wrists, pulling me up to sitting. “Unless you count the way you slay me, in high-heeled boots and a miniskirt. Man, this zero-caffeine thing is a serious morning hurdle for you. I had no idea you were such a junkie.”

“Pot, kettle,” I manage, and force my eyes open. He looks delicious, all sleepy and mussed, so I throw my arms around him, and lick his neck.

“None of that,” he admonishes, peeling me off. Then, giggling, tries to evade me as I move back in.

“No means no, Veronica,” he insists. “Get your clothes on. We’re out the door in 10 minutes max.”

He heads into the closet, and returns a minute later to drop yoga pants and a loose, swingy tank on me. “In the immortal words of Letty Navarro, move your nalgas. It’s an expression of love, I believe.”

I put on the clothes Logan gave me, and lie back down for a little doze. He returns, groans, and ends up carrying me to the car.

“I’m engaged to Sleeping Beauty,” he grouses, shaking his head as he buckles me in.

I watch him instead of the scenery, while we drive. The sun gilds his eyes to caramel and his hair to bronze, brings out faint spatters of freckles on his face and arms. I drink in his cheerful calm competence behind the wheel, steering with a palm resting atop: his bright, clever gaze that misses nothing. I marvel at how he’s become, here, his best self, just because someone had faith he could. Logan’s behavior is a perfect barometer of how much he’s loved.

“What?” he asks, smiling, as he notices me mooning. “You OK? Not worried, or anything?”

“Nah,” I scoff. “Just marveling at how adorable and amazing you are. And gloating, ‘cause I bagged you.”

He manages to look, simultaneously, mocking, pleased and shy. “Not afraid Peanut’s gonna have gills? Or flippers?”
“Well, she will,” I say, “because fetuses go through all stages of evolution during development. But she’ll outgrow them.”

“Even a tail?” he asks, fascinated.

I nod. “And fur. But they go away. If you’re asking will she be deformed, though? Nah, I’m not worried about that at all.”

“I dunno, Veronica,” he says. “I drank a LOT, at one point. And I did drugs. Plus, I’m a purebred, whereas you rock that whole middle-class hybrid vigor. I’d say her chances are 50/50.”

I smack him, and he laughs. “I’m not worried.” I say, ‘because despite everything we’ve been through, we’ve both thrived. We must have the strongest genes in the world. Peanut’s gonna be President.”

“As long as she’s not an actor,” he says, and I can’t help but smile. “Gotta draw the line somewhere.”

Logan’s excited, it turns out. He bounces all over the waiting room like a gas molecule, startling the other patients, fiddling with magazines. When the cute redhead technician leads us to the ultrasound room, he’s so fascinated by the machine, I’m afraid he’s going to break it.

He bobs his eyebrows suggestively at me, as she smears jelly over my gut: and then the baby comes onscreen, across the room, and he forgets about masks.

Peanut’s a tiny shrimp, with an outsized, pulsing heart. She’s got a big head with bulging eyes, little stumpy arms and legs, and she’s restless like her father, spinning to her own secret music. When she feels the sound waves, breaking over her, she turns TOWARDS the source, and begins waving her limbs madly.

“Look at her, wanting attention!” I laugh/breathe, transfixed. “She’s an Echolls, all right! She must think we’re shooting a photo spread for ‘People’.”

His grin blooms as he points at the screen. “I told you no acting, Peanut! And DEFINITELY no exclusive interviews! Echolls household 2.0 will contain zero media whores.”


The technician is giggling, and giving him the bashful-admiring eye, like every straight female. “All the measurements look good,” she says. “Do you want a DVD of the scan?”

“For sure,” I say. Logan’s ignoring her again, the way he does most of humanity, while he watches Peanut dance.

“We made that,” I tell him, resting my hand on his forearm. “You and me. We made a PERSON.”

He looks at me then, and there’s something on his face I’ve never seen before—something wilder and fiercer than joy. More like the exultant mask he wears into battle. He’ll burn down the world for you, Peanut, I think: and maybe for me, because I made you happen.

“Amazing,” he says, taking my hand. “That, right there, is the best thing I ever did.”

I catch him, that night (when he thinks I’m asleep) watching the DVD over and over, touching the screen with his fingertips. I don’t let him see me: but I take a picture, so Peanut will know.
Thanks to everybody for continuing to read! Quick poll for those who care to comment: how do y'all feel about some mild kink in a sex scene? Yay or nay?
Love Will Tear Us Apart Again

Chapter Notes

Buckle up, folks. Here's the angst. Trigger warnings for canon plot threads involving potential suicide, abuse and murder, made AU to involve different characters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THREAD ELEVEN INVERTS

I’m on a couch in a tiny apartment with my Dad and Backup, watching Key Largo for the 8 millionth time, and the phone is ringing. I kiss Backup on the head, because I’m so happy to see him, and go hunting for it…it’s mine. Dad pauses the movie, points to my bag on the pass-through bar.

“Yeah,” I manage, mouth full of popcorn, fumbling it open. Weevil says, “V, you need to get your ass to the Coronado Bridge.”

“What? Why?” I ask, slow on the uptake. It feels, these days, like I’m never getting any rest.

“Because I’m stuck here with a blowout, waiting for Thumper to bring me a new tire. And Richie Rich’s junkie sister just drove up in a red convertible. Now she’s standing on the edge.”

“Trina?” I ask, and Dad turns to look.

“I’m gonna try to talk her down, but she’s wasted and she’s crying, so you MOVE,” he says, and hangs up on me.

“Jumper on the Coronado Bridge,” I tell Dad. “It’s Trina. I’m going now.”

“WE’RE going,” he corrects, grabbing his keys and our jackets, already heading out. Backup whines, then dives headfirst into the bowl of popcorn, as I lock the door.

Dad’s already reached dispatch as we peel out, so I call Logan, only to be met with one of his inspirational messages (Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence). I huff frustration and hang up, the only words in my head havetostopherhavetostopher. I won’t let Logan go through this again.

“Shooting down in the barrio,” Dad informs me, closing his phone. “They’ve sent a unit to the bridge, but we’ll arrive first. Were you able to speak with Logan?” I shake my head, and he says, “Don’t leave a message. Call Dick instead, or Wallace.”

Obedient, I try Wallace, get no answer, try Dick. He picks up on the fourth ring. “Ronniekins! Missing me already? I just saw you yesterday!”

“Are you with Logan?” I demand. There’s a light mist coming down, and Dad’s got the wipers on, but I can see the bridge in the distance. “It’s an emergency, I need to find him now.”

“He’s here, Rons. We’re all hanging by the pool, having some brews. His phone’s probably back in the house, in his jeans. If you…”
“No, Dick, listen. You have to get him to the Coronado Bridge. Trina’s on the edge, acting like she’ll jump. I’m almost there, but he needs to know it’s happening. And he needs to not be alone and driving, if he tries to follow. You come with him, and you’re behind the wheel, got me?”

“On it,” he says. “I’ll bring Wally along, he can mellow anybody out. Act totally unlike yourself, Rons, and DON’T push her buttons. I’m so not kidding. Because if she goes over, his shit’s coming unglued.”

“Agreed,” I say. “Just be his friend, and do what you can.” I hang up, and then we’re approaching, and there’s no time left for calls.

“Let me lead,” Dad says, squeezing my hand. “I’ve been through training for this. I should be the one to take the blame, if it all goes wrong.”

I squeeze back, and he pulls over, puts on his hazards. Then Weevil’s by the window, collar of his motorcycle jacket up, in a futile attempt to block the rain.

“She’s doing this crazy Mary Lou Retton thing,” he says, without preamble. “Just walking back and forth, balancing. I tried to talk sense, but she’s got a mouth on her like her brother. If I piss her off too much, I’m afraid she’ll jump just to give me the finger.”

I can see Trina in the distance, up on the rail. She’s wearing a black dress, holding sandals in one hand and a flask in the other, her hair and clothing drenched. She’s taking big, exaggerated steps. As we approach she spins, dramatic. Then pauses. Lifts a hand to shield her eyes, as she peers in our direction.

“Veronica Mars?” she shouts, her high, clear, mocking voice incredulous. “Did your pet vato call in the cavalry? Where’s Logie? He’ll miss his chance to rate my swan dive!”

“Nobody wants to see you jump, Trina,” Dad says, loudly and calmly. He moves closer: but she stumbles back out of reach, almost unbalancing, and he quits trying. “You need to come down.”

“Oh, you sentimental angel,” she says, saccharine. “You BET Logan wants to see! He HATES me, even though he tries his best to act noble. He’s got all the visible scars, you know? And I never lifted a hand to save him.”

Weevil shoots a glance at me, which I ignore. Dad says, “You and Logan were victims, Trina. No blame attaches to either of you.”

“HA,” she shouts, and takes a drink. Salutes the sky with her flask. “That’s number three on the list of Dumb Things Therapists Say. Number one is: You Deserve Love.” She swings her left leg out over the void, places the foot behind her. Repeats the move with her right. “You’re the Sheriff. You’ve seen the videos. You know what I’ve done.”

“He already fell,” Dad argues. “He’s dead. It’s over.”

“Not in my head,” she says. She smiles. “And I just can’t take the noise, anymore.”

She throws the flask, a high arc, and then gazes up at the full moon, instead of watching it splash down. Dad and Weevil both try to sneak closer, but she rounds on them again, forestalling capture.
“Hey, Veronica, you’ll tell Logie, won’t you? That he wasn’t the only one? Maybe he’ll believe the truth, if he hears it from you.”

I can see how this is gonna go down. Goran ripped the tourniquet off a gushing wound, when he made that video. She’s the same kind of determined Lynn was, once upon a time. And Dad and Weevil will never reach her, before she’s gone. Stiffly, I nod.

Trina bows, like she’s on a stage, and people are throwing roses at her feet. She comes up laughing. Then she steps backwards, and disappears.

XXXXX

It’s a mess, after, cops everywhere, helicopters and searchlights, nets dragging the water. Logan, Dick and Wallace screech up in a roar of exhaust: when Logan sees my face, he crumbles. Then he’s on his knees, sobbing, and I’m wrapped around him like a sleeve, stroking his hair. Wallace talks to him non-stop in a low, calm voice, and Dick watches, arms folded, like he’s not sure what to do. Dad stops by to pat Logan’s shoulder, and Logan tries to get it together: but he’s let go control, and now he can’t call it back.

I stay silent, allow everyone else to talk, because I have nothing good to say. I let her jump. I didn’t even TRY to stop her. I allowed her to go, when he wanted her to stay, and sooner or later, he’ll find out. He’ll hate me, the way he hated me the first time, for being the knife that severed Lilly. There won’t be a baby, or a house on the beach. There won’t be Fiji, or Epic, or any form of Happily Ever After. I killed us, when I nodded my head: and somehow, he’ll make me pay.

We get separated, amid the chaos, and then I’m sitting in the open back of an ambulance, drinking cocoa, with a blanket around my shoulders. Dad’s gone, Logan, Dick and Wallace and everyone, like they were never here. But Weevil’s still waiting, leaning on the bridge rail with his arms crossed, the lone defiant criminal in a swarm of busy cops.

I’ve never really understood Weevil’s presence in my life. I use him, he uses me, I help him, he helps me—we’re a series of transactions. I haven’t bothered to discover how we became entangled, here: why he does me favors in every time line, yet never makes a pass. He lends a hand even though I’m awful for his rep, by which he lives and dies. Weevil’s a bad person, a torturer and murderer. He steals for a living, and sells drugs to kids. But every time I need backup, he comes.

I look right, see my car, still parked, flashing hazards: left behind for me. I cast off the blanket, set my cup down. I approach Weevil and he says nothing, just blinks away wetness, and unfolds his arms.

“Come on,” I tell him. “Thumper’s never gonna show here, with all these cops around. I’ll give you a ride home.”

XXXXX

In the car, wipers swishing like a metronome, it’s silent and humid, like quiet makes steam. Weevil doesn’t try to reassure me: he knows there nothing to say, and he’s not a Chatty Cathy, like the guy I love. I drive automatically, turning when he tells me to, and I breathe through the fear, and keep on living.

“What over here,” he says, indicating a residential street. “I gotta run inside that house a minute, grab something.”

“Am I coming, too?” I ask. “Or am I sitting on this dark cul-de-sac in this soft-top convertible, all by my lonesome?”
He smiles, just a little. “Ain’t that how we first met?” he asks. He gets out, and smacks the roof frame, as if to reassure me. “Back in five,” he says. “Turn on your taser, if the Mexicans surrounding you start to feel too scary.”

He walks up to the door, knocks twice. I watch through the rain as it opens, light haloing the dark-haired woman who lets him in. I sit, breathing night and regret, various streams of fear. My phone rings.

I pick it up from the cup holder, glance at the display. Logan. Old me would have sent the call to voicemail, pre-emptive self-protection. But old me was an interpersonal coward. I press the button to accept.

“Ronica?” His voice is hoarse, like he’s been yelling. “Where are you?”

“Driving Weevil home,” I say. “He called me from the bridge, to tell me Trina was there. He had a flat.”

“I looked up, and you were gone,” he says. “I thought you came to the station with your dad, so I followed.”

“I was in the ambulance,” I correct. “I’m not hurt, though, just…they gave me cocoa. Logan, I’m so, so sorry. I know that doesn’t mean much, but I am. I’m sorry, and I love you.”

“Why did she jump?” he asks. “No one will tell me.”

“She said you weren’t the only one. She wanted you to know that. She was afraid someone would publicize the pool house videos, so I guess…”

“Oh, Jesus,” he moans, voice cracking. “MOTHERFUCKER!”

There’s a crashing sound, and then some more crashing sounds, and then it’s like he drops the phone. All I hear is yelling. The line goes dead.

“Logan?” I say, staring at the ‘call ended’ message. I press the go button again, and I’m listening to it ring, when my door is jerked open.

I look up at the man above me, all in black, ski mask. I fumble in my bag for my taser as he drags me from the car: but everything spills out over the ground, contents rolling into puddles. I scream, and kick, and something cloying covers my nose and mouth. Then I’m suffocating, gasping cloth, sinking down into blackness.

I come to lying on the ground, in the rain. There’s blood trickling down my temple, congealing at the corner of my eye. My vision’s blurred. Wet wind blows a piece of newsprint into my face, and I claw it off, jerk to a sitting position.

I’m in an alley, somewhere dirty and urban, garbage cans and detritus, happy home for rats. Lying next to me, a neat round hole in his forehead, is the corpse of Felix Toombs. His eyes are fixed, unseeing, on mine. And in my hand is a gun.

I’m so…sick. I’m so sick. And I don’t have a clue where I am.
THREAD TWELVE

When I wake up, the bed I’m on is narrow and hard, the blanket covering me coarse and scratchy. I’m afraid to open my eyes.

I run my hand down my belly and it’s flat, like the pregnancy never was. Whatever I’m wearing is as unpleasant to the touch as the blanket: there’s no ring on my left hand. So when I lost Trina, I lost Logan too, I guess. It’s Lilly all over again, me tearing him apart from a woman he loves. My eyes fill with tears.

Something lands in my hair with a wet plop. A similar something strikes my cheek. I know this sensation, from Original! Reality, sophomore year. I’m being pelted with spitballs.

“Rise and shine, princess,” a Southern-accented voice says, from my right. “It’s almost time for breakfast.”

I open my eyes to a grey wall, turn my head. There’s a skinny woman on a cot, facing me, a half-destroyed Bible clutched to her chest. Her hair is black and coarse, her skin and eyes an indeterminate brown, common to ten different ethnicities. Her sparse eyebrows are raised, and her foxy face shows faint amusement.

She’s wearing an orange shirt and pants that look like hospital scrubs. But aren’t.

I sit up fast, turn, and am confronted by iron bars. They frame a view of a railed white walkway, down which identical cells are arrayed, ad infinitum, as far as I can see.

That trip to the bridge cost me everything. Including, it seems, my freedom.

Chapter End Notes

So...how 'bout them Dodgers? :-)  

This chapter concludes Part I (of 3). Part II will include summer vacation and most of senior year. Things get crazy.

I'll be traveling over the next month or so. I've got the next ten chapters written, and I will keep polishing and posting: but how often depends on how much time I have, and what the internet connections are like. May continue to be every few days, may not. I'll do my best!
I Fell Into a Burning Ring of Fire

THREAD TWELVE, CONTINUED

Lunch in jail goes about like you’d expect, for a five-foot, ninety-pound, cute, blond Sherriff’s daughter. I’m taunted, someone spits on me, and much like Neptune High, I find myself eating alone. But when some chubby pig-eyed chick reaches for my roll, I snarl at her and she jerks back so fast I realize I’ve cultivated the psycho rep, which protected me so neatly from the likes of Original! Dick.

Good. Because gouging someone’s eye out with a spoon would suit my mood a little too well, today.

Back in my cell, I can feel something sharp and hard wedged into my pillow, and I’m glad, because my roommate makes me nervous. There’s something cagey/calculating/cloying about her that’s seriously off. It’s insolence, but not the in-your-face kind I’m used to, the kind with rules. Hers lurks below the surface, waiting for a lowered guard, a turned back. I don’t look forward to sleeping, locked in a cage with her. But I’ll have to, if I want out of this place.

It’s ironic. I pride myself on my steel-trap logic: but that’s proved no match for simple bias. I assumed the dreams were straightforward, a child’s puzzle… retcon wrongs done, reap the rewards. I assumed this, because every time I changed something, my life got better. And I was too busy gloating over the spoils to question my good fortune.

Now I realize, I’ve been foolish. My knowledge of my own past gives me an advantage, in the new one, but it’s not a cure-all. I need to be more aware of the motivations of people around me, the ways they might have changed. I need to re-evaluate my friends-and-enemies list, in light of slipstream happenings. I need to gather my steely resolve, and figure out who put me in this place. And then I need to save myself, and make the bastards pay.

A long time passes while I lie staring at the wall, strategizing: my cellmate watches me, pretending to read. Then two guards come to collect me, shackle me up. Escort me through the white barred labyrinth to a dirty, green room. They chain me, there, to a bolt in the ground. And Dad comes in, sits opposite.

He’s in civilian clothes—of course he is, no one’s gonna keep a Sheriff around who’s got a daughter up on murder one. Plaid shirt, beige windbreaker, chinos and loafers, typical dad gear from the time before the dreams. His face is more lined, his hair more grey, then I’ve ever seen. “How you holding up, honey?” he asks, his voice as kind as ever.

“How you holding up, honey?” he asks, his voice as kind as ever.

“Then you’ll like my news,” he tells me. “The woman in the house, the one Weevil visited, came forward.”

“The woman in the house. Who saw me yanked out of my car by a guy in a ski mask, that woman?”

“I never thought I’d be glad your mother married Jake,” he admits. “But I am today. It was the 60 minutes interview he did that changed her mind. She provided conclusive evidence that you were kidnapped, in return for protection. Apparently there was a plot ‘to get rid of people who knew too much’, and Toombs was also ‘in the way’. They’re transferring you to Neptune lockup, right now. Your lawyers will meet you with clothes, then you appear before the appellate judge. And then, sweetheart, God willing, you finally get to go home.”
I start to cry, and he smiles at me. “I wanted to be the one to tell you,” he says. “I can’t wait to take you to the zoo.”

“No more cages,” I protest, and he laughs.

“No more,” he agrees. “Maybe the movies, instead.”

The ride in the prison wagon is an adventure in jouncing. Cell B still has the best light. My lawyers are the expensive kind Logan had, when HE was charged with this murder, and I wonder how I ended up convicted. The judge is stern, and permed and grey: but when she looks at me, her face softens. Then I’m bracketed by cops in my skirt and bun, pumps and button-down, and I’m exiting the courthouse, blinking away sunlight. Shell-shocked.

There’s a limo just past the mob of reporters (which my lawyer parts like he’s Moses at the Red Sea). I’m herded towards it, flinching when touched, as people shout and cameras flash. I’m tucked inside, where it’s quiet and cool.

I never had to go to sleep in the cage with my creepy cell mate, as far as I can recall. I didn’t experience much in the way of prison violence. I’m free, it seems, without enduring God knows how many days of unremitting ugliness.

But Logan’s not waiting in the car, to hold my hand.

Instead, it’s Lianne, garbed in floaty lemon-yellow, engulfing me in perfumed embrace. “Oh honey,” she weeps. “Finally, our little bird flies home.”

“Thanks, mom,” I say, the words sticking in my throat. And because she and dad are all I have, apparently, I hold her tight. “For whatever you did to get me out, and for being here now. Thank you for not giving up.”

“You’re my daughter,” she says, and hugs me again. And I think how strange fate is, that there’s a world where everyone I love abandons me, yet somehow my mother holds strong.

She takes me back to the house I remember, where Logan first asked for my help. To the fancy big room, bed half-occupied by a now-giant Husky. He gets up to investigate, sniffs me, and promptly goes nuts, knocking me backwards on the mattress, sprawling atop. He doesn’t lick: he tucks his head under my chin. I lie there, holding this unknown dog that loves me, and stare dry-eyed at the ceiling. And pray that I wake up somewhere else, on every morning to come.

THREAD TWELVE INVERTS

I’m in an interrogation room at the Neptune Sheriff’s station, talking to what looks like my lawyer. Lianne sits beside me, in a mint green sheath dress, a watercolor scarf. Her eyes are red, like she’s been crying or drinking, and she keeps trying to grab my hand.

“They can’t hold you,” the man in front of me is saying. He’s got distinguished silver hair, a matching bespoke suit, and square silver glasses that catch the light: he looks like he’s covered in a thin layer of frost. “There was no murder weapon at the scene, no gunpowder residue on your hands. Traces of chloroform on your skin and in your bloodstream, obvious blunt force trauma to your temple. A $50 lipstick and a tracking device, matching your description of purse contents, were found beneath the sewer grate, at the abduction location you specified: and those are not objects most women would carry. A record of a phone call made to Logan Echolls exists at the time of the assault, and the person who answered, a Mister…Dick Casablancas, reports hearing scuffling sounds, and a scream. All these pieces of evidence corroborate your story, and the only thing the prosecution has is
a terrified non-English speaker with an outdated work visa, who saw you from a distance, and claims you held a gun. Frankly, even if they manage to locate a weapon covered with your prints, we’re confident of proving reasonable doubt. This was clearly a gang killing, followed by a poorly-staged cover up, and no sensible person will believe it was perpetrated by you.”

What the hell did I do with the gun? I think, but don’t say. “So as it stands, I won’t be charged with any crime,” I clarify, instead.

“Miss Mars, you’re more of a victim here than Toombs. He presumably ran afoul of his cronies, and was dealt with accordingly. You’re just a nice, law-abiding girl, who gave a casual acquaintance a ride home.”

“Sugar and spice, that’s me,” I say, and he doesn’t smile exactly…it’s more like he marginally thaws.

We stand up and shake hands—his is, appropriately, cold—and he guides me, with a no-contact gesture, out the door. We walk down the Neptune Sheriff Station’s hall: I’m striding, anxious to get outside, and Lianne’s circling me, fluttering, like an agitated bird. And there, on the bench by the candy machines, sits Logan. He’s slumped way down, so his crossed legs block the aisle, hands in pockets, blowing a big pink bubblegum bubble. When he sees me, he slides the gum into his cheek, and shoots me a one-sided smile.

“Dangerous criminal does perp walk of shame,” he intones, framing the image between index fingers and thumbs. He hops up, nods at Frosty, and nudges me with a shoulder. “Come on, Mars, I’ll buy you ice cream. You can tell me all about life in the inside.”

“FUNNY,” I say, looking to Lianne for permission. She nods a lot and grins, patting his cheek, so I fall in step with him. “Not really up for prison jokes, though, after the day I’ve had. I’m gonna need at least 3 scoops. In a sundae.”

“Your wish,” he promises, draping an arm over my shoulder. I can feel the fine tremble in him, smell the flop sweat and booze: I realize he’s either spectacularly hung over, or still wasted. Usually, this combination of devil-may-care showmanship and self-abuse is enough to send me into a worried rage. But his sister just died, and it was my fault (my fault). And he’s still here to support me, in my hour of need. Right this moment, I’ll forgive him almost anything.

“Beach?” he asks, and I nod. He holds open the XTerra door for me, turns towards my favorite Amy’s: the one where the servers have blue and orange hair, and throw ice cream to each other, across the street.

“Hanging in there?” I ask, when we’ve settled down to eat, backs to an outcropping. We’re watching a toddler and mom build sandcastles in the surf.

He eyes me askance as I dig into my blueberry custard banana split—it’s smothered in butter pecan sauce, and sports extra whipped cream—but refrains from comment. “You know me.” He shrugs. “I like my regret on the rocks.”

“So I smell,” I say. “Hopefully you’re past the puking portion of the evening, because Guinness Beer flavored ice cream, Logan? Really?”

He crunches into his waffle cone, hiding a smile. I’m convinced he secretly likes it, when I call him on his crap. “Just trying to stay in the same flavor family.”

“Well, today I narrowly avoided prison,” I say. “So I’ve got no moral superiority cards left to play.”

“Enh,” he shrugs. “Your best friend is Lilly Kane, and you’re dating me. You were bound to fall off
your Pink Sparkle Princess pedestal, eventually.”

“True that. But honestly? EVERYONE we hang around with is shady. Well, not Wallace. Dick, though? And Weevil? Not to mention Donut? Our friends cover the whole socioeconomic spectrum of unsavory characters.”

“Veronica,” he says, in his serious voice. “Weevil is NOT your friend. Please tell me you know he’s the one who set you up. If not the one who actually chloroformed you, and hit you over the head.”

I close my eyes. I promised myself I’d stay objective, this time, but I can’t help believing Weevil would NEVER. “No, actually, I think that was Thumper.”

“It was who? Ronica, remember the chimps? I’m the leader of my social group, not because I’m so heroic or accomplished, but because I’m SMARTER than all those idiots. And Weevil’s the same way. He left you sitting alone on that dark street for a reason, and you KNOW it!”

“What if he’s NOT the smartest?” I ask. “What if one of his subordinates is sneakier, and is planning a coup?”

“Occam’s Razor,” Logan insists, with a flat, negating gesture. “The simplest explanation is usually right. Besides, even if this WAS some elaborate plot, the fact that he refused to support your story, then disappeared without a trace, should tell you something. You cannot trust Weevil to have your back. Maybe he likes you, just not enough to get involved, or maybe he tried to screw you over. But either way, he’s always gonna be on HIS side, not yours.”

“Noted,” I say, sucking sauce off my spoon. “But I’m warning you now, if you’re planning some war of retribution against Weevil, because you think he framed me? You need to call a halt. I can cope with your depression, and nascent alcoholism, and your complete lack of a self-preservation instinct. I’ll even claim partial responsibility, because I should have stopped Trina, and didn’t. You cruising around in the Banana Mobile with Dick and Enbom, though? Picking an escalating series of fights with a gang in crisis? Is the one thing you could do that would actually make me dump you. Are we clear?”

He looks at me for a minute. Turns back towards the ocean. Takes a bite of his melting cone. “Three things,” he says, finally. “One, nobody got Trina like I did, and she would not have let you stop her. Echolls spawn don’t quit unless we’re DONE. Two, your knowledge about the contents of my brain is truly scary. And three, if you think I’m gonna let some ghetto piece of trash mistreat and railroad my girlfriend, you don’t understand the stuff you know AT ALL.”

“IF he had me kidnapped,” I say, “we make him pay, together. But we prove it, before we act. Justice, not vengeance. Right?”

He rests his head against the rocks. “I’m torn here,” he says, after a while. “Between the desire to be the hero, fighting the righteous fight, and the urge to do the opposite of what I’m told.”

“You skipped the unit in kindergarten about good and bad choices, didn’t you?” I ask. “What, were you in Cannes?”

“Sundance,” he corrects. He eats the last bite of ice cream, and tosses his napkin on the sand, in complete disregard of environmental laws. “Someone may have ambushed Weevil at his shop last night, and kicked the shit out of him, and left him tied up for the cops to question. Does that someone get a pass, since the beat-down happened pre-ultimatum?”

I huff a laugh. “Someone is quite the multi-tasker.”
“Gotta stay busy,” he says. “I’m easily bored.”

“No shit,” I sigh. “Okay, clean slate. You didn’t happen to plant a bug, did you?”

“Never leave evidence.” He points at imaginary words in the air, as if reciting. “Never take souvenirs.”

“I hope you at least gave him a black eye,” I muse. “I’m not any happier about his self-serving testimony than you are.”

His lips curve into a comfortable smirk, and he twines his fingers through mine. “Ronnie,” he says, “I’m beginning to think you never WERE a good girl, deep inside.”
In Spite of All That, I'm High as a Cloud

Chapter Notes

I’m back! And I brought some angst, some humor, some fluff, and some fairly descriptive smut with me. :-) Thanks for continuing to read, hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

THREAD THIRTEEN

There’s an alarm going off. Abrasively loud, right next to my ear. I fumble, find a snooze, hit it. Drift back down.

“Veronica!” a voice snaps. A female voice. A hand shoves my leg. “Wake up, you have a test! Wake UP!”

Test, I think. College. It’s not like coming to under Logan, but at least I’m not back in Lianne’s house, fresh out of jail.

Wait. Why am I not in Lianne’s house? All I did last night was talk to Logan and my lawyer. What important thing did I inadvertently change?

I open my eyes. I’m in a dorm room—a Hearst dorm room, looks like—and Mac is sitting on the bed opposite, lacing up her Chucks. She checks her watch, throws a pillow at me, and ties the other shoe.

“I left coffee on your desk,” she says. “You need to quit taking Ambien. And I have computer lab in 15 minutes, so you live or die by your own hand. Later, Bond.”

She rushes out, long, dark, cherry-striped hair swirling, and I sit up with a groan. I have Snoopy pajama pants on, and my toenails are painted green.

I stagger over to the desk she indicated, chug the coffee there. It’s a vanity actually, with a mirror over top, so I sit and look at myself. Long hair, hanging in snarled waves. Remains of gold eye shadow, smeared around my eyes. No distended abdomen. No ring. I look a lot like I did in Original! Reality, which does not exactly thrill me.

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There’s a green messenger bag strung over the chair back, and I dig through it until I find my Sidekick. I hunt for the photo of my class schedule. It’s Thursday, by my count, so Criminology II.

Ok, then. At least I know where to go, for the test I’m taking.

I tidy up with a brush and a pack of wipes, pull my hair back into a ponytail. Shove on fresh clothes and yikes, it’s 8:47. I really AM late. I grab a bristling Cowabunga! key ring, lock up, and take off at a run.

The test is administered by a proctor—Landry and TA Tim are both, weirdly, absent. I studied this material literally the DAY before my life went to Shifting Realities Hell, though, so I finish first (despite the fact that Ratner won’t stop glaring).

I stride out of the classroom with a twofold purpose—caffeine, and answers. I’m sticking with my jailhouse resolution: learn to control what’s happening to me. Because, while I’m undecided about
the current scenario, the last one completely blew. A reality where I’m an ex-con, stuck living with my mom, is not a long-term option.

I wonder if I should make a chart, so I can search for patterns: what I did differently, in Retcon! Past, how it changed my world. Of course, if I do this and someone SEES the chart, I may end up locked away again.

“Veronica!” a guy calls, behind me. I turn to see Piz approaching, sporting his weird, rictus-like grin. Great, just what I DON’T need, before noon.

“Piz,” I say, on a sigh. “Kinda busy right now.” Then I flinch, because he’s coming closer and closer, and NOT STOPPING, and he puts his arm around me, and TRIES TO KISS ME ON THE MOUTH.

Ok, confession time. I ought to handle this setback in a mature fashion. I shouldn’t shriek, or scramble backwards, like I’m the black cat with a stripe made of paint, and he’s Pepe LePew. But NO FREAKING WAY am I going down this road with this dickhole, not ever again. I’m unsure why karma keeps throwing His Pizness in my face: but I am officially declaring all Veronicas, in all realities, a Piz Free Zone henceforward.

Like Logan said, RE Peanut and acting, you’ve got to draw the line somewhere.

My cartoonish cringe actually penetrates his self-absorption, and he frowns. “What’s wrong?” he asks. “Didn’t you have time to brush?”

I struggle not to kick him. “Piz,” I manage. “You and I were a mistake. A very bad, never-to-be-repeated mistake. Please, for the love of God, go find some smug hipster girl who loves Neko Case as much as you do, and obsess over her instead. And never, ever speak to me again.”

I leave him standing there, shell-shocked, and march off towards the cafeteria. When he begins to pursue me, determinedly calling my name, I break into a run.

I reach the coffee bar, order a quadruple espresso, and chug it, which makes me feel human again. Then I turn, search for a free table on which to construct my insane manifesto. I freeze.

Logan has his stuff sprawled all over the one center-stage, along with a Big Gulp, and a plate of fries. He’s got his feet up on the chair opposite, and he’s chewing a straw, while reading, “The Plight of the Underclass in Mexico.”

I am totally not kidding.

I approach from behind, so he can’t flee, like I just did from Piz. I sidle into view.

“If that’s not a sign of the apocalypse, I don’t know what is,” I say, gesturing at the book.

He folds his arms over his chest, but looks amused. “Veronica,” he greets me.

“Listen, I want…” I say, but then Piz storms up, and seriously, WTF? I thought this guy was anti-confrontation!

“Veronica,” he pleads. “Can you just tell me what I did? Can I have a chance to explain?”

Logan starts laughing. Like, deep hysterical belly laughs, and I’m afraid he’ll fall off the chair. I shoot him a dirty look. “No,” I say. “It’s over. Get lost.”
“But we just…”

“Over!” I insist, and Logan stands up, still chuckling. Piz decides discretion is the better part of valor, and flees.

“So,” I say, as Logan sprawls back down. “How’s things with you?”

“They’d be better if you’d strung that guy along for a few more sentences. I wanted an excuse to belt him.” He shoves some fries in his mouth. “But otherwise, can’t complain.”

“May I sit?” I ask. He studies me for a minute, then takes his feet of the chair opposite, kicks it out for me.

I sink down, clutching my bag on my lap, and realize I genuinely have no idea what to say. We stare at each other. After a while, his eyes crinkle, and he pushes his plate towards me. “Fry?” he offers.

I take a handful, which I don’t eat. He holds out a cup of ketchup, and I take that, too.

“What do you want, Veronica?” he asks, more gently than I expected.

“My life back,” I say, deciding on honesty. I close my eyes, because really, it’s all too much. The constant struggle to cope with new realities, the lack of a dull moment. God knows I love my roller coasters, but not when the car’s unbolted from the track.

“What exactly is wrong with your life?” he asks, and I open my eyes. I stare at him while he stares at me, crushing clammy, cold fries in my grip.

“If you could go back,” he persists, “and change just one thing, what would it be?”

“The part where you stopped being in it,” I say. And somehow break the tractor beam of his gaze.

“I will NEVER,” he says, very seriously, “stop being in it. Unless you leave me zero choice, the way you just did poor Piz.”

“You hate Piz,” I say, with a watery smile.


“And that’s why I love you,” I tell him. “It’s why I’ll never stop.”

“Ronica,” he says, voice gentle. “Don’t jerk me around. Seriously, you can’t yo-yo me like this, when I’m trying to move on. I have a girlfriend now—a REAL girlfriend, one I actually LIKE—and I’m not dumping her for ‘we have too many problems, and I’m not ready to commit’. YOU may not be ready to commit, but I AM. And I won’t be your disposable fuck toy, every time you’re overcome with nostalgia for The Way We Were.”

I sit back, as the pieces click into place. “This is because I wouldn’t move in with you,” I guess. “And I wouldn’t get engaged.”

“Correct,” he says. “And because, when a guy asks, ‘Do you have any regrets?’, you’re not supposed to make a list. You’re supposed to smile, and tell him, ‘I wouldn’t change a thing.’.”

(When did you know you loved me? My voice echoes. That night on the Nautilus, he replies. When
you said 'I don't regret a minute'.

See, universe? I AM paying attention.

I take a deep breath. “Okay,” I concede. “Thank you for being honest. And for continuing on as my friend, even though I let you down. I’m glad you’re happy, and I’ll be a friend to you, too, by not jeopardizing that.” I extract my hands from his, dust them together to brush away salt.

“You’re the most wonderful guy I know,” I tell him, shouldering my bag. “You deserve the best, and I hope you find it.”

I turn and walk off, shoulders up and back, so it looks like I’ve left by choice. Because what right to I have, really, to change the fate of this Veronica? Maybe she PREFERENCES life without Logan. Maybe I’m just stirring up heartache. And maybe I should learn that some mistakes can’t be fixed, in a stray half-hour, with the aid of a taser.

I don’t expect him to follow, and he doesn’t. Instead, I go through the motions, head for my next class.

When my day’s over, I pick up a to-go salad from the caf, and carry it back to my room. Mac’s not around, and I wonder if she’s Bronsoning in this reality, or working late, or doing something wholly new.

I turn on the small TV by my desk, and channel surf while I eat, until I hit an airing of ‘Clueless’. Sticky-sweet Jane Austen is just what I need: so I sit back, and munch salad, and let it play. I maybe cry a little, here where no one can see, but I’m not giving up. When the movie’s over, I’ll make my crazy flowchart. I’ll find the winning pattern, get back to where I want to be. I have a Titanic-load of flaws, for sure, but let it never be said I lack tenacity.

There’s a knock at the door, and I wonder if the Cowabunga! keys are really Mac’s, left behind in her haste. I get up, swallowing, and slouch over to let her in.

I swing it open, and Logan’s standing there, hands in his back pockets, looking awkward. I stare at him, and he stares at me, and the look in his eyes is so raw it stings. My heart seizes up, then pounds a hard, staccato rhythm. He steps through the doorway, grasps my face in both hands, and kisses me like he never wants to stop.

I lock my arms behind his neck, tight, and he picks me up and spins me, kicking the door closed. Then we’re on the bed, and I’m on top, and I say, “I’ll move in with you, Logan. And I’ll marry you someday, too.”

“Don’t leave anymore,” he warns, reaching behind him for a fistful of shirt, pulling it over his head. “Never,” I vow, and kiss him. We roll together in the cathode glow, like waves beneath the moon.

THREAD THIRTEEN INVERTS

I’m sitting in the driver’s seat of a silver convertible I don’t recognize, in front of a luxury house I don’t recognize either. I’m in a low-cut, leaf-green sundress, with a tomato-red bikini beneath. I have little gold hoops in my ears, and I’m applying red lipstick in the rearview. My hair is wound up in two knots at the crown of my head, and I look, if I’m being honest, mildly feral. Embracing my no-longer-hidden inner bad girl, perhaps?

I bare my teeth at my reflection, then grin. No Piz, no Duncan, no specter of prison violence. My odds are already improving.
I get out and ring the doorbell, and a uniformed maid answers, guiding me inside.

The lower level is one big room, decorated all in white, with splashes of sawgrass and beachy blue to break up the monotony. Lynn Echolls gracefully occupies 2/3 of a loveseat, endless legs crossed, and tilted to the side: she’s chatting flirtatiously with a dark-haired man, whose polished look screams money. She sees me and waves gaily, points towards the French doors behind her (through which I’ll presumably find Logan).

I wave back and head out, my shoes clacking against the hardwoods. I’m sporting chunky green cork-heeled sandals, with leather flowers on the toes. I reflect that mom marrying Jake has had a beneficial effect on my wardrobe.

Logan’s sprawled across a chaise lounge, looking up at clouds through $300 shades. He’s got on green flowered board shorts, and a clashing (and unbuttoned) orange flowered Hawaiian shirt. He seems peaceful and reflective, hands behind his head.

I lie down next to him: my skull fits neatly into the hollow above his collarbone. His arm rises to wrap around me. “I see a dragon,” I say, pointing. “Playing a bagpipe.”

“I see an incredibly hot chick in a skimpy dress, pasted up against me,” he retorts, pressing a kiss to my temple. “Which would feel like Christmas, right down to the color scheme, except my mom is watching through the window.”

“So climbing on top of you and kissing your brains out is a bad idea?” I ask, tracing his ear with one fingertip. Something sparks in his eyes, a recognition, maybe, of my aggressive mood, and a thrill courses through me.

“OK, that’s it. Up.” He hoists me bodily off the lounge, and stands as well, adjusting his shorts with a grimace. “No way am I walking past Harvey Weinstein with a boner. Even if you ARE the very best kind of heartless tease.”

“So what have you got in store for me today?” I ask, rubbing my hands together, evil-genius-style. “Something tawdry?”

He points at my face, prohibitive. “What did I say?”

“No heartless teasing,” I parrot, mock-obedient, and he tucks me close to his side, kisses my cheek.

“Yet,” he clarifies. “First, pool party at Dick’s. Second, surprise. Third, even bigger surprise, which you will really, really, really like. But only if you can restrain yourself from uncovering what it is, beforehand.”

“Ooh,” I say, as he gathers up a bulging beach bag, ushers me through the door. “That sounds like a challenge!”

“Of course it does,” he mutters. He shakes hands with Lynn’s guest and introduces me, bends down to kiss her cheek. “Headed over to the Casablancas’, ” he tells her. “I’m spending the night there, so don’t worry when I don’t come home.”

She puts her hand on his cheek, smiles at him, kisses his forehead. “Be polite,” she warns. “And charming in the GOOD way!”

He laughs. “But the bad way is so much more fun!” he protests. He takes my hand, and leads me out the door.
“Hey, how come YOU get to be bad?” I demand, and he pushes me against the car with his whole body, then kisses me until I can’t breathe.

“Keep it up,” he warns. “See where it gets you.”

Hmm, I think, climbing into the car and checking my lipstick, which he’s now wearing more of than I am. I really don’t miss being nice.

The Casablancas pool party is hopping when we arrive, just after dark, and there’s nary an adult in sight. Retro surf music blares from the speakers, paper lanterns and torches abound: there’s a giant buffet laid out, with every kind of fruit in piles, and a central whole, roast pig.

The host is mixing drinks at a Tiki Bar, decked out in a clear green visor and lei, a grass skirt over his swim trunks. When we approach he yells, “Aloha nui, dude!” above the noise. Hands us giant umbrella’d beverages, housed in coconut shells.

Logan takes a sip and grimaces. “Jesus, it’s like Gilligan’s Island out here. What do you think, eat, pool or mingle?”

“Pool,” I decide. “Dinner has a face, and I’m not sure yet who to mingle with.”

He grins. “Dress,” he demands, holding out a hand. I pull it over my head, and give it to him. Set my own hand on my hip, as his gaze travels down me.

He shrugs off his shirt, tosses our clothes on a lounge. “Shoes,” he says, holding his hand out again. I rest my palm on his shoulder for support, as I slip them off.

He adds them to the pile. Then he grabs me, and cannonballs into the water.

We surface, me gasping and spluttering, and he laughs when I smack his chest. His hands, beneath the water, spread over the curves of my ass, holding me up since I can’t stand.

“This is a very small swimsuit,” he whispers in my ear, as if confiding a secret, still managing to slip his fingertips beneath it.

“I wanted to wear the giant ugly grandma suit,” I whisper back, “but it was in the laundry.”

“Too bad,” he says, spinning me slowly in a circle. My hair swirls out behind me, unfurling from its knots. “Maybe this one will get dirty, too.”

“It might,” I say. “Stranger things have happened.”

“Hey, keep it PG, you two,” Wallace interjects, kneeling by the pool. He does some weird slap/shake thing with Logan, and grins at me. “Impressionable minds in the house.”

“Back off, man,” Logan says, good-naturedly. “You’ll infect me with your wholesome family values.”

Wallace smacks him on the side of the head. “Treat this girl right, my friend. It’s four hours ‘til her BIRTHDAY.”

“Oh, I’m treating her JUST right,” Logan smirks, and I punch him in the shoulder. Wallace laughs.

“Imma be a caveman and rip a leg off that pig,” Wallace tells us, clapping Logan on the back and standing. “I’ll check in later, provided you’re not off macking in some dark corner.”
“Hasta, man,” Logan says, and twirls me like we’re dancing. He snags one of our coconuts off the pool rim, drinks, and offers me a sip.

“Mmm, pina colada,” I say, looking up at him coyly, with my lips around the straw. I know what game we’re playing now, and what he wants the finish line to be.

He takes the cup away from me, and I lick my lips. He traces his thumb along the bottom one, wiping off moisture.

“We should separate and mingle,” he says, voice low and gravelly. “Because if you stare at me that way much longer, I’m likely to do you here in the pool.”

I trace a finger down the center of his chest. “Who says you’ll be doing me anywhere?” I ask, and flick his chin. Then I climb the ladder, don my dress and shoes, and head off in search of a bottled drink.

Yeah, sue me. I may be living a different reality each day, but on this point, I’m not budging. No way do I ever plan to experience Roofie Number Four.

There’s a cooler by the Tiki Bar, with a girl sitting atop it, turned away to watch the crowd. I figure there must be beer inside, so I tap her on the shoulder and say, “Hey, could I just ask you to…” Then she spins to face me, and my question changes to, “Mac!”

“Um, hi,” she says, with a little nervous wave. “Veronica, right? I’ve seen you around, but I didn’t think you had a clue who I was.”

“I’m disappointed,” I retort. “I was sure I had a rep for knowing the dirt on everyone.”

“You’re certainly talked about,” she says, with that dry Mac undertone I’ve so missed. “Not in a bad way!” she adds, when I maybe don’t hide my fear of infamy well. “Just…you lured Logan Echolls away from Lilly Kane. And you’re not even a supermodel!”

I give her my best blank, please-continue face, entertained by her spiral of fail, and she keeps on digging. “Not that you’re not…really pretty, but,” she covers her face with her hands. “How about I just get off the cooler, so you can flee with your beer in peace?”

I extract a Negro Modelo, twist the top, and take a deep, welcome swallow. “You need to breathe,” I advise. “And I didn’t steal Logan so much as he beat up my boyfriend, and dragged me off into the trees. Like Tarzan.”

Logan chooses this moment to pass by, put his hand on the small of my back, kiss my forehead and growl at me. As he walks away, we both burst out laughing.

“See?” I say. “He’s a pussycat, really. In the sense that he’s much more deadly than he looks.” I wink. “And so are you, if the rumors are true. My super secret sources tell me you’re a HACKER.”

She blushes faintly, but her expression doesn’t change, because Mac is the queen of self-possession. “Just a computer nerd,” she corrects. “Your average layperson gets confused.”

“Oh,” I say. “You can be ‘just a computer nerd’. I’ll be an adorable blonde cupcake. Dick will be an idiot, and Lilly a free-spirited vamp, and Logan the jovial 09er ringleader, without a care in the world.”

“What about your friend Wallace?” she asks, entertained by my badinage. “And Cassidy?”

“Wow,” she says, deadpan, big eyes wide. “You’re a little frightening. I’m intrigued.”

“Beware,” I tell her, pointing. “People like me can put talents like yours to good use.”

“Spying?” she asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Justice,” I correct, and toast her, and drink. “Come find me sometime, if you feel like playing Batman.”

I see Logan chatting with a group, over by the outdoor dining: I head that direction, but am intercepted by Dick. He throws an arm around me, which still makes me stiffen, and says, “Nuh-uh, Ronnie, you want to hang around here for a sec. Come on, sit down.”

He leads me to a barstool, and helps me up, then sticks his fingers in his mouth and whistles. “Yo Logan!” he yells. “We’re ready!”

Logan grins, and jogs over. He curves in behind me, arms around my waist, chin on my shoulder. “OK,” he says. “Remember how I told you there was a good surprise and a really good surprise? This is the first one.”

He nods at Dick, who shouts “GO!”, and the piped music changes from ‘Secret Agent Man’ to something bongo-heavy.

A line of Polynesian dancers files out, boy-girl/boy-girl, in two parallel columns. They do a brief routine that involves jumping, spinning and fire-stick twirling, greased bodies gleaming in the torchlight. Then they all face in, to make an alley, and reach towards the side of the house, beckoning.

From around the corner, Logan’s cronies appear, in swim trunks and leis, carrying what can only be described as a Cleopatra litter. On it sits Lilly (of course), in a navy blue bikini and hip-tied sarong, along with heaped tropical flowers, and a giant tiered cake. The cake matches her outfit: it has fondant stars, and lit sparklers in lieu of candles.

They run the gauntlet, Enbom snickering, Luke Haldeman blushing, and set the whole mess down in front of me. Lilly yells “Happy birthday, Ronica!” and leaps off for a hug.

“It’s your party, Rons!” Dick crows, horning in on the hug action. “We totally tricked you!”

I can’t help it. I start laughing. I’m used to loathing everything 09’er and over the top, but this scene seems designed to disarm me. “Yum!” I say, scooping up frosting with my finger, sticking it in my mouth. “What’s everybody else eating?”

Logan laughs and kisses me, cake-flavored, and Lilly passes out slices, and the surf music blares back on, double volume. Logan feeds me a piece, bite by bite, and then drags me to an open swath of patio where people are dancing.

Time stretches as we jump and writhe, spinning and rubbing close, mugging and laughing. It’s hot and loud and bright—it’s the anti-Shelly’s-party—and I feel a wound I didn’t know I had, healing inside me. This is what normal is, I realize. This weird, incoherent extravagance. This moment is me, being myself—brassy, paranoid, suspected of criminal acts—and still being accepted. Celebrated, even. This life stayed beyond my reach, even before the tragedy, because I lied and played parts, seeking it. But I’m not lying now. Everyone sees who I really am, and some of them like me BETTER.
Eventually I need a break. I put my hands on Logan’s shoulders to still his bouncing, and yell, “Bathroom!” in his ear. He nods and yells back, “Beer!” and heads off to the Tiki Bar. I turn the opposite direction, enter the house.

It’s dark inside, except for a glow from the den, clearly signaling ‘off limits’. I glance towards the light as I pass, and stop short. Kendall Casablancas is there, wearing a slinky black dress: she’s curled up with a glass of whiskey, watching Antiques Roadshow.

She looks up when she notices me staring, and says, with a complete lack of interest, “Oh, hey. It’s the birthday girl.” She toasts me, takes a sip. “Happy no more being jailbait. Take advantage, while you’ve still got a hot boyfriend.”

I’m swamped with rage. This is the chick who made Logan moan and come, who begged ‘harder’ and he obliged, while I listened through the wall. This bitch and her Fitzpatrick cronies stole 8 million dollars, and got my dad shot. I want to take her apart brick by brick, or at least terrify her with the fact that I have her number. But she’s smart, under the lips and hair and tits, and maybe more ruthless than I am. So I just say, “Thanks, I will,” in a tone of matching blandness, and continue, fists clenched, down the hall.

The baths on the lower level are occupied, so I head upstairs. It’s not until I’m washing my hands in a guest-room sink that I realize I cut my palms with my nails.

I switch on a lamp as I emerge, examining the damage, and from the shadows of the canopy bed, I hear, “Veronica.”

I glance up, startled. There, lounging back against the pillows, toying with a Slinky, is Beaver.

My heart begins to hammer. “Wh…what are you doing here?” I manage, to the little monster I last saw splattered across the hood of a Subaru.

“I wasn’t in a party mood.” He shrugs: the coy, pretend-modest, self-effacing gesture that deflected attention from his sociopathy for too long. I do a full-body shiver. “But happy birthday.”

I nod. I won’t ever express gratitude to him. “Dick told me you were in France.”

“I was,” he agrees. “But mom came back because she stopped enjoying herself, so I came too.”


I turn to go, and he asks, “Did you meet my new stepmom? She’s pretty, huh? All the guys think so.”

I grit my teeth, and remind myself that murder is wrong. “Yes,” I mutter, and flee. Walking as fast, and as confidently, as I can, out of the bowels of the house, into the light.

Lilly’s by the door as I emerge, likely pale and shaken. She takes one look at me, grabs my hand, and drags me off into the flower garden, where it’s dark and private. “What the hell?” she demands.

“I just ran the gauntlet of Very Bad People,” I say.

“Who?” she wants to know. “The stepmonster? Because I had her scoped already. She runs her eyeballs all over John and Logan, whenever they’re in view, and she’s somehow overspending her very generous allowance.”

“Wow, you are GOOD!” I say. “Didn’t they JUST get married?”
“Custom couture evening dresses,” she explains. “20k per. I’ve seen 6 on her, so far, and she doesn’t have the milkshake to bring designers to her yard.”

“She’s a con artist,” I reveal. “With a fake name. Pass the word discreetly, steer clear, because she may be looking for a boy toy. She’s not the big problem, though. Beaver’s back.”

Lilly makes a face. “I kind of feel bad now about calling him that,” she says. “Considering.”

“Well don’t,” I retort. “He’s not like those of us who gained strength through adversity. He’s a rotten apple, of the cruel-to-animals variety, and he may be considering upgrading to girls.”

“Check,” she says. “Does Dick know? Or Logan?”

“Logan, yes. Dick, no clue. Not from me, because Beav’s his brother.”

She studies me. “So that’s your policy? No-tell about the sins of loved ones, as long as they’re not doing crimes?”

“Yeah,” I say, directly meeting her eyes. “Your secrets stay secret, as long as they’re victimless. It’s just illegal, predatory behavior I uncover, and stop.”

She nods, the faintest hint of soft sentiment curving her mouth. “I need to warn you about something, too.”

“OK.” I sit on a wrought iron bench, and she perches beside me.

“Look, I know you and Logan haven’t…” she rolls her hand in a circle, uncharacteristically circumspect. “And I know he has PLANS, tonight. And I just want to say…” she takes a deep breath. “Don’t make him show you his back. Don’t ask about the scars. And let him…learn what you like, even though it feels vulnerable. And hold him, after. He’ll pretend he doesn’t need those things, say he’s cool with being out of control. But he does. He’s not. Underneath the snark, he’s got issues, and he doubts that anyone cares.”

I’m touched. And this speech makes me wonder if Logan was right—if her thing with Aaron was more about hurting herself, leading the abuser away. If perhaps the pattern of retributive wounding I saw between them was based in self-destruction, not revenge.

If maybe Madison Sinclair didn’t happen to make me sorry, but to definitively sabotage Logan’s own future. Because he thinks he doesn’t deserve love.

“Lils, I know,” I say, putting my hand over hers. “I’m aware of it all. But thank you, so, so much, for caring about him enough to tell me.”

She grins. “Thanks for keeping my secrets,” she replies. “Because you and your dad did, I got a second chance. Which maybe I don’t deserve, but you know I’ll take it.”

“You do deserve,” I say. “You just proved it.”

She kisses my cheek. “Run along and get yourself deflowered, Veronica Mars,” she says, making a flicking motion with her hand. “Be sure to enjoy every dirty second.”

Logan’s doing his patented Loganlean against a palm tree, when I circle back to the patio, his legs nonchalantly crossed. He’s clearly waiting to ‘casually’ intercept me: and he’s got one of those unfurling-spiral noisemakers they hand out at elementary school parties. I watch him play with it, enjoying himself, and can’t help but smile. He’s equal parts mouthy asshole, world-weary debauche
and spastic six-year-old, all in one elusive package.

“Hi there,” I call, emerging into the light, wrapping my arms around his waist. “Miss me?”

“Every second,” he says, tucking back a strand of my hair. “Ready to hit the road?”

“Why?” I tease. “Is this the part where the REALLY big surprise is revealed?”

“Maybe,” he says. “If you don’t come along for the ride, you’ll never know.”

“Logan Echolls!” I gasp. “Was that a double entendre?”

He laughs. “And this is the reason I love you,” he says. “Well, one of the reasons.”

“Let’s show some gratitude to Dick,” I say, figuring once more into the breach. “Then it’s green lights for you, all the way home.”

Dick’s on the dance floor with a bottle of tequila, shimmying his grass skirt at Meg Manning, and generally making an ass of himself. I march on over and pull him into a hug, which startles him so much he almost drops his booze.

“Thanks for the party,” I say, while he blinks at me. “It was unforgettable.”

He grins. “Hey Logan!” he yells. “You need to keep a better eye on your woman. She’s all OVER me, dude!”

“Have fun shaking your moneymaker,” I tell him, stealing his stupid visor, and putting it on my own head. I take Logan’s hand. “Come on, sugar lumps, let’s roll.”

“Hey Ronica?” Logan ventures, when he’s ushered me into the car, and we’re driving again. “Listen, you deserve some gratitude, too.”

“For what?” I ask, surprised. “You’re the one who pulled out all the stops to give me a good birthday. I mean, shirtless slaves? Sparklers? Thank YOU!”

He laughs. “No, it’s just… I appreciate you letting my friends be YOUR friends again. I know when you and Lils were fighting, it got ugly for a while, and I…it means a lot, that you’re willing to forgive. And not to sound like a girl, but it may mean even MORE to Dick and Lil. Because at least I know I was always privately on your side. Whereas they were total caustic assholes.”

“Yeah,” I say. “You’re welcome.”

He takes my hand and kisses it, turns his eyes back to the road.

“Hey Logan?” I ask, after a minute, and he glances at me. “Thanks for letting my forgiveness be on my schedule, and by my choice.” I take a deep breath. “And for making no demands. I’ve never told you this, I guess, but the fact that you just accept me as is, and don’t insist I change? That’s something I truly need. Even if I rarely return the favor.”

He laughs. “No problem. It’s all part of the Luxury Full-Service Boyfriend Package I offer.”

“Well it’s top of the line,” I say. “I’m completely satisfied.”

He drives up the highway towards the Land of Big Money, passing more and more exclusive
enclaves. Eventually he chooses a guard station, presents a card, and the gate rolls ostentatiously back.

He turns into the drive of a bougainvillea-festooned, Spanish-style house on the beach, and I realize with a start that it’s OUR house: the one where I kept waking up, in the present reality I crave. “Mom’s private retreat,” he explains. “For when she gets tired of pretending she can handle things.”

“It’s beautiful,” I say, wondering if it’s Howl’s Moving Castle. Because how did it get all the way from here to Berkeley? Did he cut it in half at some point, and stick it on a truck?

“Wait ‘til you see the inside.” He helps me down—the amount of chivalry from him today is entertaining—and glances over his shoulder with an eyebrow bob, as he unlocks the door. “Happy birthday,” he sing-songs, waving a conjurer’s arm.

Somebody’s clearly just been here, prepping. There’s mood lighting and mood music, a gourmet meal laid out on the table. I look at it, the green couch, the pretty-but-different ocean view: and the desire to just chill with fiancée-him, eating ice cream and bantering, wearing his sweater, is almost overwhelming.

I walk back towards the bedroom, because I know that’s the grand finale. I push the door open, and gasp. Because it’s done up with about a hundred candles, it smells like cinnamon, and there are flower petals scattered on the lacy white bed.

“This isn’t pressure,” he assures, earnest, coming up behind me. He leads me to the couch, guides me to sit. Follows me down. “You say whether you want to do anything, you say how much, and anytime you tell me stop or no, I’ll quit. This is just…a place where your first time can be special. If you want. Where we can have privacy, and learn each other, and take however long we need. And you can feel like you’re the most important person in the world to me, like you have my total focus. Because you are, and you do.”

Okay, I ought to say no to this, right? In case there really is an Improved Past! Veronica, whose life I’m borrowing? I should be mature and responsible, tell him I’m not ready, and then jump the next Live-in Boyfriend Logan I see.

But here’s the thing. I never had a true ‘first time’. I was raped, and that doesn’t count, except in the ways it made me feel foreign to my body, frightened of it. And then I tried to normalize that rape by dating Duncan, which maybe shouldn’t count either (although back then, both Logan and I were sure it did). The sex in that faux-relationship was rare, and uninspired: partly because my subconscious didn’t want him touching me, and partly because he loved like he lived. In bed, as in life, Donut was uninspired, bland, and severely inhibited about giving or receiving pleasure.

Logan realized, when we finally slept together, that he was way more experienced. But he assumed I knew what I was doing. In truth, his physicality, his savant-like ability to induce orgasms, his anything-goes attitude, were new and overwhelming (and frankly, kind of intimidating). I pretended to be unfazed until I actually was: it was a steep, terrifying learning curve, though, and hiding my fears was exhausting.

So this gesture…the flowers, the candles and music, the setting and speech…touches me in a place so vulnerable, so secret, even MY Logan doesn’t know it’s there. The place that wants to learn intimacy with someone in tandem. The place that would like to start fresh.

“But what about you?” I ask, because I’m still the Sheriff’s daughter, and I OUGHT to be good. “Your birthday’s not for six more days. Shouldn’t we wait, and then everybody will be legal, and there won’t be any…”
“Veronica.” He cuts me off. “I’ve been emancipated for fourteen months now. Mom’s gone for long periods, filming, and she and I both thought…after Aaron…that I needed more control over my life. Like if she gets married again, and I’m not into hanging with the guy, I don’t have to. She…wants me protected, even when she can’t take care of me.” He sees my face go soft, and waves a hand to forestall comment. “It’s not a big deal. I mean, we still technically live in the same house. I only brought it up because I’ve been a legal adult since before you and I got together. I was just waiting for YOU to feel ready.”

“Wow,” I say. “You really DID think of everything.” I get up, walk to the middle of the room, and spin around. Taking it all in, trying to imprint every detail on my memory. “This is an incredibly kind, amazing, beautiful gesture,” I say. “How can I possibly reward you, for being so sweet and generous?”

I walk over to the bed. Recline slowly backwards onto my elbows, amidst the petals. Crook a finger.

He smiles and approaches, stopping by the foot. Pulls out his phone, takes a picture. “Perfect moment,” he says, smirking as he checks the image. “Got to capture it, for posterity.”

He sets the phone down and crawls on top of me, easing me back to the mattress, his forearms braced on either side of my head. Takes a deep breath, lets it go.

“So you’re a virgin,” he says, conversationally, nuzzling the spot below my ear. He scrapes his teeth along it very gently, licks, and when I shiver I can feel his lips curve. “But you know how to have an orgasm.”

“Well, there’s this one boy,” I murmur, my skin rippling with excitement, because he’s giving me cues from his favorite fantasy. “Sometimes I let him do things. I shouldn’t, but he’s so sexy, and he makes me feel so good.”

“What does he do?” he asks, running his nose under my chin, softly kissing there. I realize he’s smelling me. “What makes you want to say yes?”

“He’s romantic,” I breathe, running my hands down his chest, tugging lightly at the hair. “And he’s funny, and handsome, and he loves me. But really, I think it’s the way he moves, so fluid and overwhelming and physical. And the fact that he’s wicked. He knows a million ways to turn girls on, and he tries them all.”

He bites my shoulder, less gently, and his hand curves down my throat, palms my breast. My legs get restless, shifting, wanting to curl around him, but he keeps them braced between his knees.

“And he talks,” I say, while he sucks my throat, runs a thumb over my nipple. “He says naughty things while he DOES naughty things, which makes me SO excited.”

“Do you masturbate?” he asks, mouthing my breast through the fabric of my dress. His hand slides down to my waist, his thumb dipping into my navel.

“Yes,” I admit, sighing. I can feel the flush spreading over my throat and chest, and my nipples are swollen knots. He’s experimenting with them now, nibbling and licking, massaging and pinching, and I’m so wet and turned on, I’m having trouble remembering which Veronica I’m supposed to be. “Almost every night.”

“Do you put anything inside yourself, during? Or do you just touch, here?” He runs two fingers over my clit, pressing cloth between my legs, and I moan. I want him in me.

“It feels better,” I manage, “with my fingers inside.”
“And what do you think about?” he asks, untying the knot behind my neck. He peels the straps of my dress down and returns to my breasts, pushing the cups of the bikini aside, circling a nipple with his tongue. He nips, and my hips rise off the bed. He grins, gently licks the wound.

“You like biting,” he murmurs, opening his mouth wide to scrape his teeth along the slopes. His hand eases down between my legs, rubs gently: I rock against his fingers, seeking contact. He sucks at the spot just below one under-curve, like he’s leaving a hickey, and I make a sound of frustration.

He rises up then, kisses me deep, and his hand slides inside my bikini bottoms, delving through the wetness. “Jesus,” he says, breathing harder, and pushes a finger in.

Oh God, it’s good when he circles my clit with his thumb, even though the penetration burns. I guess mentally, I expected it: I mean, I’ve heard the first time’s painful. And I was so sore after Shelly’s party, though I was also badly bruised. But I’ve never felt anything like this itch, slightly too much friction deep inside, delicious even as it stings. I want it. I want him to coax me open.

I lift my hips, taking him deeper, sucking at his tongue as he works me: and abruptly I’m coming, fierce and fast, big pulsing contractions. He crooks his finger against my g-spot, coaxing forth a second wave, and eases another finger in, keeping up the massage.

“What do you think about?” he asks again, as I gasp and it eases, still very gently fucking me with his hand, nibbling at my ear.

“His mouth,” I say, and my voice sounds hoarse. “He licked me once, through my underwear. And I wanted him to do with his tongue what you’re doing with your fingers.”

He lets out a groan, grinds his cock against my belly. I’ve always loved it, the size and heft of it—like everything else about him, it makes me feel dainty. But this time, I’m actually a little worried about whether it will fit.

“Would you do that to him?” he asks, teeth to my neck now, penetrating with his fingers more deeply and insistently. “Would you suck his dick?”

“Oh yeah,” I say, and he commences writhing, finally sharing my frustration. “His skin tastes good. And I love to watch him get turned on.”

He pushes my dress off, down over my legs, and my bikini bottoms too. He nips at my nipples, one and then the other, until I moan every time his teeth touch. He replaces them with his hand, pinching and kneading, and licks a stripe across my belly, delving his tongue into my navel. And he goes down, laving lavishly over my clit, then doing just what I told him to, fingers along for the ride.

“Oh,” I say, because I’m starting to clench very deep inside. “Oh, God, Logan, please now. Please.”

“Not yet,” he says, and pushes in a third finger, and I convulse all the way to my womb, wracking shudders as fluid spurts.

I make a hungry noise, spreading my legs wide, and he relents and climbs back up. He extracts a condom from his shorts and takes them off, and I slide the shirt from his shoulders. Now we’re both naked, and I want him.

He tears the condom open, hands it to me. “Put it on,” he says, and I take him in both hands and smooth it down, his jaw flexing as I work. He kisses me, laces his fingers through mine, and says, “OK. Tell me if I hurt you.” He starts pushing in.

Man, it aches, like the skin is raw, a weird juxtaposition of pleasure/pain. I pull my knees to my
chest, to relieve the pressure, and he eases his shoulders under, and oh, that helps. He goes all the way in, and I come again, so over-sensitized any stimulation gets me.

He kisses my cheek, looks into my eyes, and we’re past games, past words, onto full union. He rolls into me, deep gentle waves, and I roll back, accepting him. We barely fit, but it’s somehow perfect. He’s tender, and I love him so much it hurts. I slide my legs down, wind them around his waist, and embrace his shoulders, my lips on his face and throat. “I love you,” I say softly, between butterfly kisses, remembering Lilly’s advice. “I love you with my whole heart.”

He moans and pushes deeper, undulating, insistent now: I stroke him gently with my hands and feet, urging him on. I kiss his chin, his nose. Run my hands softly over his ass, then my nails. He huffs and fucks me harder, so I do it again, and he groans, so I nip his neck. He loses restraint, kissing me roughly, driving me up the bed. He reaches down between us, starts rhythmically squeezing my clit, and I slide into a stream of contractions that last and lasts, until I’ve finally sucked him dry.

“Holy shit,” he mumbles, when he relaxes from his full body clench. He sags boneless on top of me, breathing hard. “That was EPIC. Who says dreams don’t come true?”

I laugh so hard tears roll out, twining all my limbs around him. “You think,” I manage, “they’ll still be writing songs about us, in a hundred years?”

“I’d write a song about you NOW, if I was a pretentious asshole.” He rolls us sideways with a grunt, kisses my nose. “And if I was capable of more than just lying here, stunned.”

“A wise man once told me that the best things in life don’t come easy,” I chastise, with a pat, and succumb to another gust of laughter.

“You were a hell of a lot easier than I thought you’d be,” he murmurs. He brushes the hair back from my face, and the corner of his mouth crooks. “You came like 40 times. And now you’re GIDDY!”

“I have no point of comparison,” I say. “But that may have been the best first time the world has ever seen.”

“I’VE got no point of comparison,” he says. “Wow, Ronica. And I only explored maybe the top quarter of your front half, before you turned all greedy. This getting-to-know-you project could take DAYS.”

“I live with Jake and Lianne,” I say. “They probably wouldn’t notice I was gone, unless the dog made a fuss.”

He smiles at me, his rarest, sweetest, most infatuated smile, and my heart lurches in response. “We could just stay here,” I urge, tracing his hairline with one finger, “now that we’re both adults. You could surf every morning, and we could do THAT every night. Think how well you’d sleep.”

“Veronica,” he chides. “You know there’s no rest for the wicked.”

“Fine,” I say, rolling onto my back. “At least do me again, before we have to leave.”

“Uh-uh.” He shakes his head. “I’ve never been a girl’s first time either, but I can tell based on how tight you were that you’re gonna be sore. You need a hot bath. And I will wash you, and pet you, and dry you off, and kiss you everywhere. But I’m not going back in until you can walk without wincing. So get your mind out of the gutter.”

“Can I kiss you too?” I ask, wistfully.
He groans, curving around me. “Because I taste good?”

“I want to try it all,” I say. “Everything you like. Show me.”

He presses his face into the pillow. “This is one of THOSE dreams, right?” he asks, peeking sideways at me. “Because no way is my karma this good.”

“How about that bath?” I suggest, instead of answering. He gets up, and offers his hand.

Chapter End Notes

So the practice of ‘redshirting’ (or holding your kid back from kindergarten for a year) is quite popular in California, especially when the kid in question has a summer birthday. It’s supposed to confer social, academic and athletic advantages, which is attractive to hyper-competitive (or worried) parents.

Veronica’s canon age seems to be slightly older than that of her classmates, with an August birthday, which means this probably happened to her. Logan’s canon birthday seems to be in March or April, making him almost a year younger. (Presumably that’s why the show went with the whole ‘emancipated minor’ storyline: they wanted him having sex scenes Senior Year, but he wasn’t 18).

That timetable felt labyrinthine to me, due to Some Upcoming Plot Developments. So I retconned his birthday to be six days after Veronica’s, and had him redshirted, too. This gets discussed in a later chapter, and reasons for their respective redshirtings are given.
I’ve made some minor modifications to this chapter to clarify the details and timeline of the murder case. I'll post the changed passages at the beginning of the next chapter for anyone who’s not into re-reading this one.

THREAD FOURTTEEN

I wake to the sound of an air conditioner hissing, a wet snuffling at my ear. I turn my head to the side, open my eyes, and the big husky gazes diffidently back at me.

Oh no, I think. Oh nonononononono.

Tears well up, but I don’t let them fall. I reach a hand out, ruffling through the lush fur: locate the green collar, the nametag. Loki. Trickster god. I gaze into the dog’s one blue and one brown eye, and decide it seems appropriate.

I hug him, and he tucks his head under my chin the way he did before, like there’s no place he’d rather be. Okay, I think. I’m Veronica Mars. If I could survive my life post-Lilly, I can handle this. Step one, find the best sources of information, and exploit them. Step two, discover if I have any friends left.

I search out my closet, dress in jeans and boots, a grey t-shirt with a graphic of a kitten hanging from a tree branch. It feels right. I put my hair up in a ponytail, grab a hoodie from a chair. I whistle for Loki, using Backup’s old commands, and he comes.

I know my mom’s organizational schemes, so I’m not surprised to find a bench in the mudroom, with cubbies and hooks for everyone’s gear. Mine has a shelf that contains several college letters of deferment: a bin with a dog leash and harness, a collapsible water bowl full of bagged treats: and a black leather messenger bag, with a post-it stuck to the front.

“Cash, bank card, credit card, DL in wallet,” the note reads. “Pls eat breakfast u r thin. Home by 5 Luv Mom!”

I shake my head, remembering my dad shouting at me, in my very first not-dream (‘breakfast is the most important meal of the day!’). I wonder where Dad is, how he’s coping. Then I realize, and I smile.

I harness Loki as he shifts from paw to paw in excitement, dig through my bag for keys. Then I latch on his leash, and we head off in search of the garage.

XXXXX

I park my grey convertible Mercedes in front of the Dim Sum House/ massage parlor, and gaze up at the Mars Investigations sign.

“This is the place outcasts go,” I tell Loki, rubbing his ears, “to find out who wronged them, and seek their deadly revenge.”
Inside, it looks the same: ancient brown furniture, shabby fake plants, stained glass that paints the light red/gold. I trail my fingers along the receptionist’s desk, wondering who does my job. I knock on Dad’s office door, walk in.

He glances up, surprised, but smiles when he sees me, coming around the desk for a hug. “Hey, honey!” he exclaims. “What brings you to my neck of the woods?”

“I want to work for you,” I say. “I’m a good investigator, and I need a job.”

Dad bends down to pat Loki, eyeing me shrewdly. “If I give you a job, Veronica, it’ll be answering phones. I just got you out of the joint. I’m not taking any risks.”

“Yeah, but why was I IN?” I ask, the question that’s been haunting me, since the morning I woke up in jail. “I’m innocent of the crime, there was tons of evidence PROVING that, and I had a high-dollar lawyer who was cool under pressure. No way should the cadre that offed Felix Toombs have had the power to take me down, with both the right of law and Jake Kane behind me.”

“Officially? Because a very respectable person came forward as a witness, and described the murder. Unofficially, because the Fitzpatricks, and the bigwig who’s backing them financially, set you up to take the blame.”

“How can we prove it?” I loop Loki’s leash tight around my fist. He’s a great dog, sitting patient at my feet. “I want the person who really killed Felix to pay.”

Dad puts his hands on his hips. Sighs. “That’s your desk,” he says, pointing through the door. “My receptionist quit last week, anyway. Go make yourself comfortable, I’ll bring you the file.”

Three hours later, I’ve read (and digitized) every piece of paper in the accordion folder. And I have a pretty good idea who was and wasn’t behind my fall from grace.

For one thing, Weevil was attacked about a month after my arrest, and he’s been in a coma ever since. And for another, the ‘very respectable person’ who ‘witnessed’ my crime wasn’t cokehead Dr. Tom Griffiths.

It was Meg Manning.

According to court transcripts, Meg came forward in late August 2005, claiming we were kidnapped as part of a gang initiation. She testified that we woke up in a warehouse, guarded by Felix Toombs, who said he had to ‘look us in the eyes, and kill us both’. She claimed I tased him, appropriated the gun, and shot him in cold blood, quipping ‘Guess I get that teardrop tattoo now, instead of you’. I then, apparently, turned the gun on her, to eliminate the witness.

She told police the gun jammed, so she hit me in the head with a rotten board, and managed to escape. She kept silent for several months, in fear of gang retaliation: then tearfully confided all to her father, who convinced her to come forward. She led police to the warehouse, where my messenger bag was found behind a pile of rusted pipes.

How do you incriminate a rich, pretty blonde girl for a gangland murder, in Neptune? Start with a sweeter blonde girl, to make the defendant look like a bitch, add a cup of racist urban legend, and stir.

XXXXX

I wait until Dad’s at lunch to hunt up the password in his desk calendar, and Prying-Eyez Logan. Much to my surprise, I find almost nothing.
I figured he’d fall apart, after the 1-2 whammy of his sister’s death and his girlfriend’s jailing, because that’s how Logan rolls. I thought there’d be drunken brawling, and OD’s, and DUI’s, and reams of unpaid tickets. He’d likely skip college, or flee to Europe, or become a tabloid staple, screwing his way through the latest crop of starlets.

But no. He attends Hearst, majoring in criminal justice, and his grades are good. No spouse, no kids, no arrest record of any kind, not even the juvie vandalism stuff he was infamous for in Original! Reality. One ticket in the last year and a half, for running a stop sign, and he even took defensive driving.

I log off and Google him, which is again unfruitful: even the fan-club media presence of Ideal! Logan is absent, here. This Logan seems serious, composed and driven, determined to fly under the radar. When I locate a red-carpet photo of him, posing with his mother, he’s not scowling, smirking or mugging. He just stands there silently, expressionless, adult and calm.

I sigh, clear my cache and cookies, shut the computer down. I whistle for Loki, who’s curled up on the ancient couch, watching me. “Come on, boy,” I say, gathering up his leash. “Let’s be psychos, and go stake out the ex.”

Logan’s listed residence is a small house near the Hearst campus, on a tree-lined residential street. It’s nice, but way less ostentatious than his usual style, and nowhere near the beach. I know his rhythms, so I arrive at 3:00, assuming he’ll show up after class, change, drink a beer: then head out for dinner, and evening activities.

Sure enough, just after 4:00 a black Range Rover rounds the corner. I glimpse him in the driver’s seat as he rolls past me. He goes into the garage, lights appear in the house, and he opens all the windows, so I can hear the White Stripes playing. I settle back to wait him out.

At 4:22, a blue Mini Cooper with a white roof pulls up, coming from the other direction: the garage door slides open. I straighten. Logan’s the only one on the title, but apparently, he has a roommate.

At 5:13, the front door opens. Logan appears, dressed in cargo shorts and a black t-shirt, hair shorter and more severe than I’ve ever seen it. He’s got a bag slung over his shoulder with a tennis-ball atlatl sticking out, and a black mutt with white paws frolics around him. He turns back toward the door, smiling, cupping his hand around his mouth to call out: in a minute, a short-haired girl in a sky-blue sundress emerges. She’s got a punky style, long bangs, eyeliner so thick I can see it from my car, purple Converse on her feet. It’s not ‘til she tosses her hair and puts her hands, laughing, on her hips, that I realize the girl is Mac.

He skips backwards a couple steps, luring her, and she locks the door and joins him, shaking her head. He slings his arm around her, rests the other hand on her belly, in a protective gesture I immediately recognize. She gazes up at him, still smiling, and I know that look—I’ve worn it.

Mac’s in love with my boyfriend. And he’s living with her: he’s knocked her up. I stole Logan away from Lilly, once upon a time: and, now, apparently, Mac’s stolen him from me.

I drive back to MI in a daze. I enter dad’s office, lock the door, and sit in the corner on the floor, until I feel calm.

I emerge from the kitchenette, which I’ve just disassembled and scrubbed like it harbored Ebola, to
find Logan sitting on the client couch with Loki. He’s still in his going-to-the-park clothes, and the traitor dog is sprawled across him, panting happily.

“I thought that was you,” he says, pinning me with his most inscrutable, assessing gaze. “Veronica Mars on a stakeout. I can spot it from half a mile away.”

My face flushes red, and I look at the wall. “Just checking up. Surveilling from a distance, you know, since I’m not sure where I’ll be welcome.”

“I heard you got out.” He draws his fingers hypnotically through Loki’s fur, while I try not to watch. “Congratulations. I knew justice would triumph, someday.”

My head jerks sharply as I meet his eyes. “You don’t think I did it.”

He rolls his eyes. “Veronica, Dick was on speakerphone with you when you got abducted. None of us think you did it. You KNOW that. You know I would have been in that jail every week, visiting, if you hadn’t refused to see me. God, we’re your FRIENDS, Rons! You don’t need to hide in a car and spy on us. We’re the Justice League, and you’re Wonder Woman!”

I feel tears spill, and I turn my back. “I appreciate that.”

“Okay…” his voice is slow, like light is dawning. “Okay, now I get it. This is about Mac.”

I tense, but keep my face averted. “It’s been a long time, Logan. Life happens.”

“You didn’t know.”

I shake my head, once. “Don’t make me talk about this,” I say. “True confessions: not my style.”

“Look,” he murmurs, and I can tell he wants to get up and embrace me, but he doesn’t. “You remember, when you went down, I was in a bad place.”

I nod.

“My sister was dead,” his voice cracks on this, but he continues. “My dad was dead. My girlfriend was sentenced to life in prison, and told me, in so many words, I should leave her to rot. My mom was being…my mom. She went to Fiji for six months, to ‘decompress’. And Dick and Lils, God bless ‘em….were not so helpful.

“Mac got me through, Veronica. She did some hacker shit, and I was magically enrolled in college. She made sure I studied, and went to class. She came to my room and flushed my drugs, and told my potential drunken hookups I had herpes. And she showed me how to research your case. We have SO much information, we can help you do what I KNOW you will, put the right person away. Mac was a great friend to both of us, Ronica. She saved my life.”

I turn, and he’s on his feet, looking down at me. He takes a step closer. “What I have with her, it’s not like us,” he says, waving the back of his hand at me, and the palm at himself. “It’s not…epic. But she’s good for me. She deserves the gratitude of everyone who cares if I make it. And we’ve…there’s a kid on the way, now. So you should know. She and I, we’re like, grown-up together.”

“I could tell,” I say, twisting my fingers into kanji. “Congratulations.”

He sweeps me up in a hug, holding really tight, and I grip his biceps, not sure whether to pull or push. “I still love you, just the same as ever,” he whispers. “I always will. You should know that, too.”
“Logan,” I say. I press my face into his neck.

“So the door’s open,” he tells me, fierce. His mouth is on my temple, and I feel like if either of us moves, we’ll end up screwing. “Come and let us help you. Because we can.”

I clear my throat, disengage. Someone has to be the asshole here, if we’re not going to spend the rest of our lives pining, and it looks like that job falls to me. “How about we dispense with the melodrama and you just TELL me what you know, right now? Like, who killed Felix, really? And who framed me?”

“We think Chardo pulled the trigger—he’s Weevil’s cousin— and Thumper gave the order. As you suspected.” Logan studies me while I back away, mask coming down. “And Stewart Manning bullied and bribed a lot of people, to make sure you took the fall. What we don’t know is why—he’s got no motive. And unless Weevil wakes up with his brain intact, which is extremely unlikely, we’ll never be sure how it all went down.”

“Weevil was in on it?” I ask, shocked.


“The Fitzpatricks are the connective tissue,” I say. “Thumper was dealing drugs for them. Felix was dating Liam’s niece Molly. My best guess about Stewart is that he’s the investor behind the operation. And Kendall Casablancas is Bonnie, to Cormac Fitzpatrick’s Clyde.”

“Kendall?” he asks, sounding shocked. “Dick’s stepmom, Kendall?”

I narrow my eyes. “PLEASE tell me you didn’t bone her. Or say anything of importance, within her hearing.”

He grimaces, and there’s my confirmation. “Then you were the leak. Seriously, Logan, she’s plastic and evil! What the hell has she got that guys find so irresistible?”

He looks at his shoes. Looks up at me, from under his brow. “Veronica, you dumped me two weeks after my birthday for no reason: you wouldn’t even speak to me when the Meg thing went down. I was circling the drain. I was angry and drunk 24/7, and she was hot, and great in bed. It was easy.”

“Easy for YOU,” I say, shaking my head at him. “I did hard time. Look, just go, Logan. You, and your idiot dick, and your tendency to be BFF’s with the worst person in the room, are Mac’s problem now. You need to back off, until I can look at you without wanting to punch you in the face.”

He laughs, and I remember this, the mirthful smirk clashing with the angry eyes. “Ah, here we go. Get jealous, dive for the throat. This is why people believe you killed a man to watch him die, Veronica. Because you’re violent as fuck, when someone pisses you off.” He points at me. “But I’m not an idiot, like all the losers you’ve taken out. I WELCOME the challenge. And I can handle the pain, if it gets you justice. So pull yourself together, and quit attacking, because you’re stuck with me whether you want me or not. I swore to you, and you NEED me. And I’m not letting you chase me away again, no matter how mean you get.”

“Bite me,” I say, and he clacks his teeth, eyes alive. Like fighting and screwing are the same thing, in his brain. Which is, basically, true.

“Call by next week,” he warns, giving me a finger wave over his shoulder as he walks out. “Don’t make me pull out the big guns.”
“I hate you,” I mutter, slumping against the wall.

THREAD FOURTTEEN INVERTS

I’m sprawled across the bed in the beach house, with Logan, and I’m dozing. I’m in a purple bra and nothing else, for some reason: he’s nude, except for Puka shells, watching Seinfeld on a little TV that’s perched on the dresser.

I press my face into his neck, inhaling his scent. I’m still feeling raw and angry from the events of the day, and it makes me possessive. Like I should mark him, so they all keep their hands off. “I hate you, Kendall Casablancas,” I mutter, and he glances at me, amused.

“Pardon?” he asks, muting the TV, tossing the remote on the floor. He turns and cups my throat in his hand, kisses me just the way I want him to. When he pulls back, his eyes are laughing. “Are you having dirty dreams about Dick’s stepmom?”

“Promise me,” I demand, and my voice is slurred, like I’m half-awake. “If I die, or you dump me, or I’m kidnapped by aliens, or whatever. Promise you won’t sleep with her, specifically. Or trust her, or talk to her, or tell her any secrets. She looks like a cupcake, but she’s mob, Logan. She’s dangerous.”

“Does Dick Senior know he married a moll?” he asks, brushing my hair back with his palm.

I shake my head. “She’s the bag man for his real estate crimes,” I say. “But he thinks she’s just a hot, corruptible cheerleader.”

“Veronica,” Logan says. “I don’t want other women. I can barely keep up with you. But if it makes you sleep better, I promise to avoid that one specific bimbo under any and all circumstances.”

“I’d rather you join a monastery,” I say. “But if you move on, make it someone you trust, please. Someone who loves you. Swear.”

He puts his forehead against mine. “I swear. You want a blood vow, like I gave Lilly?”

I make a face. “Not necessary,” I say, and hug him tight.

He rubs my back, gently. “Wow. What the hell did you dream?”

“She manipulated information from you,” I tell him. “And I went to prison. And you moved in with Mac, and the two of you had a baby.”

“I moved in with WHO?” he laughs. “Wait, I was sleeping with both of them?”

“Mac,” I say. “This girl I met at my birthday party. She’s a hacker, with blue streaks in her hair.”

“Not my style,” he informs me. “Either one. I like hot blonde pep-squad girls, with real tits, and tons of prickly-sweet attitude. And I like them to be loyal,” he sucks at the hollow of my throat, “and scary smart,” he scrapes his teeth over my breast, captures the nipple, licks it, “and phenomenally uninhibited in bed. Which, frankly, is hot enough to make external fantasy objects unnecessary.”

He presses his face between my legs, where I’m already pretty sticky from a presumptive previous round: and it’s clear he’s completed that full-body exploration he threatened, because he gets me off twice in about a minute and a half. He eases up, slides gently inside, and while the fit is still extreme, there’s no longer any pain.

I kiss him, loving his unselfconsciousness, the way he tastes of me. He tucks me close, sits up so I’m
straddling him. And then we rock ourselves to completion, embracing loosely, gazing into each others’ eyes.

“I love you,” I say, as he trembles with the aftershocks of orgasm, face pressed to my throat. “I don’t think, at this point, I’ll ever be able to stop.”

“Good,” he says, voice muffled. “Because I never plan to let you go.”
When You're a Jet, You're a Jet All the Way

Chapter Notes

I made minor changes to Ch 14 to fix some passages that were confusing commenters. For those who don't want to re-read, here's what's different.

1) I modified several of Logan's lines in the Mars Investigations conversation, to clarify timeline (Lo-Ve have been broken up for 1.5 years, in this reality, and she was in jail for a year) and his intentions (he's offering to help her find the real killer).

2) I took this passage out of a later chapter, and added it to the section where V reads the murder file, to give readers more data on Meg's testimony:

According to court transcripts, Meg came forward in late August 2005, claiming we were kidnapped as part of a gang initiation. She testified that we woke up in a warehouse, guarded by Felix Toombs, who said he had to ‘look us in the eyes, and kill us both’. She claimed I tased him, appropriated the gun, and shot him in cold blood, quipping ‘Guess I get that teardrop tattoo now, instead of you’. I then, apparently, turned the gun on her, to eliminate the witness.

She told police the gun jammed, so she hit me in the head with a rotten board, and managed to escape. She kept silent for several months, in fear of gang retaliation: then tearfully confided all to her father, who convinced her to come forward. She led police to the warehouse, where my messenger bag was found behind a pile of rusted pipes.

How do you incriminate a rich, pretty blonde girl for a gangland murder, in Neptune? Start with a sweeter blonde girl, to make the defendant look like a bitch, add a cup of racist urban legend, and stir.

So, now for something completely different! Another timeline and some Beach Blanket Bingo. Trigger warning for a run-in between the Sharks and the Jets.

THREAD FIFTEEN

I start awake in a convertible Mercedes, in the parking lot of the Neptune Grand. It’s the middle of the night: no traffic, very little moon, sky alive with stars. I look down at my hand, and I’m holding the key card Logan gave me, so I guess I know what I’m here to do. I sigh.

I foresee angst in any scenario that involves me invading his room at night. At best, it’ll be angsty sex. And frankly, after the events of the last few days, an ambiguous hate-fuck holds zero appeal. I deserve better than that. I deserve the Logan who watched our ultrasound video on a loop, the one who made my second first time perfect. The one who only wants me, and proves it regularly. I’ve seen how amazing he can be when he tries, now, and I won’t settle for less.

I sigh, and lever myself out of the car. I feel exhausted and unmotivated, like I’m coming down with the flu. I enter the lobby, wave at Tina (who’s covertly knitting), and board the Express Elevator to Hell. Going Up.
His room’s dark—of course it is, it’s 3:32 AM—and he’s sprawled unconscious across his big orange bed, in Superman boxers and one sock. I have no idea if this is the reality where I’m Mac’s roommate, so I’m nervous about the reaction I’ll get. I cross my arms, and switch on the light.

Logan wakes immediately, but stays stock-still: the better to assess unpredictable threats, my dear. He blinks up at me in confusion, then his face curves into a cold smirk. Great.

“Guess it’s drunken booty call o’clock, huh?” he says, sitting up and knuckling his eyes. “What’s wrong, Ronnie? Piz wouldn’t take you back?”

“My life is a permanent Piz-free zone,” I tell him, the one thing I know to be true.

“Yeah, well, it’s a Logan-free zone, too,” he says, lying back down. “Leave the card on the dresser when you go, so I don’t have to reprogram the locks.”

“I thought we fixed this,” I say. “I thought we got back together, and decided to buy a place on the beach, and I promised never to leave again.”

His eyes narrow, and he really LOOKS at me. An unpleasant feeling skitters through my gut, like he’s re-evaluating my sanity. “We did,” he agrees, slowly. “And then the next morning you freaked the fuck out, said it was all a big mistake, and fled your own dorm room to get away from me. I haven’t heard a word from you since.”

God, the Veronica of this reality is an ASSHOLE. I think I might prefer the ex-con. She was too dumb to stay out of jail, but at least she seems like she cares.

“Hormones,” I claim, daring him to argue.

He battles a smile. “Veronica, I have two tests tomorrow. Tell me what you want, and then go. And please don’t say sex, because I already kind of hate myself for giving in last time. I mean, I hate myself more than usual.”

Since I have no clue why I’m here, I’ve got no response. Just thinking of all the shitty things Shitty Hearst! Veronica might be up to makes me faintly nauseous. Am I here to harangue him for his failings? Accuse him of a crime? Do I need information about one of his soul-destroying lovers?

Okay, I’m Kendall-flashbacking. Really nauseous, now. Like I think I might actually hurl. In fact…

I turn, and sprint for the bathroom. I barely get the lid up in time.

I puke for three minutes straight, until I’m just spitting bile, my forearm pressed to my sweating face. I can hear Logan behind me, moving around: then a cool wet cloth comes down on my neck, smelling of his aftershave.

I sit back, pressing my palm to the rag, and he hands me a cup of water. “Rinse and spit,” he says. “I’m afraid I trashed your toothbrush and stuff, in a fit of pique.”

“I’m sure I have gum in my purse,” I rasp. “Never leave home without Juicy Fruit.” I gag again as he walks out, and mash the cloth to my lips.

“Um, Ronica?” Logan calls, from the living room. “What the hell is this?”

“You’ll have to be more specific,” I groan. “I lug around all kinds of weird stuff.”

He strides into the bathroom, holding a Ziploc bag. Inside is a pregnancy test stick, used. One with
two pink lines showing in the window.

I press my fist to my belly, which is gurgling ominously again. “Shit,” I say, and bend for one more bout.

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“So is it mine?” he wants to know, when I emerge into the living room. He shoots me a quick, loaded glance. He’s sprawled on the couch, aggressively changing channels.

“That or immaculate conception,” I guess, bracing against the wall. “Because there is no way on God’s green earth I would actually have sex with Piz, no matter how pissed off at you I was.”

Please let this be true. I may not like Hearst! Veronica much, but she does NOT deserve to be tied by 18 years of soccer tournaments and orthodontist payments to HIM.

Logan fixes me with his most unnerving stare. “What do you want to do?”

“I think the question is, what do WE want to do?” I correct. “It’s my body, but you’re not an innocent bystander, here.”

“I’d like to keep it,” he says, and turns back to the TV. “If you’re not into parenthood, but you’re willing to carry to term, I’ll assume custody after. If you want to be involved, we can share. If you decide to have an abortion, I’ll pay for it and take you, but only because, like you said, it’s your body. If I were the one knocked up, no way would I go that road.”

“So the option where we raise it as a couple is off the table?” I ask.

He sets the remote aside, and gets up to loom over me, moving in close. “You tell me,” he says. “You know how I want this movie to end, not that you usually care. You’ve always known.”

“Say it out loud,” I insist. “All cards on the table, face up.”

“I wish you would love me as much as I love you. Same as it ever was. I thought you did—I was SO SURE—and then we came to Hearst, and ever since, the whole house has been crumbling down around me. I’m not going to have a miserable marriage, Veronica. I’m not either one of my parents. The way you’re acting, right now—the way you acted the other day, in the cafeteria—reminds me of the girl I could count on. The girl I adored. But if you can’t bring a level of commitment like this, every minute,” he shakes his head. “I’m not getting back on that train.”

He walks over to the espresso machine, braces his hand against it. “Make your choice,” he says. “Let me know. And just so we’re clear, I appreciate you involving me in the decision, and giving me a vote. I realize you didn’t have to.”

“I would never not,” I assure him, approaching to touch his arm. And I go.

Because I MYSELF would never not. I doubt I’d CHOOSE to get pregnant at age 19, in any reality: but it happened once, and it was his, and I was happy. Until I’m sure I’ll be stuck here permanently, though, dealing with the consequences, I can’t impose my value set. It’s Hearst! Veronica’s life to manage, not mine.

Red satin, I’m discovering, has its limits as a personal code. Because sometimes, what you want to do most ends up hurting everyone involved.

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I make it as far as my car and then collapse against the seat. I don’t know where to go from here: I’m genuinely at a loss, now, as to how to handle the slipstream.

My dilemma is this. I’m starting to fret about what happens to the Veronica I displace, when I appear in some random timeline. And it’s bringing up sticky questions, about ethics and consent, that I’d honestly rather ignore.

I mean, it could all be a dream, or an insane hallucination, right? I could be dead: is it even possible to OD on Nyquil? In which case it doesn’t matter what I do, how I behave, except insofar as it pleases me. The slipstream may be my New Normal, now and forever, amen.

OR it could be we’re switching places, other Veronica and me, and while I’m tangling with her Logan, she’s getting Freaky Friday with mine. In which case, God knows what I’ll find when (if) I get back home. She could be jacking with my reality as hard as I’m jacking with hers.

But what if I’m possessing her? What if she’s watching from behind my eyes, helpless and out of control? Or blacking out, while I’m playing around in her life? What if she’s coming to, only to realize I gave up her virginity, or dumped her boyfriend, or settled on a course of vengeance that might land her back in jail? I know how I felt when I woke up in Shelly Pomroy’s guest room, with bruises all over my hips and thighs, and a black hole where my memory should be. What if Shitty Hearst! Veronica actually LOVES Piz, and the baby she’s carrying is his? What if Prison! Veronica’s Mac dumps Logan, for endangering their kid to help me? What if Jailbait No More! Veronica wasn’t ready to go all the way? Do the other Veronicas hate me, for the things I’ve done? Will they take it out on Logan? Or themselves? Will any of my loved ones be hurt, because I was selfishly red satin, stealing the life I wanted, leaving them holding the bag?

I need an ally. Someone who knows all my secrets, in each timeline. Someone who’ll tell me what happens, when I’m not around. Someone who won’t think I’m nuts, and call the lab-coated professionals, when I rehash my supernatural tale of woe.

And I’ve got to stash all the data I’ve collected in the past, where it won’t be found. Where I can access it, in all possible futures, and my ally can, too. If I’m ever going to figure this out, navigate through the maze, end things? I have to quit dicking around.

I drag myself back to the dorm, eat four granola bars, and crawl into my narrow (but extra long) bed. Wallace, I think, is the best choice. He’s helped me with crazier (?) schemes, and never complained. All I need is an hour alone to convince him, and a laptop loaded with Excel. And a day free of crises, to make the spreadsheet happen.

THREAD FIFTEEN INVERTS

No such luck awaits me, though. My dream sets me down on a beach, in a bikini, no desk, computer, or electrical plug in sight. And my companions are distant shapes in the water, bobbing on boards among the waves.

I yawn and stretch, uncurling from the ball that’s my standard sleeping posture. I blink against the light. Then I watch, because there’s nothing else to do, as each successive crest rolls in, a figure balancing astride. The ocean’s hypnotic: slow, full undulations, like Logan during sex, green and foam at the peak, boiling blue in the trough.

I can tell the surfers apart by the way they move, Dick flashy, Wallace abrupt and stiff, Logan relaxed and effortless, a sentient part of the cycle. There are a couple other guys out there with them, maybe Bodie and Casey, one burly and skilled, one lanky and average. It strikes me that riding the slipstream is like being lost at sea: and instead of finding a boat, heading for land, I’m just thrashing
around, treading water. Trying not to drown.

I’m so absorbed in contemplation, I don’t notice Wallace approaching. He flings himself onto the blanket, scattering water droplets, and wipes his face with a towel. “Supafly,” he acknowledges, with a half-smile.

“You’re getting better at the surfing,” I observe, trying to disguise my happiness at this unexpected alone time. Maybe I should wait ‘til next conversation to tell him I’ve gone nuts, so I can savor the moment? “You rode that last wave ALL the way down.”

He shrugs, unperturbed: there’s a twinkle in his eye. “I’m a basketball superstar. No need to excel at everything.”

“And you’re modest, too!” I say, which earns me a real smile. “No wonder you’re friends with Logan!”

He grunts, noncommittal. “I don’t see how we could NOT be friends, to tell you the truth. We’re practically the same guy.”

“Seriously?” I turn to look at him, incredulous. “He’s hyper, verbal and dramatic, and you’re sublimely chill! I mean, you’re two great boys, but in completely different ways!”

“We both have dead dads,” he says flatly, reverting to the disapproving look I SO don’t enjoy. “Moms who survived an abusive relationship, and still bear scars. We’re both athletes who could go pro, but also dig the idea of helping people. And beyond the concrete, we’re both the guy who’ll go all the way to the wall, doing what we think is right.”

His gaze shifts back to the water. “Like I said. Dick’s his friend who gets the world where he grew up, the one who has his back when things are fighty. I’m his friend who gets the person he is inside, independent of the trappings.”

“And who am I?” I muse, watching the silent figures in the distance, silhouettes against the setting sun.

“You’re the girl he’s wanted since he was old enough to have a preference,” Wallace tells me. “And I think, maybe, a long way back, you taught him right from wrong. He’d never admit it, but he kind of worships you, Veronica. You’re like his angry goddess, holding scales.”

I laugh. “Funny. He called me Athena once. And I stood right on this spot, the night of Sophomore homecoming, and decided he was Poseidon.” I lean back, onto my elbows, spare Wallace a brief glance. “Do I really come off angry? Because inside, I’m a marshmallow.”

“You seem scared, to me,” he says, and I do a double take. “Let me ask you this,” he continues, holding my gaze steadily, in his gentle Wallace way. “Why are you the only one in our social group who never tries to surf?”

I scoff. “Because I’m terrible. Not an ounce of athletic prowess in this bod.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t think that’s true.”

I’m left without an answer. Because he’s right. And because, up to this point, no one has ever questioned my deflection: cute, blonde cheerleaders aren’t expected to love boy sports. “Do you know how big the Pacific Ocean is?” I ask. “Water covers most of the Earth. Miles deep in places, filled with hidden dangers, and people can’t breathe, once they sink. There are sharks, jellyfish, giant squids. And I’m small.” I huff a laugh: this is something I don’t admit. “I mean, my personality is
huge, but my body is child-size. One wave hits me wrong, psssh. I’m done.”

“There’s always gonna be waves,” he says. “A smart person learns to ride them, instead of shrinking away.”

“YOU can’t ride them,” I point out, getting a bit pissed at his wise-words-of-wisdom routine. “Most of the time, you face-plant.”

“Yeah, but at least I try.” He tosses the towel aside, hops up. Looks down at me, hands on hips.
“You should too. Logan would be a big help, I bet.”

He lopes off, and I’m left alone. I stare at the dangerous, dark ocean, stretching out past the horizon.

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The beach gathering drags on into the small hours, morphing from surf day, to cookout dinner, to co-ed beer fest around a bonfire. It swells in size to maybe 50 people, at one point, then wanes, as all but the hardiest turn into pumpkins. In Original! Reality, I would have been one of them, if I was even willing to waste the day. I still have a hard time believing that here, I have no curfew, no job and plenty of money for college.

Those of us that remain—Logan and myself, Wallace, Dick, Luke, Shelly, Casey Gant—sprawl lazily around the fading fire, half-heartedly staying awake. I’m the only one not drunk. Logan’s got his head in my lap: he’s staring into the flames, half-lidded, while I toy with his hair. Shelly’s going on about some trip her family’s taking to Monte Carlo, but I’m not really listening. I’m gazing down at Logan, lost in thought.

He looks sweet, stripped of vicious angst, serene. His cheeks still hold a hint of baby curve, deceptively innocent, and he’s soggily relaxed. I remember this face, sneering while he mocked me, eyes bright with hate-lust, friendship turned inside out. I remember how swift the flip from tormenter to protector was, how much I didn’t trust it: how badly he hurt me, when I rejected him, and exalted me, once I caved. All along, what he wanted was this, me adoring him, a sense of safety in my arms. And all along, it’s the one thing I wouldn’t give. Because he ring-led my humiliation, facilitated my violation, and I wanted to make him pay.

Here, in this place, where he’s only ever been kind, I can admit it: I was cruel, too. I estranged him from his girlfriend and his two best friends, because he kissed Yolanda instead of me. I escalated, by planting the cock bong, because he told the whole parking lot my mom was a drunk. I refused to date him publically, dumped him without a word, paraded Duncan like a prize to underscore the insult. I allowed him to be beaten, abused, framed, and didn’t offer help. He had to plead for a hand to hold, a friend to bind his wounds. A knight to slay his dragons. He had to play on my ego, my guilt.

I never told him I loved him, even when he begged. I was vindictive, not just. I went pyrrhic.

His behavior in Original! Reality was awful, Sophomore Year: our crimes were not comparable, and I wasn’t obligated to forgive. But my inability to do so was destructive to us both. Because I wouldn’t forgive him, but I couldn’t let him go.

The truth is, I always wanted what we have, here, as much as he did. I cared for him still, even as I raged. What Wallace said about him preferring me, since he was old enough to have a preference—that was both of us. It was mutual. We were entwined since that first mixed-gender soccer game, when he tricked me to score a goal, and I engineered his red-carding, as payback.

I stroke his cheek with a fingertip, and he glances up, smiling. He takes my hand, kisses it, enfolds it
in his own.

It was always you, I think, turning towards the fire. My gender preference, my aesthetic, the traits that make me tender. It’s why we keep entangling, in every reality, obstacles be damned. Sometimes you’re a gigantic asshole, and sometimes you wound and lie. But you never went so far off the path my heart couldn’t follow.

“Hey Logan,” I say, breath of sound. He rolls onto his back, gazing up with big dark eyes, one shade warmer than the night. “I want to learn to surf. For real.”

He smiles, lazy. “Can I call you Gidget?” he asks. “Like, every time we have a lesson?”

“If I can call you Kahuna,” I say. “Or daddy-o.”

“You’re bent,” he observes. “I like it. You’ve got yourself a deal. Just prepare for a challenge. Because it’s not easy, and you can’t control nature, and it’s a long road even to basic competence.”

I glance at Shelly, who is, insanely, still talking, and think, just like the slipstream. Maybe learning to ride one will help with the other. I nod, and settle down behind him. Make the big spoon around his much larger body, and press my face to his neck.

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Dick slumps into the sand beside us, who knows how much later, and I startle from my doze. He hands Logan a beer, and in an undervoice says, “Dude. We’ve got company.”

Logan sits up and yawns, pretend-casual, kisses my cheek: but he’s wide awake, and tense, and his eyes are covertly scanning. “Check your cellphone in your bag,” he murmurs, by my ear. “See if it has service.”

I nod and dig for it. I can’t see anything at the periphery of firelight but rocks, waves and sand. “Yeah,” I tell him, when the screen activates.

“Good. Text your dad, ask him to send a car. Looks like we’re surrounded by the 02’s finest.” He leans over and mumbles to Dick, while I do as he asks. Dick grins and hops up, ambling towards Casey.

“I want you to sit by Shelly,” Logan instructs, pressing his car keys discreetly into my palm. “You’re cool-headed and competent, and she’s useless under pressure. Casey’s staying close to you guys: he knows Krav Maga. He can get you to the car, if things turn dicey. Then you go for help, if we’re mobbed, or 4 wheel over to collect us, if we’re not.”

“Why does this routine seem so rehearsed?” I demand, eyes narrowing. My taser and purse aren’t in my beach bag, but I’ve clocked a pile of sturdy sticks, stacked innocuous by the fire. As well as three PCH’ers, lurking near the pier.

His mouth curves, hint of the arrogant smirk. “I promised you I wouldn’t cut these guys off at the knees,” he reminds me. “They didn’t return the favor. This is the third incident this summer—they catch a few of us alone, attack with knives. If some genius among them ever has a lightbulb moment, and shows up with a gun, we’re screwed.”

“We learned a valuable lesson when you got kidnapped.” Dick reappears on my left, having apparently overheard. “If we’re not holding weapons, we won’t go to jail.”

I sigh, because apparently I’m the bad influence. “Don’t’ get hurt,” I warn Logan, spreading a palm
across his chest. He smiles, and kisses me.

“I’m the muscle,” he says, with a shrug. “You stick to rhetoric and sarcasm, I’ll nail peoples’ heads to the floor. Now, go sharpen your wit on the weak link.”

He hops lightly to his feet, like he weighs 18 pounds, not 180: I head over to Shelly, the biggest key protruding from my clenched fist. I touch her arm and murmur, “Stay close to me and Casey.” And I notice the boys have moved into formation, holding sticks, so we stand protected at the center of a circle.

“You know any self-defense skills, Veronica?” Casey asks over his shoulder, as a line of four leather-jacketed guys appears. They approach the spot where Logan and Dick stand.

“I took a class,” I say. “And I’m wily.”

“Won’t argue with you there,” he smiles, and then we brace ourselves, because the enemy’s drawing near.

“Where’s your fearless leader?” Logan drawls, as soon as they’re in range, not bothering to raise his voice. He’s speaking to Thumper, who seems to be point man. “Not so fearless? I thought Weevil was the brains behind your ragtag band of merry men.”

“That’s what WE want to know,” Thumper retorts, coming on heavy with the macho. “You beat him up, deliver him to the Sheriff. He won’t say the right words, to clear your little girlfriend of murdering his boy. And then he conveniently disappears. I’m thinking your pal Duncan Kane ain’t the only 09’er with a temper problem.”

“Wow, it’s a shame I’m not half your size, and distraught. You could ineptly fail to frame ME for your crimes, too.” Logan laughs. “Sure is interesting how you’re the one who benefits, from the Weevil/Felix power vacuum.”

The dude on Thumper’s left, whose name escapes me, looks at him sharply: but Chardo muscles forward, blustering. “You don’t know nothing about loyalty, Echolls. Your best friend went to jail for defending himself against your dad, so you dumped his sister, and started banging his girl. Nobody wants to listen to what you’ve got to say.”

“Aw, now you’re hurting my feelings.” Logan flexes his hands, limbering them up. “Clearly you don’t read Tiger Beat, or you’d know I’m sensitive and deep.”

Casey smothers a laugh, and I kick him, for attracting attention to us.

Chardo zeroes in. “Oh, you think that’s funny, Gant? You like how ‘sensitive’ Echolls is? Hey, maybe Veronica can give you tips on how to suck his…”

Dick’s fist plants itself in Chardo’s face, turning the rest of the taunt into a crunching gurgle, and then it’s mayhem. PCH’ers descend from the rocks all around us and close in: Shelly starts screaming like it’s a 70’s horror movie: and Casey turns into a whirling dervish that reminds me of Logan, decimating his nightmares via punching bag.

Things go adrenaline-slow as I lock my hand around Shelly’s wrist and brace myself. I can see all, hear all, because I’m optimal in situations like this.

Dick’s got Chardo in a headlock, punching his face over and over, but staggers back when he takes an elbow to the mouth. Logan’s efficiently fighting dirty, putting one guy down with sand to the eyes and a foot to the jaw, punching another in the nuts. Wallace has a stick he’s wielding like a baseball
bat, while his opponent tries to stay clear: Luke’s wiping a trickle of blood from his brow, looking a little frightened.

“VERONICA!” Casey yells, and I duck just as a hand grabs for my throat, making Shelly scream again. I jab up and in with the keys, twist, and my assailant goes staggering back, bleeding from the sternum, eyes wide with shock. Casey flattens him with a roundhouse to the side of the head, and the guy drags himself over to the rocks and falls, panting.

I bare my teeth in a snarl and let go of Shelly to gather a handful of sand, because that’s a GOOD trick. “Throw it in their eyes,” I tell her, pouring it into her palm, and collect another. She nods, and we commence blinding every PCH’er we can reach, because the 09’ers are DEFENDING ME, and HOW FUCKING DARE THEY JUMP US?

Logan turns from whaling on Thumper, notices what I’m doing, and laughs, which I can see but not hear over the fray. “QUIT BEING BLOODTHIRSTY AND FOLLOW THE PLAN!” he yells, focusing back on his beat-down, and I sand-face one last opponent with a fuck-you smirk. I grab Shelly and yank: pass Casey as I march up the beach, clutch the back of his shirt, yank him, too. He spins around to walk backwards while I pull him, guarding our retreat.

“We get the car;” I tell them, “and we do just like Aliens. You both strap in and jerk your seatbelts to lock them, in case we hit any leather-jacketed speed bumps.”

Shelly nods a bunch of times, which reminds me of Lianne, and I notice she’s dragging a big-ass stick she probably can’t lift. “You need to drop that,” I say. “It’s way too…”

“WALLACE!” Casey shouts, distracting me. I turn, and to my horror see the Asian guy who ripped off the Sac n Pac, on top of Wallace with a butterfly knife raised.

I yell “NO!” and start forward, but Casey grabs me around the waist and won’t let go, no matter how much I kick. He’s dragging me now, and I’m screaming, “WALLACE!” and then Logan’s on the guy from behind, yanking his knife arm back until he squeals, yanking it some more. Wallace scrambles up and punches the guy in the face, then the stomach. He backs off, leaving the dude to Logan’s tender mercies, and I can breathe again.

“Ng,” says Casey behind me, and falls to the ground. I turn to see a very young PCH’er with a rock in his hand, who grabs me by the wrist and cocks his arm.

I’ve still got the keys in my fist, and I go for his eye, but he jerks his head back out of reach. “Uh-uh, play nice,” he says, swinging, but I’m writhing so much the rock glances off my shoulder with barely a graze. He lifts it again, grinning not-sweetly at me: and then Shelly jumps off the bumper of the Banana Mobile, bringing her stick down on him with all her might, and he crumples to the ground, and lies still.

“Holy shit!” Casey marvels, staggering to his feet and rubbing the back of his skull, and I snarl, “IN THE CAR!”

We pile inside and buckle up, and I yell, “Hold on!”, throw it into reverse. Because Logan told me once I’m not a killer, and I believe him: and I’m not running over some unconscious 15 year old, even if he DID try to brain me with a rock.

I veer around Shelly’s victim and barrel down the hill, splashing through surf, wondering if the stupid car snorkel might actually see some use tonight. I put my hand on the horn and hold it down, and I guess that’s a signal they all recognize. The guys disengage from the six PCH’ers still standing and present, Luke half-carrying Dick, and then Logan’s shoving them all in the car, stick-swiping
anyone who gets close without mercy. He stage-dives across their laps and screams, “GO!”, before the door’s even shut. I spin my wheels in wet sand for a heart-stopping second, then take off with a lurch, scattering the pursuing gang members like ants. And we’re up the beach, onto the road, free at last.

I pant, short sharp breaths, driving way over the speed limit. Behind me, Logan goes, “Ease back, you’re grinding metal,” and I laugh, because he KNOWS what I was thinking. He KNOWS me. He knows how I feel, how I think it’s wrong that I feel GOOD, and he’s brilliantly misdirecting, because that’s how he plays.

God, the stars are bright. And the moon’s as huge in the sky as Elizabeth Taylor’s pearls.

I’m speeding along the PCH again, and we’re like a clown car, Casey and Shelly piled in front, Wallace, Luke, Dick and Logan half on top of each other in the back seat. It smells like sweat, blood, beer, and what’s probably testosterone.

Dick’s rubbing his jaw, I notice, as I glance in the rearview, searching for pursuers. It’s swollen and red, and he’s got a big contusion across his cheekbone. “I think that asshole knocked a tooth loose,” he mutters.

“Dick,” Logan says on a sigh, covering his eyes with his hand, and slumping back. “What’s the first rule of fighting?”

“Make the other guys think you’re crazy,” Dick parrots, like Logan’s Socrates, and this is his daily lesson.

“Make them THINK you’re crazy,” Logan clarifies. “Don’t actually BE crazy, because then you just lose it and go sick. We were surrounded and outnumbered, and you threw the first punch. You put us all in danger.”

“He called you a fag!” Dick protests, incensed. I notice Wallace, wedged against the door, disgustedly shaking his head.

“Dick,” Logan says again, sounding tired. “It’s 2005. We don’t use the word ‘fag’ as an insult, anymore.”

“Whatever, fag,” Dick mutters, sullenly, and Logan cuffs him on the uninjured side of the head. “At least I didn’t stab some PCH’er in the chest with your car keys, like your girlfriend did.”

Logan sits forward to check out the keys, which are, admittedly, bloody. “Are you okay, Ronica?” he asks, anxious. “He didn’t hurt you?”

“I’m FINE,” I insist, turning up the incline towards the Pomroys’ hilltop enclave. “It was just a SMALL stab. He got up and ran away under his own power.”

“Jesus, Veronica, remind me never to get on your bad side.” Luke scrubs his hands over his face, still freaked. “Man, how much longer will this stuff go on? Don’t we have LAWS in this town, to protect us from the criminal element?”

“The criminal element thinks we killed Felix and Weevil,” Wallace reminds him. “Or some of THEM did it, and they’re trying to make us scapegoats. Either way, things are getting ugly all over town, even as far out as my neighborhood. People saying 09’ers are above the law. First Duncan gets ten years in a cushy private sanitarium, then Casey’s DUI is dismissed, then Veronica’s played
up in the press like she suffered worse than Toombs.”

“Hey, I had a clean record,” Casey protests, his demeanor mild as ever. “And it’s not like I hurt anybody. I just broke that telephone pole. And my new Porsche.”

“And SOMEBODY tried to burn down the public pool,” Wallace continues, shooting him a look. “That didn’t help, from a PR standpoint.”

“That was Lucky,” Logan says, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. “The janitor? Dude who used to buy us kegs? I tried to stop him, Ronica, I swear, but he pulled a big-ass knife on me, and started screaming about how this was a war, and I was either with him or against him. So I just backed off, and called in an anonymous tip from a pay phone.”

“Yeah, but they didn’t catch him ’til he’d soaked the whole area with gasoline,” Wallace chides, patiently. “Same result, because they had to remediate.”

“NOT the same result!” Logan snaps. “I did my fucking best! I feel sorry for the dude, I didn’t want to hurt him. Or, you know, get gutted. That thing was like a scimitar.”

I pull into Shelly’s driveway, and she bends down to give me and Casey a hug. “Thanks for being a human shield, guys,” she says.

“Thanks for saving us!” I reply. “If you hadn’t bashed that guy with your stick, he would have brained me. Didn’t know you had it in you, Pomroy.”

She grins and does the rock-and-roll thing with both hands, then climbs down out of the car. I shake my head. Shelly P, avenging angel. Whooda thunk it?

“Well, who’s next?” I ask, and Casey says, “My folks are in New York for some publishing gala. You guys want to crash at my place, so you don’t show up at home all bloody, in the middle of the night?”

“Dicks’ got a messed up face,” I say. “He needs an x-ray.”

“Ronnie Mars, mother hen,” Dick snarks, with what would probably be a smirk, on his normal mouth. “Dude, you still got the number of that EMT who makes house calls for cash?”

“Texting it to you now,” Logan says, pulling out his phone.

“See, Rons, I’m covered. But nice to know you caaaaaarreeee.” He makes a kissy face at me, and I roll my eyes.

I turn the corner towards the Gant mansion. “OK if I just drop you at the gate, so I don’t have to run the key-pad, guard-dog gauntlet?”

Casey does an eyes-closed thumbs up, so I roll to a stop by the spike-finialed fence. “I appreciate what you did, you guys,” I say, before they can open the doors. “I’m sorry I got you all into this mess.”

“Veronica, the PCH’ers were looking to stir up trouble,” Casey chides, opening his eyes. “If it wasn’t you they framed, it would have been someone else. All this, it’s just…Neptune.” He shrugs. “One more year, and we’re off to the Ivy Leagues anyway.”

“If we live that long,” Luke mutters, climbing down: and I sigh, because even though they’re on my side, this time, they’re still so freaking elitist. I kind of enjoyed being the scrappy Robin Hood of
Neptune High, I realize. More than I dig being Maria, in the battle of the Sharks and Jets.

“Sweet dreams,” Logan calls, as they wander away, and Wallace waves goodbye over his shoulder. Logan climbs into the passenger seat, kissing my nose, and I head off to find a quiet place, where we can let down from alt in peace.

XXXXX

“Are you OK?” Logan asks, as soon as we’re parked in the donut shop lot (where we lost our heads and fooled around, what seems like a million years ago). He grips my hands and spreads my arms wide, giving me a quick visual exam. “You’re not just putting up a tough front?”

“I’m not hurt,” I insist, and he curves his hands around my face and kisses me. “Are you?” I ask, when we break apart.

“Check my ribs, right side, near the back. Chardo got me with a switchblade. I don’t think it’s bad, but I can’t see it.”

We climb out of the car, and he turns so I have a better view. Sure enough, there’s a big red stain on his shirt, and an angry slash beneath. I’m shocked by the flood of rage I feel. “It’s not deep,” I manage, forcing my voice to calmness. “It’s not even bleeding anymore. We should clean it up, though. Maybe put some butterfly bandages on it, so it doesn’t scar.”

“What’s one more?” he asks, with a shrug. Strokes my cheek, reading my expression. “In the glove box,” he says. “Give me a penicillin cap, while you’re at it. And there’s Valium and Xanax, too, if you want one.”

I shoot him a dirty look, and he laughs. “My bad little good girl,” he says, affectionately, then winces when I spray alcohol on the wound. “With the gentle nature, and the tender touch.”

I hand him the antibiotic, and he dry-swallows, while I smear Neosporin on gauze, tape it down.

“Tidy,” he praises, craning his neck to look. “Very professional.”

Of course it is, I want to say. I’ve been entangled with you half my life. But I grit my teeth, and instead ask, “What would you do? If you were gonna cut those guys off at the knees, I mean?”

He cocks his head, considering me. His hair is sweat-stiff, standing straight up, and full of sand.

“Same thing the US Government does,” he replies, “when confronted with an unfriendly foreign revolution. Find the old leader, determine if he’s someone we can work with. If he is, reinstall him. If he’s not, find a substitute who’ll keep the peace and leave us alone, and install THAT guy in his place.” He shakes his head. “I’d prefer the first option, because Weevil is to those assholes what I am to Dick—the steadying hand. But I don’t trust Weevil to keep to his side of the fence, anymore, after what he let his peons do to you. Besides, there’s about a 50% chance Weevil’s dead.”

“How would you even go about this plan?” I wonder. “Why would the PCH’ers let you pick their leader? And what makes you think you can locate Weevil, if he, or whoever killed him, doesn’t want him found?”

“I’d need help,” he says, gazing at me steadily. “Middle men. People with common interests, on both sides of the law.”

“Oh, NO WAY!” I recoil back a step. “NOT the Fitzpatricks. Logan, that’s not just playing with matches, that’s setting the house on fire!”
“Veronica, I tried your turning-the-other-cheek-like-Jesus tactic, and amazingly, it didn’t work. One of my friends is gonna end up dead. Or more likely, me, or you, since we’re the ones they’re targeting. Wallace almost got pasted tonight, in case you didn’t notice: I’m not letting him become a tragic statistic because I fucking lacked nerve. Alicia’s gonna kill me as is, just for putting him in danger. I may never get invited to Sunday dinner again.”

“So we go to my dad!” I say. “He always gets his man.”

“Sure, eventually,” he counters. “He’ll be meticulous, and by the book, and when he finds the answer, it’ll be the right one. Meanwhile, those guys just got their asses kicked, and now they’re gonna escalate. I expect drive-bys. Maybe ambushes at school, maybe attacks on family members. Don’t go anywhere alone anymore, and keep your taser handy. Myself, I’m considering buying a gun.”

I close my eyes. This is where I bailed from the brakeless car, last time, and went running back to Duncan. And Logan spent all of senior year sinking deeper into quicksand, until he latched onto Weevil and Hannah, and pulled himself free.

But I can’t run this time, because I’m the target. I’m the one who was framed. And the fight that just went down happened because my friends and boyfriend were protecting me.

“If we don’t go to the Fitzpatricks, what are our options?” I ask, opening my eyes, giving back his resolute stare.

He shrugs, corner of his mouth quirking. “Russian mob, Irish mob, rival gangs, Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, Hollywood producers. That’s who runs Neptune, with some real estate speculators and politicians thrown in. Shall we play compare/contrast?”

“There’s someone among those categories who can get us the results we want, but won’t make us kiss his ring,” I say. “Jake being the obvious choice, since he lives in my house, and is fond of my mother.”

“You think Jake Kane’s gonna get his hands dirty restructuring a Mexican street gang?” he asks, amused.

“You think Liam Fitzpatrick’s gonna do you a favor out of the goodness of his heart?” I counter.

“Well, he IS a church-going man,” Logan retorts, with a smirk. “Fine, how ‘bout we start with Weevil, and work our way up to the big stuff? I’ve got a carrot and a stick to hold over that family, so if one of them, other than Chardo, knows where he is, they’ll probably give him up.”

“The carrot being money, or a job with your mom?” I ask, and he nods. “What’s the stick?”

“I own the mortgage on Letty Navarro’s house,” he says, with an eyebrow bob.
Thank You For Letting Me Be Myself

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, guys, this chapter was a beast to write. Trigger warning for non-graphic discussion of abuse.

THREAD SIXTEEN

I jerk into the present behind the wheel of a car, and if that’s not a fucking nightmare, I don’t know what is. I narrowly miss a Miata as I run a stop sign, slam on the brakes…sit for a minute, while my adrenaline recedes. I’m in the neighborhood where Jake and Lianne live: so I decide to decompress in my room, with Loki the Breathing Security Blanket cuddled alongside.

I slow as I approach the house, though, because Mac is waiting for me on the steps. She sees me, so I can’t escape, and she smiles. But she doesn’t get up from her comfortable sprawl, and she doesn’t speak.

She looks like Mac—blue TARDIS t-shirt, the purple Converse again—yet not. She’s got that long-bang, short-hair thing going on, threaded liberally with electric blue: little skull earrings, lots of eye makeup, woven friendship bracelet, cut-off jeans. The self-conscious air of emotional repression, the sense that she’s trying to fly under the radar, are gone. She seems relaxed, happy and actualized, which must be Logan’s sexual healing at work. I both love and loathe the look on her.

“Hey,” she says, when I close in. She gets up, tucking her thumbs in her back pockets. “Got a minute?”

I shrug, and sit on the step, and she drops back down beside me. I look at my hands, twisting the strap of my bag between them: I can feel her staring.

“So Logan told me he came by,” she begins, same calm, logical Mac as always. “He said it went badly. And I’m thinking he probably explained things like a guy, in the way most calculated to piss you off. I hoped, if I explained things like a girl, maybe you could understand.”

“So Logan told me he came by,” she says, same calm, logical Mac as always. “He said it went badly. And I’m thinking he probably explained things like a guy, in the way most calculated to piss you off. I hoped, if I explained things like a girl, maybe you could understand.”

“Logan’s great with words,” I say, looking up. I love her, but God help me, it’s taking all I’ve got not to punch her in the face. “He didn’t mince any.”

“Logan’s great with words,” I say, looking up. I love her, but God help me, it’s taking all I’ve got not to punch her in the face. “He didn’t mince any.”

“Veronica,” she says. “Logan and I are living together. And we ARE having a baby. But we’re not involved anymore. Romantically, I mean.”

She pulls a face. “See, this is why I came,” she says. “Even though I doubted you’d want to see me. It’s why I told him not to rush straight after you, too, the second you made contact. But you know how he is. Passionately emo to the core. I’m guessing he lied in self-defense.”

“I quirk an eyebrow at her, and she laughs. “You know how he is,” she repeats. “So you get that he has no problem being faithful. But he’s not going to stay celibate indefinitely, either, when he’s not attached. After you told him to disappear, Veronica, he pined for like nine months, and then he
hooked back up with Lilly. You probably didn’t hear this part.”

I shake my head, because what I heard was immediate drunken debauchery, with Kendall. It seems this reality has shifted, since last time.

“Well, he did, although it was strictly a FWB deal. Only APPARENTLY, she’s gotten heavily into the girl-on-girl, and was demanding threesomes. And he wouldn’t go along.”

I raise both eyebrows at this, and she smiles. “I know. I was surprised too. But he says he promised you that if you, and I quote, were ever ‘abducted by aliens’, he would only sleep with women he cared about and trusted. And he said since he couldn’t keep any of his other promises, to stay with you, to protect you, he was damn sure keeping that one. So they broke things off, and he was miserable.”

“At that point,” she continues, “we were already roommates, and my love life had…spectacularly imploded. And it felt… easier than trying to date. We were never in love, or anything. I just enjoyed the way he’s open-minded, and doesn’t judge—I could explore who I was, what I wanted, with no repercussions. Like I was free yet safe, like he expected nothing, but wouldn’t let me fall. And I think HE was grateful I was steady, and reliable, and called him on his crap. And I understood we weren’t long-term, because he was completely gone on someone else. Do you see?”

I nod, because I’m clear on the way Logan holds up a mirror, showing you everything you are, and then celebrates it all. It’s why he’s so addictive, never mind the superficial.

“We’re not lovers anymore, Veronica,” she says. “We were only together for like two months, and the baby was an accident. You must know he wants you back. But he thinks he let you down that summer, by failing to protect you, and you rejected him for it. So he’s not going to make a move. He’ll just hover around and piss you off, because then at least he can get you to interact.”

I snort—I can’t help myself, because he WILL. “I’m mad I can’t tase or convict any of you, to make myself feel better.”

“I’m mad that you went to jail for a year, and we couldn’t get you out,” she says. “And it depresses me that the fling I had, when I was at my lowest ebb, might ruin things between us. I’m sure you feel like I betrayed you, Veronica. But the truth is, I was just lonely, and so was he, and we made a mistake.”

“Look,” I sigh. “I’m not gonna lie, I’m a big ball of rage right now. I don’t trust easily, and this whole scenario is my Achilles heel. I feel like he’s MINE, like he always was, and always will be, whether we’re broken up or not. And yet he’s been with every attractive girl I’ve met. He’s the one thing I’m not willing to share, and I HATE that I’m never given the choice. I’m left seething with jealousy I can’t even admit, like there’s a black hole, inside me. Whether he was trying to hurt me or not, when he got with you and Lils, he DID. And I’m so, so ANGRY.”

She takes a deep breath. “You’re not going to like this. And I feel like I’m messing with the bull, by even saying it. But you have no right to play dog in the manger. You dumped him, without any explanation. You wouldn’t speak to him, or look at him: every time he got close to you, you walked away. He adored you, Veronica. He tried so hard to make you listen, and when you wouldn’t, he grieved. I understand that you feel jealous and possessive…he’s the same. But he’s a person, not a belonging. He’s not a toy you can toss away, and then attack someone else for picking up.”

“I have always loved him,” I say, because it’s true. I don’t know why the Veronica in this timeline dumped him, but it wasn’t because she got bored. “And he’s always loved me.”
“I believe you,” she says. “But he hasn’t always been your boyfriend. He used to be Lilly’s, and he loved her, at least a little bit, too. And you stole him from her at a party, in front of all her friends, and never apologized or looked back. What I did was no worse than that, Veronica. Look, I’m not asking you to do the ‘nice’ thing, or behave against your nature: but you may want to mull over the fact that Lilly eventually forgave YOU.”

She stands, brushing dirt off the back of her shorts. “You know where to find me, if you feel so inclined. I’ve said what I had to say, and I won’t push again. But know that, if you do arrive at a headspace where you want to be friends again? I want that, too.”

I nod and she walks away, confident and self-assured, thumbs still tucked in her pockets. I don’t like the way I feel, as I watch her leave: as if I want her to come back and comfort me. And as if I’m the one who’s wrong.

XXXXX

It takes me two hours, cuddled up with the dog, to unravel the changes between my last Prison! Reality visit, and this one. Usually, puzzle pieces click into place for me easily: but when it comes to Logan, and betrayal, I’m so swamped by emotion, I literally can’t think.

He spirals, when he believes no one loves him—I know that, I’ve seen it. He drinks, and drugs, and screws every girl in his social circle. He risks his life, because what’s so great about living? My Google search made me think that didn’t happen here, but it did. It did, and he fell in with Kendall, and she dragged him all the way down. Mac saved him, the way I did once, after Lynn jumped. And he was needy, and grateful, turned the full force of his charm on her, in thanks. She was dazzled, like everyone is, and along came baby.

But he listened to me, when I warned him off Kendall: and somehow, staying away from her kept him from pushing self-destruct. He was whole enough to grieve for me for 9 months, before moving on. To set ‘no-third-party’ limits on his reunion with Lilly. To be clear on the boundaries of his affair with his roommate, so there were no unmet expectations, or broken friendships. I may loathe the results, but Logan did exactly what I asked. He restricted his liaisons to girls he cared about and trusted. He treated himself with respect.

I’m not just changing situations, when I take action in the past. I’m changing PEOPLE. I saved LOGAN from a year and a half of rock-bottom shenanigans with one petty, jealous, half-awake demand. Who else have I changed, without realizing? How far do the ripples of the slipstream spread? And what’s gone on, in the cracks and chasms between my past visits and now, as a result of those epiphanies?

Ugh, I hate the uncertainty of this situation. I deal best with cold, incontrovertible, black and white facts. There are too many variables, too many unknowns. I need DATA.

And I know where to find it, if I can just nerve myself up to ask.

XXXXX

It’s dark when I ring the doorbell to the little house, after 9:30. There’s scratching and whining, and I wonder if anybody but the dog is home. But then I hear footsteps, the door’s flung open, and Logan’s blinking at me in his threadbare lounging clothes, like I’m the Ghost of Christmas Past.

“I brought dinner,” I say, holding up a big greasy bag of Chinese. “And my dad’s file.” I pat my messenger bag. “And every dirty secret Neptune’s ever had, lodged in the dark corners of my brain.”
He pulls the screen aside, gaping, as if he’s not sure what to say. “Mac’s not here,” he tells me, while I sidle past. “She has African Dance on Fridays.”

“I scanned everything,” I say. “I can email her any of it you think matters.”

“Did she find you?” he asks, easing down on the couch, gesturing for me to set my bag on the coffee table. “This afternoon? She said she would.”

“Yeah,” I tell him, and make it a point to look him in the eye. “Congratulations, by the way. You managed, in my absence, to screw the only two girls in the world I’d feel guilty about destroying. I’m here for business, not bloodshed.”

He busies himself extracting cartons, focusing carefully on the food. “You want a fork?” he asks. “Or a drink? A plate?”

“Sure,” I say, and he looks at me, and his eyes are like quicksand. “Don’t stare at me that way. You are nowhere near forgiven.”

“What way?” He smiles. Glances down at the floor, then up from under his brow. Damn him, this is an unfair tactic. “It’s just, you came,” he says, steady gaze holding me prisoner. “Of your own free will. And you know everything. And I’m not bleeding out, on the floor, from a slashed jugular.” He pulls a dumpling from a carton, rolls it between his fingers. In a soft voice, he asks, “You’re not going to make me pay?”

“For what?” I roll my eyes. “Believing life in prison meant life in prison? Seeking comfort with a trusted friend? Yeah, it hurts, and I’m jealous as all hell. But Mac managed to convince me that you didn’t do anything WRONG.”

“I’m…dumbstruck,” he says, after a minute. “I’ll get dishes.”

He wanders off to the kitchen, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck and head. I open all the cartons, and boot up my laptop. I can picture him, hands braced on the counter, head down, eyes shut, trembling as he breathes in control. I wish we were in a place where we could comfort each other.

He comes back, sets a bunch of tableware down, and gently takes my hands. “I will do anything for you,” he says, dead serious, squeezing my knuckles. “Just tell me what. Anything at all.”

“Eat,” I say. “And talk to me. No evasions, no fibs. I need to know exactly what happened to Weevil, and what information you guys may have found that dad didn’t. If there’s a whiteboard, or a chalk board, or a corkboard around, that will help. I’m taking you at your word that you are nowhere near forgiven.”

“I’m…dumbstruck,” he says, after a minute. “I’ll get dishes.”

“He breathes for a minute, deep ins and outs, like he’s using yoga techniques to calm himself down. “It was us that put Weevil in the hospital. Me, Dick, Casey, Luke, Enbom. He could have backed you up in his testimony, and kept you free, but he didn’t. He lied on the stand. He took out one of ours, so we took him out. But we got proof first, like you wanted. We knew he lied.”

He shoots me a defiant, not-sorry look, but I say nothing, so he continues. “We didn’t put him in a coma, though. Just broke some ribs. Someone got into his room and injected insulin into his IV, or at least that’s what Mac speculates. We don’t know who, or why. So many people hated his guts, or had a reason to shut him up.”

“Oh,” I say. “Your story had a better ending than I thought it would. Good to know.”
I pick up the Kung Pao Chicken and start eating, while he stares at me. After a minute, he laughs, and digs into the dumplings, also eschewing a plate. “Justice, not vengeance,” I remind him, when he shakes his head for the second time. “I told you myself. If we had proof he framed me, we’d make him pay. I couldn’t, you did. Fair enough.” I take another bite. “What was the proof?”

“Eleven year old girl,” he says. “Watched him watch the kidnapping go down, and not lift a finger. Said he made a call after, then finished his drink before leaving. He didn’t grab you, but he didn’t save you. And he said on the stand he never saw a thing.”

“Justice, not vengeance,” I remind him, when he shakes his head for the second time. “I told you myself. If we had proof he framed me, we’d make him pay. I couldn’t, you did. Fair enough.” I take another bite. “What was the proof?”

“Eleven year old girl,” he says. “Watched him watch the kidnapping go down, and not lift a finger. Said he made a call after, then finished his drink before leaving. He didn’t grab you, but he didn’t save you. And he said on the stand he never saw a thing.”

“Eleven year old girl,” he says. “Watched him watch the kidnapping go down, and not lift a finger. Said he made a call after, then finished his drink before leaving. He didn’t grab you, but he didn’t save you. And he said on the stand he never saw a thing.”

“I wish I could talk to Weevil,” I whine, tossing down the whiteboard marker in disgust. We’ve been over the labyrinthine dealings of the Fitzpatrick gang for 3 hours now, and it just gets more convoluted, the more detail we add. Never less, and never the slightest connection to Stewart Manning, as far as I can see. I flop down on the couch beside him. “I need to know where he went, after he left that house. I feel like whatever he did between then, and when you found him at the shop, is the key to the whole mess.”

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“Lot of people wish that,” Logan says, grim. “Of course, most of them don’t have your skill at ferreting out hidden truths.”

“He’s not easy to read,” I say, with a sigh. “More opaque than you, even, or maybe it’s just I don’t know him as well.”

“Enh, I have faith,” he says. “You’re Wonder Woman. You make everyone give up the dirt you need, sooner or later.”

I yawn and lean back, putting my feet on the coffee table. “That’s what my name means, you know.”

“What, Veronica? Like veritas?”

“Yeah, Latin. Vero icon, ‘true image’. Veronica was a saint who put the shroud of Turin on Jesus’s face, and it came away bearing his divine image.”

“So your superpower is seeing people the way they really are. That’s scary accurate.” He leans back, mirroring me, hands behind his head. Glances at me, sideways. “I wonder what mine means.”

I smile. “Yours is Gaelic. It’s like a little hollow in the woods. A safe, secret place to rest.”

His mouth works. He closes his eyes. A shudder runs through his body, not a fine tremor, but a series of wracking jerks. Tears start to leak silently from beneath his lids, and I realize he’s sobbing, without a sound.

The heels of his hands come up, obscuring most of his face, and I reach towards him, tentative. Touch his shoulder. This doesn’t soothe: if anything, his fit intensifies. His breath sounds like he’s hyperventilating.

“Hush,” I say, stroking his arm. “It’s OK, you don’t…”

“I FAILED you,” he says, and his voice is so raw, it hurts to listen. “I couldn’t keep you safe. I love you so much, and I lost track of you that night, and I FAILED.”

“No,” I correct. “I failed YOU. I went to the bridge without you, and I let Trina jump, and I waited for Weevil in the car alone, even though I knew it was stupid. I was impulsive and arrogant and reckless. I always have been. I work myself into a rage, and then I act before I think. Or I get so
smug about how smart I am that I don’t listen, when other people talk. This time it cost me, and everyone paid. But I’M the one that failed. Not you.”

He grabs the hand that’s touching him, and uses it to tug me close, then wraps me up in his embrace. Arms, legs, cheek to my skull, and he shudders, and clutches me, and cries. “You’re so small,” he says, cradling me against his chest. “I don’t see how anyone could physically hurt something so delicate and little. It’s like kicking a kitten.”

“I’m vicious,” I say. “And kind of an asshole. It’s just, that’s a plus for you, because you are, too.”

“Please don’t go away again,” he murmurs. He’s still shivering, though the tears have stopped. “Please, I need you. When you’re gone, it’s like I’m trapped underwater, and nothing is real.”

“No,” I say. “I won’t be tricked a second time. And the ones who put me in a cage? I’m going to ruin them all.”

He holds me tight, while we both quiet and still. I feel warm for the first time today, protected. I nestle my head into the hollow of his shoulder, and drift down deep into sleeping peace.

THREAD SIXTEEN INVERTS

I’m snoring on a couch—Alicia Fennel’s couch—and the alarm on my Sidekick is blaring. I sit up, running my hands down a sweaty t-shirt, jeans, then over my face. I don’t see my phone anywhere, so I can’t make it stop.

Lilly comes bubbling in and bounces down beside me, draping a companionable arm over my shoulder. “Veronica Mars!” she chides, doing her best Celeste impersonation. “You are making a VULGAR amount of noise!”

I laugh, and she extracts my bag from under the cushion, my cell from inside it. Shuts off the alarm, with a dismissive flick. “Tea time with Alice?” she giggles, eyebrows raised, and I see she’s shamelessly rooting through my calendar. “Are psychedelic mushrooms the entrée?”

“Alice wants a favor,” I guess, swiping my phone back, bumping her with my shoulder. I don’t know why I’m not mad at her, the way I was at Mac: maybe because I know sex and love live in different rooms, in her brain? Or maybe I’d forgive her anything, since she’s practically my sister. Of course, in this reality, she technically IS my sister, by marriage. God, my life is a soap opera.

I check the time and entry, realize I’ve got an hour to get there. “Can I help it if my services are in demand?”

“They’re TOO in demand,” she grouses, flopping back on the couch with a dramatic sigh. “Between your favors, and the boys’ asinine turf war, and the Echolls-Mars Humpfest 2005, I’m not getting NEARLY enough BFF face time. I had to play VIDEO GAMES to hang out with you today. And then you fell asleep!” Her eyes twinkle up at me, mouth pursed in mischief. “There’s no telling what I may do, if I start to feel neglected.”

I shake my head at her, but can’t help smiling. She’s as irresistibly naughty, in her own way, as Logan. “Clearly we can’t let that happen,” I say. “Shopping and slumber party, after tea?”

“NOW you’re speaking my language.” She uncurls from the couch and grabs my wrist, dragging me through the living room, towards Wallace’s lair.

The standard Wallace-Dick-Logan, exploding-skull game-athon is playing out inside. All of them are
dressed for the heat, in ratty shorts and tanks, and snarfing a bowl of Cheetos.

“You’re going to die of Vitamin D deficiency if you keep this up,” I say.

Logan grins, tosses his controller down, and leaps the Cheetos to get to me. Cries of “Dude, no way!” and “Watch it!” filter up from the peanut gallery: but he maneuvers me onto my back on Wallace’s bed, and kisses me anyway.

“Hey,” he says when we break apart, tucking hair out of my face. “Good nap?”

I smile: but before I can answer, Dick throws a handful of popcorn at us, and yells, “Logan you dickwad, look what you did!”

We turn to see that Lilly has taken over Logan’s avatar, and killed everything. She’s now examining her nails, with a not-quite-hidden smirk. “Just because I don’t care doesn’t mean I can’t kick your ass,” she tells Dick provocatively, blowing him a kiss. Wallace laughs, and offers her his fist to bump.

“I’d better get her out of here,” I say to Logan. “She’s bored, and you know what THAT means.”

He rolls his eyes, kisses my nose, hops up, and extends a hand to help me do the same. “What’s the plan for tonight?”

“Shopping and slumber party,” I say, with a grin. “You can have me back tomorrow, after Lilly’s done her worst.”

“Oh, now you’re just taunting me.” He shakes his head, kisses my cheek. “Remember to stick together. You wear the brass knuckles, let her carry the Mace.”

“Will do.” I put my hand on his jaw, gaze up into his eyes. Lilly has to yank on my arm, to get me to focus.

“Ugh, you are SICKENING!” she pronounces, hauling me towards the door. “Honestly, Ronica, I thought you had more sass.”

Lilly scoffs at Logan’s protectiveness, but picks up Ashley Banks anyway: they drop me at Rose’s Tea Shop, and head off to ‘enjoy’ a Hot Room Yoga class. I examine the quaint blue-painted cottage, with lace curtains and twining roses, and feel I got the better end of the bargain.

It’s empty, since 2 pm is not optimal teatime for Californians: but it’s got a pleasant smell of baking, and a wall of books to browse. The cheerful 30-something Irishwoman behind the counter greets me by name, and asks if I want ‘the usual’: I guess Alice and I come here a lot. I smile and nod, then try to look busy by the shelf, so she won’t attempt conversation.

I’m engrossed in ‘The Art of War’, and halfway through a mountain of scones with clotted cream, when the bell over the door tinkles. Carrie Bishop strides in. We gaze at each other in silence for a moment: then she smiles, and eases into the seat opposite me.

“Sorry I’m late,” she says, picking up a scone, surveying it like it’s a museum specimen. “Cassandra didn’t show for her shift at the Hut, again. Are you SURE you don’t want a job?”

I feel a laugh bubbling up inside. Of COURSE Other Veronica’s got secrets like this in reserve. She’s probably hiding a million more, just as juicy, and I am walking in a minefield. “No thanks,” I
“Not even for unlimited slices of German Chocolate Nutgasm. The only work I’ve got time for these days is favor-trading.”

“On which note…” She raises her eyebrows archly, extracts a Moleskine notebook from her pricey handbag. “This has been a veeeeery interesting week, gossip-wise.”

Excitement stirs in my gut, but I keep my face blank. “Do tell,” I say.

“Hmmmm.” She reads down a page, tapping a little gold pen against her lower lip. “You don’t care about cosmetic surgery, right? Or do you, since it’s Madison Sinclair?”

“Only if it went horribly awry,” I say, taking a sip of my (surprisingly decent) cinnamon tea.

“Deviated septum,” she pronounces, with the faintest of smiles. “She’s holed up in her house for the week, with two black eyes. It occurs to me that telephoto candids would be excellent to have in reserve, should you ever need to persuade her to help you.”

This time, I can’t contain the laugh. “Duly noted,” I say, typing a reminder for Other Veronica into my Sidekick. “What else?”

“Sean Friedrich’s getting high on his own supply,” she says, making a neat checkmark, with a flourish. “Like that’s news. Although you have to wonder how it’ll go over with his underworld crime boss. Marcos Oliveras got sent to ‘Pray the Gay Away’ camp, and came back all damaged and swaggery. Oh, and this will interest you. Rumor has it, Weevil Navarro was spotted in LA, buying peanut butter and body wash at a neighborhood bodega.”

“Spotted by who?” I ask, leaning forward on my elbows.

“Daphne Curtis’s cousin. Her name is…” she traces the pen along the page, “Cameron Prescott. Give me your phone, I’ll type in her number.”

I slide it across, and she does the double-thumb thing really fast, for someone with a hundred-dollar manicure. I will never understand how Carrie Bishop always looks so Haute Couture, when clearly she’s one of the have-nots, like myself.

Well, like I used to be, anyway.

I check out the entry when she hands it back, which reads, ‘Cameron Prescott LEAD!!!!’, and tuck my phone away. I smile at the proprietor, as she delivers a silver pot and cup for Carrie, but wait ‘til she leaves to ask, “You hear anything about Meg Manning?”

“Other than the email she sent to CPS in May, from the computer lab?” She pours, unwraps a sugar cube, stirs it in with a tiny, tinkling spoon. “No, Meg’s not one to blab her secrets. Her father’s fundraising, though, very quietly, behind the scenes. I think he may be planning to run for mayor.”

I sit back in my chair. Prison Veronica must have discovered something Stewart wanted kept hidden. Maybe his abuse of Grace, maybe a connection with the Fitzpatricks. Whatever it was, it was ugly enough he’d force his kid to frame her for murder. And he likely used the resulting fervor to fuel his political campaign. “How do Meg and Lizzie feel about that? And the little one, Grace?”

“Meg’s silent, Lizzie’s openly mocking. I didn’t even realize there WAS a little one. Meg and I aren’t exactly pals.” She takes a dainty sip. “Dick’s friendly with her. He might know.”

“Carrie,” I say, “I can’t tell you how glad I am you’re working WITH me, not against me.”
She laughs, a surprisingly throaty sound. It occurs to me that I haven’t heard her do that since maybe elementary school. “You’re hard to say no to,” she murmurs. “Mostly because you won’t stop asking.”

“Persistence pays,” I agree. I slather another scone with cream, and gesture at the shrinking pile. “Sure I can’t tempt you? They’re amazing.”

She makes a face. “One carb binge a week, that’s my limit. And no offense, but I prefer the liquid kind.”

“Your loss,” I say, and take a bite.

“So,” she ventures, when my mouth’s full, “I have to know. Has it happened again?”

“Has what happened again?” I ask, around a wad of scone. I’m not really listening, because is that crystallized ginger? Whatever, it tastes amazing with the tea.

“Your ‘what was I thinking?’ moments. When it’s like some alien takes over your brain, and you start channeling Logan? I haven’t seen you in several weeks, and you said, last time, that they were getting more frequent.”

I stop cold, scone lowering slowly from my mouth. I manage to swallow, but I’m not hungry anymore. “Is that how I described it?” I ask, faintly. ‘I’m watching an alien take over my body, and make bad choices?’

“I think your exact words were, ‘it feels like the morning after I’ve had one too many drinks. And I don’t know whether to be proud or embarrassed that I lost my inhibitions’.”

I take a deep breath. That’s….not as bad as I feared. I may be Cringeworthy Cousin Veronica with the over-large id, but at least I’m not doing things Past Veronica wouldn’t. “What’s the last incident I told you about?”

“Um, your birthday?” She says, raising her eyebrows. “When you had so much amazing sex you could barely walk the next day?”

I wince. I told CARRIE about that? Jesus, Past Veronica, get it together and quit SHARING! She keeps a Gossip Notebook, for Christ’s sake! “Yeah,” I manage. “Twice, since then.”

She leans forward, lowers her voice to a murmur. “Have you considered demonic possession? Because I’ve been reading up on it, and there’s some evidence it’s real.”

I straighten, offended. “This is NOT about demonic possession.”

“How can you be sure? The one time I saw it happen, you tried to take your clothes off in front of five people, and then tased Norris like it was NOTHING.”

“I’m sure!” I say, losing my temper. Because Norris was going to HURT SOMEBODY, and I can take my clothes off WHENEVER I WANT. “You’re TALKING to the alien. And I may be a lot of less-than-pristine things, but I’m definitely no demon.”

She gazes at me for a minute, eyebrows still raised, then sits back in her chair. “Well,” she says. “This calls for a cigarette.”

She digs around in her bag with, I’m amused to note, shaking hands, fishes out a gold lighter and a pack of Virginia Slims. Sparks one up, and the smoke swirls around her, smelling as cool as she
seems. "So who are you?" she asks, expelling plumes from her nostrils.

"A regular girl," I say. "From a different place. I’m not showing up here on purpose. It just… happens."

"What’s up in your life, while you’re here?" She wants to know. "Do you just, like, slip into suspended animation or something?"

"I have no idea," I say. "I haven’t been back home since this started. When I’m not here I go… somewhere else."

"Are you a ghost?" she demands, brown eyes getting big. Whether from fear or fascination, I can’t tell. Maybe a bit of both?

"Not as far as I know."

"Wow." She shoves my scones aside, and ashes onto the plate. "So why do you come HERE? Why take over Veronica?"

"Aren’t you going to get in trouble for smoking in a restaurant?" I ask, instead of answering.

She rolls her eyes. "Mara doesn’t care. That’s why we meet in this place. Now tell me everything, because Veronica is stressing, and she can’t leave it alone."

"I’m here to help her," I say. "I know about events in her future that I’m trying to prevent. For example, something has to be done to neutralize Stewart Manning, like this week, or he’ll force Meg to lie about Veronica shooting Felix, and Veronica will end up in jail."

"Are you SERIOUS?" she demands, stubbing out the cigarette on the plate.

"As taxes," I say. "Stewart Manning’s a child abuser and a religious freak, he’s standing in a glass house. Somewhere around here, there must be a big enough rock to shatter it."

"Why is Meg helping?" she wonders, as if thinking out loud. "Is she afraid?"

"Pretty sure it’s her sister," I say. "The one you’ve never seen. Meg and Lizzie are close to grown, but Grace is much younger. He makes Grace fill notebooks with quotes from Scripture, and locks her in a closet when she ‘sins’. That’s what the letter to CPS was. Meg, trying to get her out."

"Then we help Meg," Carrie decides. "If we can get proof, he loses custody, and Meg has no reason to screw Veronica."

"What kind of proof would be decisive?" I muse. "He’s a powerful guy, even a good cop wouldn’t arrest without something damning."

"Video always works," she says. "I bet it would convince the Sheriff, at least. Do you have a hidden camera?"

"If I don’t, I know where to buy one." I sit back, arms crossed, and study her. "So I have to ask. Why are you helping me? Why is Veronica confiding in you? Because the last time I saw you here, I did NOT get the impression the two of you were friends."

Her smile is marginally bigger this time: she enjoys having the upper hand. "That’s between me and Veronica,” she says. “And I’m helping HER, not you. I’m not even sure I trust you: we’ll see whether I get burned, for pitching in on this.”
“Will you at least explain why she calls you Alice?”

She taps a fingernail against the side of her teacup. “Because we went down the rabbit hole together. And that’s all you need to know.”

“All right,” I say. “I’ll figure out how to get the proof we need, and be in touch. Expect to hear from me soon.”

She nods, and shoulders her bag. “I’m not sure it’s been a pleasure, exactly, but it’s been… interesting. Whoever you are.” She gives me a mildly mocking finger wave, and turns to go.

“Hey Carrie?” I call, when she’s halfway to the door. She comes back.

“When you talk to Veronica about this? Let her know I don’t mean her any harm. And tell her she can email me at the kittenfancy address, if there’s anything she wants to say.”

She quirks a brow. “Kitten fancy?”

It’s a joke account Lilly and I used, to send each other (and Logan) ridiculous celebrity fan mail, when we were 13. But Carrie has way too much sensitive data about me already. “Veronica will understand.”

She smiles, arch, and swirls away, long, cool confident strides. I slump in my chair, and fulminate.

Lilly comes bouncing in, a few minutes later, in the frivolous outfit/sensible shoes combo she wears power-shopping. “Yum, scones!” she exclaims, flopping into the chair, selecting the biggest one. She examines it for ash. “So how did the favor-dispensing go? You’re wearing that face weak people fear.”

“We need to do something more important than shopping, tonight,” I say, looking up at her, intent. “It’s dangerous, and I don’t trust the person I just met to have my back. But I trust you. Are you in?”

“REALLY dangerous?” She widens her eyes, wiggles her shoulders in excitement. Takes a gigantic bite. “Do you even need to ASK?”

I smile. “Right, danger’s your middle name. How could I forget? OK, here’s what we need to do. And don’t tell anyone, because if the guys find out we’re courting trouble like this, they will NOT be happy.”

XXXXX

“Lils, we’re here. Are we clear on the plan?” I park my Mercedes around the corner from the Manning house, and poke her to get her attention.

She’s fixing her lip liner in the makeup mirror, but rolls her eyes at this. “It’s not like it’s complicated, Veronica. We sneak in, videotape the awful evidence, leave without a trace, and take it to your dad. The whole family’s at that stupid fundraiser, anyway, it said so on his website. You lied to me, when you told me this was dangerous.”

“It IS illegal,” I offer, and she shoots me A Look.

“I’m in it to help the little girl,” she warns. “Plus, I like the outfit. If nothing else, we got some EXCELLENT spy clothes out of this scenario.”

Lilly insisted we go shopping, for appropriate breaking-and-entering gear. She’s channeling Emma
Peel, in a skintight catsuit and sensible flats, her hair pulled back in Heidi braids. I’m in black jeans, a black Nehru jacket, and a red v-neck with a ninja graphic, which is as far as I would bend. She’s got my new (and heinously expensive) spy pen tucked into a pocket on her chest, so only the lens peeks out: it makes a bump in the Lycra, because the pocket’s small and her boobs are gigantic, but whatever. I’m glad she’s here. She’s got twice Duncan’s brains, and four times his balls, so she’s a much better co-conspirator.

The house is relatively modest, considering the family’s wealth and prominence. Guess Stewart didn’t want to upgrade, and risk buyers finding his torture dungeon. Picking the lock’s easier than using a key.

“No security system?” Lilly marvels, as we enter the cozy, darkened kitchen. “What, are they Amish?”

“Maybe just smug?” I turn on my penlight and play it along the walls, searching for the path to Grace’s bedroom. “God only punishes the unbelievers, remember?”

Lilly snorts, and clicks the camera to start filming. “Lead the way.”

It looks just like I remember, cozy and normal, making me that much more queasy. I locate the stacks of notebooks with ease, and stuff one into my messenger bag as proof, then motion over Lilly to film the rest. “Ronica?” she murmurs, turning the pages. “I want to hurt this guy.”

“Wait ‘til you see what he keeps in reserve, to REALLY drive the devil out,” I say, locating the hidden latch, swinging the false closet wall open.

And there’s little Grace, in her sad, white nightgown, clutching herself and shivering. She’s pale and thin, with dark circles under her eyes, and she cringes in fear at the sight of us.

“Holy shit,” Lilly says flatly, her voice dipping dangerously low. “Veronica, get a blanket from the bed.”

She reaches for Grace, who flinches back, and Lilly crouches to make herself smaller. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I’m not going to hurt you. My name’s Lilly, what’s yours?”

“Grace,” the little girl whispers, soft breath of sound. “I’m supposed to be in here. I was bad.”

“Grace, you look cold,” Lilly soothes, through gritted teeth. “No one will know if you wrap up in a blanket, to get warm. Nobody’s here but us.” She holds out a hand, behind her, and I set a patchwork quilt in it. “Can I wind this around you?” she asks.

Grace nods, and Lilly tucks the blanket carefully about her arms and legs, making a hood for her head. “Sweetie, how long do you have to stay in the closet, before you can come out?”

“Until I repent,” Grace tells us, pulling the blanket tight.

“Repent? Does that mean sorry?” The girl nods, and Lilly says, “I bet you ARE sorry, right?”

Grace nods again, and Lilly offers, “OK, then how about you come out, and we get you something hot to drink? Apple cider or cocoa, something yummy and sweet.”

“Lils,” I warn, but she holds up a silencing hand.

“I don’t want to be tested,” Grace says, seeming agitated, and Lilly spreads her hands out flat in a calming gesture.
“OK. I understand. Nobody’s going to test you. Tell you what, I’m just gonna leave this door open, so you’re not in the dark. You get warm while I talk to my friend, here, and then we’ll figure out the safest thing to do.”

Lilly grabs my wrist and drags me into the kitchen. In the thin moonlight that filters through the sheers, I can see her face is white with rage. “What’s your PROBLEM? I’m trying to coax her out of there without terrifying her, and you are NOT helping!”

“Lilly, we can’t take that child out of her home! It’s kidnapping! We need to report this, and let the COPS rescue her. We can call them now.”

“Oh, suddenly you’re concerned about laws? What the hell, Ronica? I’m not letting her sit in the dark for weeks, waiting to get ‘tested’, while the wheels of justice spin!”

“So your answer is to ABduct her? You don’t want to end up in jail, Lils! It is NOT a NICE PLACE!”

“Veronica,” she says. “You don’t understand what it is, to have an adult you trust betray you. And I’m glad of that. But I DO. And there’s no FUCKING way I’m leaving that child in that SHOEBOX for one more minute. I don’t care how much trouble I get into, and you shouldn’t either. I’m taking her, whether you like it or not: and frankly, if you try to stop me, I’ll kick your ass.”

I swallow. The biggest mistake of my life was helping Duncan kidnap Meg’s baby, in light of his rage seizures, poorly medicated schizophrenia, and striking lack of empathy. It strained my relationships with my dad, and Logan, to the limit: and I still have nightmares, sometimes, about what little Lilly’s life is like, now.

But the reason I did it was to ease my guilt. Because I was too afraid to help Grace, and Logan, get free of their abusers, even though I knew what they were suffering.

“I’m in,” I say, taking a deep breath. “But we go STRAIGHT to my dad. Like first stop, do not pass go. Agreed?”

She nods, and hugs me, marches back to the bedroom. Nothing frivolous about her in the moment, all masks dropped.

Grace is peering around the closet door when we enter, small face framed by the patchwork quilt.

“Honey,” Lilly says, crouching down again. “I’ve been where you are, and I know grown-ups are hard to trust. But I PROMISE you this. I have a lot of money, and I am very, very strong. If you come with me, right now, I will make SURE you’re safe, and happy, and you never have to sit in a closet again.”

No one moves, for a long moment. Then, very slowly, Grace creeps into the light. She approaches Lilly, and puts a hand on her arm. “Can I have the cocoa?” she asks, her voice stronger. “And a muffin?”

“Absolutely,” Lilly says, and picks her up, surreptitiously brushing tears away on the blanket. “In fact, you can have two.”

Lilly carries her out, into the night: buckles her into the back seat of the convertible, blanket and all. She’s asleep before we’re halfway to the Sheriff’s station.
Devils Are Dreaming of a Blue Angel

Chapter Notes

The surf scene in this chapter was inspired by one of Lilamadison11’s lovely artworks, so credit where it’s due. Trigger warning for non-graphic discussion of assault, and the twisted mind of Cassidy Casablancas.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

THREAD SEVENTEEN

I’m sitting on a bench, on yet another college campus. I’ve got a hamburger in my hand, Loki sprawled across my feet, and I’m gazing blankly at a squirrel in a tree. I’ve never been here before, but this place I recognize, from brochures: it’s Stanford.

I know I should be freaked, about just appearing in some random present, AGAIN. But I’m shell-shocked from yesterday, and way tired, and hungry, besides. I unwrap the burger, take a bite.

There’s a commotion to my right, and I glance over as Logan flops down next to me. He’s in his standard going-to-class uniform of semi-clean t-shirt, shredded bell bottoms and skater shoes, and his hair looks like he just rolled out of bed. He’s got the black and white dog on a leash: she and Loki seem acquainted, because they immediately start wrestling, tangling each other up.

“You ready?” Logan asks, ignoring the chaos unfolding at our feet. He wipes a smear of mustard from my cheek.

“Sure,” I say, fatalistically, through a big bite. I seem to be in Prison! Reality, but not just out of prison, and Logan and I are interacting without angst. After the day I just had, that counts as a double win.

I unclip Loki, make him lie down while I unsnarl the mess: I’m hindered by the black dog, who keeps licking my face. I surreptitiously check her tag (Lulu), and tell her to sit. She does, albeit whining and fidgeting. I guess she’s just young and enthusiastic, not untrained.

Logan grabs the gym bag and surfboard resting against the bench, gestures me forward with his chin. “You want to stop for coffee, on the way?” he asks. “It’s about an hour’s drive.”

“Perfect,” I say, and he bumps my shoulder companionably, the way he used to when he was with Lilly, and we were friends. I smile at him, he smiles back, and I revise that to ‘friends, but he wants more’.

“So what have you been up to this morning?” I ask, as he straps the surfboard to the roof rack, along with several others. I open the back door, usher in the dogs.

“I had a test in my Legal Ethics class, and then I did Classical Civilizations. Today, my teacher showed up in a hooded cape, and we watched a slideshow of Greek monuments shaped like giant dicks.”

“Do you mean metaphorically?” I wonder, as he helps me into the passenger seat.
“No, I mean 20-foot-high stone carvings of erect penises. Apparently the Ancient Greeks liked their porn public, and visible from space.”

I laugh, because seriously, only in college. “I still don’t understand how you got into Stanford. But I bet you’re sorry, now.”

He arches a brow at me. “Hey, I may not have been Pan High Valedictorian, like you were, but I WAS number nine in my class. AND I almost aced my SAT’s, AND I’m a rich, hot celebrity, so everybody wants me. Face it, Mars, sometimes the silver spoon comes in handy.”

Pan High? I think, startled. I didn’t go to Neptune, Senior Year?

“You WISH you could have graduated from the normal, no-soap-operas school,” I try, fishing.

“Yeah, that wouldn’t have been awkward,” he says, voice bone dry. “Considering you spent the whole year pretending I didn’t exist. Besides,” he adds, eyes softening as he reads my face, “I can’t escape the soap opera. It follows me everywhere, like my own personal rain cloud.”

“Well, you ARE an Echolls, of the Hollywood Echollses,” I intone, doing my best Robin Leach. “Power comes at a price.”

He smirks at this, but doesn’t respond, focused on merging onto the highway. I continue to dig. “So what’s everybody up to these days? How’s Mac?”

“Mac.” He frowns, distracted by a road-ragey pickup. “Mac Mackenzie, that techie girl who hung around the Casablancases, summer before last? The one who came to a couple of our Justice League meetings, and hacked Weevil’s bank account? I think Dick said she got a scholarship to MIT.” He shoots me a glance. “Why do you care how she is? Is this one of your seemingly random questions that’s actually a subtle trap?”

I shake my head, heart hammering. “Just wondering about the old gang. No need to get paranoid.”

He sighs. “Well, AS YOU WOULD KNOW, if you’d kept in touch with anybody: Dick and Lils are at Berkeley, Wallace got a basketball scholarship to Hearst, and Casey’s off ‘finding himself’ in Tibet.”

“What about Weevil?” I ask. “And Beaver, and Meg?”

This time, he stares at me a lot longer, and I nudge him to keep his attention on the road. “Veronica,” he says. “Whatever it is you’re trying to find out, just ask. Because I know we stopped being friends, for a while, but there’s NO WAY you’ve quit obsessively reading the paper.”

“I’d just like to hear the Neptune High version,” I improvise. “It comes with juicy not-fit-for-print details, especially as told by the world’s second-biggest snoop.”

One corner of his lips curls up. “Thank you for qualifying,” he says. “To answer your incredibly bizarre question, Weevil and Beaver remain missing, and Meg remains dead. The gossip is that Weevil fled to Mexico and joined the Sinaloa Cartel, and Beaver is a serial killer, roaming the country under an assumed name. Meg, of course, has assumed her rightful place in heaven, beside all the other pretty, do-gooding virgins who died too soon. You want to ask me what my mom is up to, next? It’s not like THE WHOLE WORLD has heard about the David Fincher heist movie with Hugh Jackman.”

I shove his shoulder and he says, “Watch it, I’m driving,” and shoves me back. We tussle for a minute, then he puts his arm around me, kisses the top of my head. “I missed you,” he says. “And
your bulldog tenacity, and your complete lack of sympathy for the losers in your sights. Ask as many pointless questions as you want, provided you stick around.”

“OK,” I say, fiddling with the air vent. “I’ll take full advantage. But I’m warning you, the next one’s off the wall, and probably offensive.”

He huffs a laugh. “Of course it is. Lay it on me, Veronica. I’m sure, at some point in my sordid life, I’ve heard worse.”

I breathe deep. “Knocked anyone up, recently?”

He looks at me, eyebrows raised to maximum height. Shakes his head, turns back to the road. “You know,” he says, conversationally, “sometimes I don’t understand you. I haven’t had a girlfriend, or even a sex life, in ten months, which is frankly the longest I’ve gone since puberty. And if that’s not obvious, you’ve got some serious cognitive dissonance going on.”

“What?” I whisper, watching his face. “Why haven’t you dated, I mean?”

He laughs, without humor. “Because eleven months ago, you sent me a postcard of Laird Hamilton surfing in Hawaii, and wrote ‘This reminded me of you’. And ten months ago, you let me buy you a burger, put your head on my shoulder, and whispered, ‘I missed us so much’. Of course, you ran away shortly thereafter, when I said I was still in love with you, but it was progress from the silent treatment. You want me to keep going?”

I nod, and he continues. “Eight months ago, you showed up on my doorstep, even though I’d never told you where I lived, or even that I followed you to Stanford. You cried on my chest, said everyone in your pre-law program hated you, and asked if you could sleep on my couch.”

He smiles, running his knuckles along my cheek. “Six months ago, you suggested a weekly pizza and movie night. Three months ago, you told me you loved me too, but it was all very complicated, and I didn’t understand. Five weeks ago, you kissed me on the bridge, and said if we could take it really slow, you wanted to try again. And for the last four days, you’ve let me hold you all night, while you slept.”

He laughs, tears slipping down his cheeks, and he’s Logan, so he’s not even embarrassed. “Why would I date anyone else, if I had the chance to be with you, Veronica? With that kind of encouragement, after a year of nothing, I would have waited way longer. My life has been a series of epic fails: but even I’m not enough of an idiot to throw away my last shot at the girl of my dreams.”

I press my lips together and gaze out the window, curling my hand through his to indicate remorse. Because it doesn’t sound, to me, like he threw anything away. It sounds like I did. And that just feels WRONG.

Logan and I disagree, fiercely and often: but neither of us channels Duncan, making the problematic person invisible, making them wonder why they’re scorned. We name our issues, face to face. We explain why we’re walking away. If he’d done something horrible, something I wouldn’t forgive, he wouldn’t be here today, asking for a second chance. He wouldn’t feel he had the right. And I’d have made him pay on the spot, all guns blazing.

I assumed my problems in Prison! Reality sprung from, well, prison: I assumed my trial and conviction were what differentiated this timeline from the others. But that’s clearly not the case. There may have been a trial here (although I tend to think not, since Stanford accepted me), but there was no conviction. And in any case, I jettisoned my life before the trial could have occurred.
Something else happened in summer ’05 that made me feel the way my mother did once, as if the only way to cope was to run. It went down in this timeline, but for some reason, not the others, which means it’s the pivot point. And the evidence tells me it wasn’t Logan’s fault: on the contrary, I cut off all contact, to ensure he’d never know.

“I love your sappy romantic speeches,” I say, into the stillness, and he coughs out a surprised chuckle. “Thank you for giving me time.”

“You’re welcome,” he tells me, with a sidelong glance. He rests our joined hands on his thigh, and the corner of his mouth settles into a faint curl.

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“You just want Starbucks because you crave the gallon-size, double-syrup, whipped-cream Frappucino,” Logan accuses. Like this is a crime. He pulls up by the lone pump at a tiny gas station, kills the engine. “And possibly some baked goods. Your hedonism is blinding you to their criminal lack of quality.”

“Oh yeah, I’M the hedonist in this car,” I retort. “All I had for lunch was a burger, and it did not stick to these ribs.”

“This place has REALLY good espresso,” he wheedles. “And clean single-person bathrooms, where you can change. There’s a cooler full of food in the back, too, in case your tapeworm gets peckish.”

“It’s not ‘if’, it’s ‘when’,” I correct, shouldering my duffel. “Make my shot a quadruple. And there had better be Nacho Cheese Doritos in that cooler, or we’re stopping again.”

The store’s a typical Quik-Stop, in a small coastal town: it’s got lifejackets and flares, bait and shades, ‘I heart surfing’ tees in yellow and pink. A coffee counter lines one wall, utilitarian but sparkling: and the ladies’ is, as advertised, clean, well-lit, and lockable.

I strip efficiently, tie on a black bikini, shaking my head at the off-again absence of Schrodinger’s Pregnancy. Then the light catches my skin, and I freeze. Creep closer.

There are nine long scars extending across my stomach, from just below my breasts to my bikini line, barely visible against my fish-belly coloring. They’re white with age, so at least a year old: and they flare out in a pattern, like sun’s rays. Somebody cut into my body, made it performance art, and never once faltered.

Was I drugged or tied, when this happened? Did I lose my mind, do it to myself? Did it serve as a warning, or some sicko’s daily fun? Suddenly, the weight of all I don’t know about my life is oppressive, panic-inducing. I’ve felt, for some time now, as if the slipstream was swallowing me: and the horror of this new discovery hurts. It hurts like seeing Lilly, dead on the ground.

I think about what Logan said, a couple days ago, at Mars Investigations: I’d have been in jail every week, visiting, but you told me to let you rot. God knows what I was hiding…a lot, it seems. I feel an ache of sympathy for Prison! Veronica. She had to cope with the derailment of her life, a Logan-impregnated Mac, his ardent desire to atone, and this.

I spent a year agonizing over forgotten atrocities, what-iffing my blackout at Shelly’s party: gang rape, internet videos, Dick and Sean, tag-teaming. The secret Jake Ryan fantasy of my tween years, Logan, spewing acid commentary as he defiled. And the rapists turned out to be two mentally ill nerds, ignorant of each other’s actions, who thought normal love beyond their reach.

I hope Prison! Veronica doesn’t have to imagine what happened.
I struggle into my rash guard and wetsuit, hands shaking, and find my way outside, blinking back sunshine. I fumble in my bag for shades. I don’t know what to say, what to do: I can barely remember where I am. I feel lost at sea, surrounded by submerged dangers, no land in sight.

Then I spot him, lying on the hood of his Range Rover, parked by a retaining wall. Same pose he chose Original! Junior Year, just before he smashed my headlights. He’s got the dogs sprawled across him, his black mutt Lulu, my Loki: all three content to just be. The dogs doze, and he’s tucked his hands behind his head, taking the world as it comes.

I feel a great weightless sensation, pain sliding south, like it’s dripping out my feet and draining into the ground. The one saving grace, across all these realities, is the small group of people who continue to love me. No matter what I do, or who I am. And Logan’s foremost among them.

I need him, I realize. Not as a sexual craving, a drug. Not as love’s young, shining dream. I need him to be my heart, my warm safe place to rest. To care for the parts of me I neglect. To shine a light on my shadows, so I can see I’m whole.

It doesn’t matter how the other Veronicas feel about me wanting him, I realize. I can’t fight this battle alone. Just like Piz is permanently out, consequences be damned? Logan, in every reality where he’s willing, is permanently in.

I walk to the car and climb up, wedging between him and Loki. They make room, encircle me, his arm, both dogs’ snouts.

“Suited up and ready to rumble,” I say, after a while, sun glowing red through my closed lids. He squeezes me silently, kisses my temple.

“No rush.” He shrugs, like it doesn’t matter. “The waves happen when they happen. We’ll do what you want, on your schedule.”

“I want to be wherever you are,” I tell him, turning my face into his chest. “You’re my home.”

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Logan plants the boards—his big one, my little one—in the sand, nose up, and studies me, wiping spray off his forehead with the back of his hand. “So what do you remember?” he asks. “You still know how to chicken wing?”

I shrug, because I have no recollection of ever surfing. I’m not sure if it’s one of those body-memory things, like riding a bike: I might well flail.

He rolls his eyes. “Right, let’s just start over. This is your board.” He whips the towel out of my beach bag, spreads it on the sand. Toes a line down the center, making a dent. “There’s your midline, keep that under the arches of your feet. Now, lie down on your stomach, I’m gonna stand behind you.”

I raise my eyebrows at this, and he laughs. “To get you in position,” he clarifies, suggestively wiggling his.

I comply, with a snort, and he crouches at my feet. “OK, hands under your chest, arch your back, curl your toes. Like it’s Yoga Night, and you’re doing up-dog/down-dog. Bend your knee, this way.” He grasps my ankle, slides my foot up towards my hip. It feels sexual. I’m flooded with awareness, and when I glance back at him, I can see he thinks the same. He smiles at me, then gazes out to sea, breathing in calm.
“Good. Now, get on your toes again,” he continues, voice husky. “Push with your hands, and the foot of the chicken wing, then pop your left leg through to the front.”

“This isn’t the way YOU do it,” I accuse, letting him guide me. He keeps his touch light, doesn’t linger.

“Well, no,” he admits, coming around to the side, cocking his head to watch several iterations. “A little faster. See, Ronica, I don’t have tiny, frail twig arms like you do. It’s amazing you can lift any weight at all.”

I punch him in the chest, and he does an exaggerated wince, rubbing the spot. “Into the water,” he says. “You remember this part just fine.”

We paddle out, not too far from the beach, to a spot just past the baby waves, cresting. “OK, safety first,” Logan calls, straddling his board, not bothering to hold on. “When you can’t make it up the wave before it breaks, or when some oblivious hotshot veers right at you, turtle roll.” He grips the sides of his board and flips himself, submerging. A stream of bubbles surfaces, near the prow, and then he turns back over. “Keep your elbows bent, toes on the board, body up close. And hang on tight, because the sea will try to rip it out of your hands. Take a deep breath first, blow out slowly while you’re under. Show me.”

I inhale, grit my teeth, give it a try. Exhale a thin stream, while the water distorts the foam, and sky, and yellow board above me. It’s peaceful down below, just in that moment, an embrace. I wrestle the board upright, and sprawl atop.

“See?” he asks, from beside me, hand coming to rest lightly on my back. “Your body remembers everything. You want to practice duck dives, or catch a wave?”

“Wave,” I say, and he grins, spraying sunlit water droplets as he tosses his head.

“Watch me first,” he orders, and takes off paddling, mounting the crest and popping up like it’s child’s play. “What happens when I lean back too far?” he yells.

I know this, I’ve seen it, but I do a big, ingenuous shrug. He laughs, puts his weight on his rear heel, and obligingly pratfalls. In a minute, his board bobs up, then he does, and he bounces aboard and returns to me.

“I assume you know what happens if I lean forward? Or stand up straight?”

“You should demonstrate,” I say, and he flattens his lips in mock disappointment.

“Yeah, I think I’ll save my energy, so I can keep up with you. Now, recap. Paddle hard up the slope, while it’s still green, no foam. When you feel your tail lift, maybe five more strokes with your arms, then pop up. And you’re watching the wave over your shoulder the whole time, right? To make sure it’s not cresting.” He points two fingers at my eyes, then his. “You and the wave are one. You go straight at it on approach, perpendicular, and ride it forward ‘til it’s done, no turning or grandstanding. Got me?”

I thumbs-up, and he leans in to kiss my forehead. “Good. Get out there and show me how badass you are.” He gives a theatrical arm wave, like I should make the world my oyster. And I feel great, I feel brave. So I go.

I paddle hard: the rushing fills my ears, and I find my body DOES remember—it KNOWS this. I pop up, my arms swing out for balance, and then I’m hydroplaning down the water, like I’m sliding across ice. I glance over at him, and he’s cheering. The shift in position makes me fall, but that’s OK.
I did it.

I sink down deep, foam crashing over me, into a green-grey forest of writhing kelp. Strands twine around my legs, fish stroke past, and I feel incredibly PRESENT: every millisecond seems separate, vital. Then my board floats up far enough to yank me by the tether, and I kick to it, grab hold. Drift through crystal blue, towards the sun.

I break the surface, shaking water out of my eyes, climb back on. I can see him, in the near distance, so I paddle that way. He’s grinning, I notice. Like he KNOWS.

“That was…” I say. Shake my head, seeking words. “I felt so FREE!”

His smile softens, lingering in his eyes. He grabs hold of my board, tugs me closer. “Imagine this times a million,” he says, caressingly. “Imagine shooting the curl of a big wave, balanced in the Green Room, belly of the beast. Crest curving around. All you can hear is the sea.”

He strokes across my forehead with the tips of his fingers, brushing back my hair. “That’s how it is for me, every day, when you’re in my life. That moment where I’m perfectly balanced on top of this…unfathomable force of nature. It could crush me, without even meaning to. But it doesn’t. I ride it.” He takes my hand, kisses my fingers. “God’s honest truth, Veronica. I’m a surf-or-die guy, and you’re the world’s biggest wave. It’s what I love best about you.”

I pull him closer by our linked hands and kiss him, his mouth a hot shock after the burning cold. We bob together, two small bits of human flotsam, insignificant against the great unknown. But somehow, it feels all right.

“I want to do it AGAIN,” I say, when we break apart, and his laugh is…joyful. A sound I’ve never heard, from any version of Logan Echolls. He seems more intensely himself, in this moment, than he’s ever been.

“No turning back,” he taunts. “You’re one of us now, Gidge.”

He jerks his head, and I paddle out after him, to wait for the next wave.

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We get in the car and drive once we’re spent, holding hands on the gear shift. Peaceful silence descends. He doesn’t ask, I don’t tell, and that seems fine. He pulls into a Dairy Queen drive-through, gets the largest size of chocolate-dipped cones, and we chase the cracks and leaks with our tongues as he turns onto the highway.

He takes me to the house with the bougainvilleas, and the Spanish-tiled roof: like there’s a homing beacon in the weather vane, like it’s our supra-reality den. My mouth crooks as I catch on, and his does the same. I remember I lost my virginity, here, and know why he brought me. This is where he wants to reunite. This place feels ours, and safe.

We walk inside. It’s dusty and closed up, long-unused, half-forgotten. He goes around the den, sliding back curtains, unlatching windows, and light and air flood in, dazzling me.

“Better,” I say, half-lidded in the cool breeze, the buttery shine.

The dogs are sniffing, cataloguing, as Logan heads off to the bedroom, Lulu eager to tussle, Loki bent to his task. I follow him through the door, shutting them both out. I find him shaking the comforter and re-spreading it, making things clean.
“I have scars,” I say, as he smoothes it, and he looks up at me. His hair is bronze in this light, his stubble sparkles copper: his eyes are carnelians. There’s always been something magical about him, for me. Right now he reminds me of Native American stories, coyotes that turn into men, lie so well they trick the Gods. I guess that’s what love is. You look at the imperfect person who holds your heart, and see them as sublime.

He straightens. “Front or back?” he asks, approaching. He’s not surprised. I guess he knew only something awful had the power to tear us apart.

“Front,” I say, curling my hands around his biceps. “Don’t be upset, when you see.”

He takes his brown t-shirt off, reaching behind him to yank it over his head. He turns his back to me: and for the first time, in full sun, in any reality, he lets me look. “That means we match,” he says, over his shoulder. “And neither of us needs pity.”

I trace a finger through the mess Aaron made of him, lines crossing lines, rough spots that got infected. It’s all very faint, faded in the last three years to a subtle discoloration. Not even visible, from a few feet away. But when I touch, I feel each one.

I take off my own shirt, and his mouth tightens, as he registers the deliberate way it was done. He draws a thumb across my cheekbone, then kneels to kiss my stomach, all compassion, no judgment. A benediction flows from his lips. I grow calm.

“I love you,” I say, threading my fingers through his hair. “I always have.”

“Likewise,” he says, and stands to kiss me, in full acceptance, in full sun.

THREAD SEVENTEEN INVERTS

I wake in the back seat of Dick’s jouncing jeep, just before sunset on a warm summer night. I’m wedged in the center, leaning on Logan’s shoulder: he’s out cold, cheek pressed against the window. Wallace slouches in the other corner, rubbing his half-mast eyes and yawning. We’re all in beach gear, rash guards and suits, sandy and bleached. Somnolent, from too much sun. Even Dick and Casey, trading insults up front, seem ragged and wiped.

The car jostles to a halt, and Logan comes awake, in his usual still, unobtrusive way. “Hey, sunshine,” I say, and he blinks at me, smiles. I lean in to kiss him. His arms come up around me, pressing me close: he tastes of brine and salt.

“Last stop, Dog Beach!” Dick yells, making us all jerk. “Everybody out, I’ve got a date. I need to go groom myself, so I’m EVEN MORE devastatingly handsome!”

We tumble onto the heat-saturated, parking-lot cement. I dig my messenger bag out of the foot well, while Logan unstraps boards, yawning into his forearm.

I locate my phone, find a text from Dad waiting. ‘Having dinner with a mutual friend. Join us and say hello? 7:30, 8814 Serenity Terrace.”

I yawn and stretch: intercept Logan as he comes around the car, carrying our boards. “You look wiped,” I say, brushing sand out from under his eye. “I’ve got a dinner date with Dad. You up to joining us, or you want to head home and veg?”

“I was gonna play Call of Duty with Casey,” he says. “Lie in the air conditioning, have some beers. Let me check and see if he’s still up for it. I’ll be right back.”
I nod, and he heads for the XTerra, to stow our boards. I text back, ‘OK if I’m late? Just got dropped at my car, will clean up and see u in @ 40 min’. Then I make for my Mercedes.

“Whoa! Hey V, hold up,” Wallace calls. He abandons Logan with the boards, and jogs over, rubbing his salt-frosted hair. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Step into my office,” I say, sitting on the hood of my car, patting the adjacent spot. He joins me, leaning back on his hands.

“Listen, I just want to say thanks.” He scratches his nose, combining embarrassment with his usual Wallace good-heartedness. “Logan told me what you did, the other night at the beach: said he only noticed that guy about to stab me because you kept screaming my name. And according to Casey, you almost got your brains beat in, trying to come help.”

He holds up a hand, when I start to respond. “I know you’re gonna say it was nothing, because that’s what you do, right? You save people. You bribed Weevil to save ME, the first day we met, when you had no reason to care. But I want you to know I feel lucky, having someone like you in my corner. Even though I nag you like a Grandma, from time to time, about treating my boy right.”

I feel a smile bursting out, around the edges of my mouth: I can’t contain it. “What are friends for?”

He grins back, holds a hand out for me to high-five. I try, and he does the too-slow jerk-away. I laugh, and shove his shoulder, and this is SO much better than yesterday. I think maybe I’ll make a spirit box for his locker, next time I find myself near a kitchen.

“So where were you off to in such a hurry, anyhow?” he asks.

“Meeting my dad,” I say. “It’s already 7:45, I’m late, and I still have to shower and dress. You know where this address is?”

He takes my phone and studies it, frowning. “This is Dick’s mom’s house. Hey Logan!” He switches to a yell. “Get your pasty ass over here a minute!”

Logan jogs across the lot, Casey following. He rests a hand on my shoulder. “You rang?”

Wallace forks over my phone, and Logan frowns too. “Dude, I gotta take a raincheck,” he tells Casey. “Something just came up.”

“Something always does, when Veronica’s around,” Casey says slyly, and Logan flips him off. “OK, I’m gonna head over to Ashley’s party. Have some drinks, brood about Darcy. Give me a ring, if you free up later.”

He shakes with Wallace and Logan, kisses my cheek, saunters off. In the background, I see Dick’s jeep peel out, at high velocity.

“OK, what’s with the Praetorian Guard, all of a sudden?” I ask, narrowing my eyes.

Logan hands my cell back. “Beaver lives there. We’re coming with you.”

I look at Wallace, who shrugs, but doesn’t seem contrite. “He’s on the list of people we don’t engage alone,” he explains. “Your list, your rule.”

“I’m meeting my dad!” I protest. “You know, the Sheriff?”

“I like Keith,” Wallace says, implacably. “We’ll talk baseball.”
“Oh, whatever,” I grouse, tossing my bag into the car. “You two can rock-paper-scissors for who sits in back.”

“If you ever let me marry you,” Logan warns, “or even be your sugar daddy, the first thing I’m buying you is a car that actually seats four.”

“Like I trust your taste,” I say, revving the engine. “You wear orange break-dancing pants, and your SUV is YELLOW.”

Man, I am moving IN to one of y’all’s houses, Senior Year,” Wallace declares, as I gun the engine, and we peel away from Jake and Lianne’s. “The hot water never runs out, you’ve got big, fluffy towels the size of football fields, and none of your parents even ASK what time you’re coming home.”

“That’s because they don’t CARE,” I say, rounding the corner and pulling up at a light. “Your mother micromanages because she wants to protect you. You’re LUCKY.”

“Look, I love my mom,” Wallace agrees, with an easy grin. “But those towels are a considerable temptation.”

“Dude, I’ll BUY you towels,” Logan says. “Shit you can fix by throwing money around so doesn’t matter. Whereas your mom, and her chicken cacciatore, are past price.”

“You said the same damn thing about the ham and cheese casserole, even though it had potato chips on top,” Wallace scoffs, giving me a look like he knows I’ll agree. “I think you secretly want to be part of the Waltons.”

I can’t contain a laugh at this, and Logan scowls at me in the rearview. But I can practically SEE him charming the socks off Alicia Fennel, to score an invite to One Dish Supper Night, and I find the image both touching and sad.

“I’ll never actually BE wholesome,” Logan admits, maybe reading my mind. “But yeah, I could play it on TV. My mom’s agent’s been trying to get me into the business since I was 11. He says I have MOJO.”

“You’d make an excellent Eddie Haskell,” I concede, which cracks Wallace up. He laughs for like 30 seconds and then gasps, “The sweater vests!”

“OR we could grease your hair into a pompadour,” I continue, pretending to get serious. “And you could do your sexy Ricky Nelson pout. What do you think, sugar lumps? 50’s bad boy, or 50’s Bad Boy?”

“I think I’m more of a Cool Hand Luke,” he counters, with a snarl, and this makes me laugh, too.

“That’s GOOD,” I say. “Keep that expression on your face all evening, it’s an EXCELLENT bodyguard scowl. Wallace, can you do it, too?”

“Nah, I’m more about action,” he says, as I pull into the drive of Bettina’s bungalow, park. “I’ll use my recently acquired skills, to neutralize threats.”

I raise my eyebrows as I climb out. Logan vaults the door, Dukes of Hazard style, to walk beside me. “Surfing?”
“Wallace and I have been working with Casey’s trainer,” Logan explains. “Alicia made me pay for five lessons a week, for both of us, because I got him into a fight. He’s way better than me.” Logan gives Wallace a shove. “Show her your moves, man.”

“V WISHES she could see my moves.” Wallace leans in, confiding. “I’m better because I can DANCE. Whereas he just shuffles around in a sad-ass circle, and tries to look brooding.”

“Don’t say that in front of your mother. She’ll make me take foxtrot lessons, too.”

“Maybe then you wouldn’t put up such a pathetic showing, next time we play Dance Dance Revolution,” Wallace counters. “I am NEVER letting you on my team again.”

Logan points at Wallace’s face. “Hey, I maintain it’s not a real video game unless someone’s spine gets ripped out.”

“I’ll rip out your spine,” Wallace says, and they start scuffling.

I shake my head, amused by their BROTP now that I feel included. I have to admit, as much as I think MY Wallace is the Most Amazing Human Ever? I like the look of confidence on this one. He doesn’t depend on me for protection, and that’s good for his self-esteem.

Logan shoves him off, laughing. “Dude, don’t make me look bad in front of my girl! She’s not gonna want to shuffle around in a circle anymore, if I get my ass kicked by the world’s shortest basketball player.”

“Spud Webb was short,” Wallace protests, like this is an old argument. “Curly from the Globetrotters? It’s all about the footwork and precision aim, my friend.”

“Which is why you’re good at Krav Maga,” Logan says. “Ronica? Little help defending my honor, here?”

“Sorry,” I say. “I’m on the short person side of this argument. But, for the record, I LIKE the way you duck your head and brood.”

Wallace rolls his eyes. “Love, man,” he mutters, shaking his head. “Makes the smartest people in the world stupid.”

I ring the bell, smile to myself, and hiss, “Look tough.” Wallace makes a Maori warrior grimace, and Logan repeats the sneer. We all snicker.

The door swings open, and there’s Beaver, in beige shorts and a t-shirt, holding a bowl of popcorn. “Hey, Veronica,” he says, with what seems like mild surprise. “Hi guys. What are you doing here?”

“My dad asked me to meet him,” I say, waving my phone. “Something about dinner with a friend?”

“My dad asked me to meet him,” I say, waving my phone. “Something about dinner with a friend?”

“Huh,” he muses, swinging the door wide: we pass through. “Weird. Are you sure he said meet HERE? Because they left like an hour ago.”

“Did they say where they were going?” I walk into the living room and turn, taking it in. The place is decorated in creams, grey-blues and earth tones, with decorator touches like framed butterflies, and seashells in jars. It could not look less like the evil lair of a sociopath.

Beaver shrugs. “They should be back soon, if you want to wait. Mom told me she wouldn’t be gone long.” He sets the popcorn on the table, wanders into the kitchen. “Drink?”
I start to say no, but Wallace shouts, “Coke?” I give him a death glare, and he goes, “What? I’m thirsty!”

Logan jerks his head towards the door and mouths, “Let’s go”. I hold up my hand to signal ‘5 minutes’, because I want to see how Beaver behaves. He slumps, dissatisfied, deep into his chair, and his right hand starts methodically flexing.

Beaver returns with a tray, carrying 3 iced glasses of soda, and sets it on the coffee table. He wanders to the media cabinet on the far wall, and calls, over his shoulder, “I was about to watch a movie. You guys like ‘Notorious’?”

I know Logan not only LOVES ‘Notorious’, he gets upset when Ingrid Bergman slut-shames herself (but keeps watching anyway, so he doesn’t miss the kiss). He’s staring fixedly at Beaver, though: and instead of answering, asks, “Hey dude, can I use your bathroom?” His voice, in contrast to his face, is completely blasé.

“Yeah, down the hall to your left.” Beaver gestures vaguely, glances back at us. “Would you prefer something else?”

“‘Notorious’ is fine,” I reply, in my most nonchalant tone, and he starts digging through a pile of DVD’s. I pick up my Coke, dip my pinky into it, take the barest taste. And it’s salty: because unlike Improved Dick, this Beaver is still a drink-drugging piece of shit.

I grab Wallace’s wrist before he can swallow, and vehemently shake my head. He looks at me, wide-eyed, down at the glass. His face shifts, hardens. He gently takes charge of mine, pours the liquid from both into a potted plant. Then he sits back, watching Beaver, his expression turned severe.

Beaver settles into the chair opposite Logan’s, curling his feet up under him. He gathers a fistful of popcorn as the movie starts, and begins, serenely, to eat.

We’re halfway through the first Grant-Bergman scene when Logan returns, phone pressed to one ear. He’s got a hand over the other, as if blocking sound. “Yes, mom,” he’s saying. “Yeah, in ten, we’re right around the corner. Look, don’t freak out, that’s what security’s for. I’m with Veronica, she’ll bring me. Love you, too.”

He hangs up, rakes a hand through his hair. “Man, we need to take a rain check on the movie. Mom’s stalker just made it onto the property, and they found him in the garage.”

“Oh my God, is she OK?” I stand up and cross the room, take his hand. He squeezes reassuringly. “Just shaken up. Can you guys drop me, though? Like now?”

“Yes,” I say. “Cassidy, will you tell my dad we came by?”

“Yeah, of course. Sorry about your mom.” He waves nonchalantly, turns back to the movie. We evacuate, Logan practically dragging me.

“So what happened?” I ask him, once we round the corner. He’s in the front seat, this time. “How did he get on the property? I’m assuming the stalker’s a he?”

“Pull over,” Logan says, staring straight ahead.

“What?”

“Because I faked the phone call. Pull over,” he repeats, and when he looks at me, his face is
dangerous.

I do, studying him intently. Once we’re parked, he gently takes my hands. “Remember when you showed me how to pick locks with paperclips?”

I don’t, but I nod. “Were you snooping, instead of using the bathroom?”

This earns me a reluctant half-grin. “I didn’t like it. The text instead of a phone call, your dad thinks texts are voodoo magic. Beaver being the only one home, playing the generous host. So I did a little recon.”

“Veronica told me the drinks were drugged,” Wallace contributes. “I poured them into a plant.”

Logan’s hands on mine tighten, and I say, “Roofies. Coke is not salty.”

“Son of a bitch.” Logan’s head falls back, face to the sky, and he does a deep exhale. “Veronica,” he says, refocusing on me, “I picked the lock on Beaver’s nightstand drawer. Inside I found a switchblade, a bunch of vials of GHB, and a framed piece of kid’s artwork.” He shakes his head: his eyes are shiny with distress. “It was a drawing of a smiling little boy, playing baseball, under a big orange sun.”

We did the RIGHT THING,” Wallace insists, holding his ground for maybe the 47th time. He’s in the spot of honor, next to Dad’s office door. “I know y’all love your cloak-and-dagger secrets, but this is a POLICE MATTER. And Veronica’s father’s the police.”

“It’s just, the last time I asked for this much help, he was gone nine hours,” I fret, clutching Logan’s hand. “And when it was over, Logan’s dad was dead, Duncan was in jail, and Lilly hated my guts for a year.”

Logan’s been slumped in his chair since we arrived, toeing a petrified wad of gum: he seems unhappy to be present. He comes alert at this, though, and looks at me sharply. “You saying you regret that?” he demands. “Because I view it more in the light of a Hail Mary rescue.”

“Of course I don’t regret AARON,” I snap. “He was the scum on the bottom of scum’s shoe. I regret putting my dad in danger, without adequate warning. I regret not having a PLAN.”

Logan smirks and kisses the top of my head, draping an arm around me. “Have you got a plan now?”

“Public flogging in the town square?” I suggest, and this time he actually laughs. Wallace slowly shakes his head at both of us, then Dad comes softly striding down the hall.

He’s in street clothes, nice ones, and looks tired. But he gives me a hug and kiss, and shakes hands with the boys, before unlocking his door.

“Come on in, kids,” Dad says, shuts us all inside. He waves at the guest chairs. “Have a seat. Can I offer you a drink? Water? Soda?”

“I’d prefer Cassidy Casablancas’ head on a tray,” I say, not quite under my breath. Logan squeezes my shoulders, and Dad’s mouth shapes a pained smile.

“I searched the house.” Dad settles behind his desk, taking a sip of probably-cold coffee. “I found no illegal drugs, no switchblade, no framed child’s artwork. There was no potted plant in the living
room, and the dishwasher was full, running on sanitary cycle. So I was unable to snag potting soil or
glassware, to test for drug residue. Since none of you drank any, I can’t test you either.

“I also called Cassidy, under the pretense of tracking you down. He was at his father’s house,
playing Halo with his brother. He corroborated the non-criminal details of your story: said the three
of you came by, had a drink and stayed for a few minutes, then got a call from Logan’s mother, and
left. He said you told him I had texted you, and asked you to meet me there. He wanted me to bring
him spumoni, if we were still at Mama Leone’s. He didn’t behave like a person who felt guilty.”

“Wait, how did you get in?” Logan interrupts. “Because if you housebroke, wouldn’t that make any
evidence you found inadmissible?”

Dad’s eyelids flicker, and I say, “He has a key. Don’t you?”

Dad nods, chagrined. “I have a key. Bettina gave it to me, in case of emergency. But in this case, I
brought her home from dinner, and searched while she was having a bath.”

Logan raises his eyebrows at this, but says nothing. Beside me, Wallace covers his mouth with his
fist and coughs, to hide a smile.

Dad sighs, setting the cup down, curling his palms around it. “I didn’t send you a text, Veronica, and
there’s no record of one on my phone. And while I believe the three of you saw what you say you
did, your assertions aren’t probable cause for arrest. No crime was committed, and there may be
other explanations for the objects in the drawer.”

“Just the fact that the text EXISTS is evidence,” Wallace argues. “Veronica still has a record of it,
right? Can’t you do some computer forensic stuff, figure out where it came from?”

“The listed number on Veronica’s text is mine,” Dad says. “Our resident guru suggests that either
someone used my phone and erased the message, or this was a prank by a hacker. I dusted my cell
for prints—there were only two, my thumbs.”

“You said there might be another reason for the stuff in the drawer,” Logan chimes in. “Can you
explain?”

Dad looks down at his cupped hands. “I’m going to tell you something I promised to keep in
confidence,” he says. “Don’t repeat it.”

He looks at me for confirmation, and I nod. “Veronica, you know Bettina and I have been friends for
some time. You remember, she used to come to your mother’s bridge parties?”

I nod again, and he continues. “Shortly after they returned from France, she and I had coffee: she’s
normally self-possessed, but she broke down, asked for advice. She had concerns about Cassidy’s
mental state. Apparently he was acting out in Paris, associating with an undesirable crowd. She
assumed he was abusing either alcohol or drugs: he kept coming home and passing out, getting into
fights. She also saw some evidence that he was cutting himself. She thinks he’s traumatized, due to
the Woody Goodman situation, but he refuses to discuss it, or go into therapy. And of course, she
blames herself for allowing Big Dick custody, instead of going bankrupt, fighting him. The things
you saw in the drawer fit that narrative, as well.”

“Why was the plant gone, then?” I ask. “Why did he run a load of dishes, right after we left?”

“He appears to have prepared and eaten a meal, then cleaned up after himself,” dad replies. “The
plant, like the text, is an unanswered question. It wasn’t in any garbage can on the property.”
“So you believe us, then,” Wallace says, correctly reading Dad’s equivocations. “You think he’s guilty.”

“There’s cause for concern,” Dad concedes. “Methodical removal of evidence suggests guilt, and the text suggests advance planning. I’d advise the three of you not to be alone with Cassidy, or accept beverages from him that have been opened. I’ll be keeping a close eye on him, from now on. But I can’t take official action, at this time.”

I grit my teeth, and nod. I don’t like being checkmated by Beaver, but I don’t want Dad to damage his career (or, I guess, relationship) without legal grounds. “Thanks for checking into it, pops,” I say, and his face softens.

“If he makes the slightest threat towards any of you, I want to hear about it immediately,” he warns. “Job number one is keeping you safe. No matter what else I am, Veronica, I’m still your daddy.”

“Yeah, you are,” I say, and for the first time this evening, he smiles.

Chapter End Notes

I'll be out of town starting Friday, and I've had problems with AO3 on my laptop in the past. If I don't respond to comments right away, it's only because I can't. :-)

Quick survey for the meta-lovers among you, as we head into Season 2. What, in your opinion, are the most important themes and events that happen that season (other than the big things like bus crash, Alterna-Prom, exploding plane, etc)?
OK, here's Ch 18 at last, containing some fluff, some smut, and a few big surprises. Happy birthday to Jen and Ellen, hope you (and all the other readers) enjoy. :-)

I got lots of yesses and zero noes IN RE the (mild, non-graphic, consensual) kink: so it's here, at the end of the chapter. If kink's not your thing, stop reading at the five asterisks. You won't miss any important plot.

THREAD EIGHTTEEN

“Veronica.” There’s a foot prodding me. “VERONICA. We’re at the gas station. Do you want Doritos? Do you want Sunkist?” Shove. “Speak now or forever hold your peace. VERONICA!”

I moan, turn away from the angry foot. There’s a deliciously soft pillow up against some hard surface, and I nestle down into it. Aaaahhh…..

“Should we be worried about this?” the voice asks, and it sounds like Mac. “Did she take something?”

“Nah, it’s just the pregnancy,” Logan says, from behind me. “Peanut’s an energy vampire. Ronica sleeps CONSTANTLY.”

Peanut?! I jerk awake, my hand flying to my belly and curving there. I grin, because it’s the size of a half-cantaloupe: and I can feel the weight of the gigantic ring, shifting on my finger.

I did it. I’m back where I want to be, in the best life, with the best Logan. Screw you, fate, you’re no match for Veronica Mars.

“Morning, sunshine.” Logan wavers into view as I open my eyes, smiling lopsidedly. He hands me a fresh, cold bubbly Sunkist, a straw in the hole, and I sigh with pleasure. “You need to pee?”

I shake my head and turn towards Mac, who’s rocking sun-streaked, short natural hair, her Justice League ring, a red v-necked t-shirt, and running shoes with jeans. She doesn’t look repressed: but she also doesn’t look like she gives a shit what Logan thinks. My grin gets bigger.

She raises her eyebrows, I guess because I look like a maniac. But before she can say anything, the passenger door opens, and Dick crawls in.

“OK, Fritos and bean dip.” He plops them onto Mac’s lap. “That’s the best I could do. Neither one’s got lard, I checked, because I’m considerate, and I rock the hardest.” He pops the tab on a Dos Equis and chugs half of it, his consideration apparently not encompassing laws of the road.

“I’ll put that on your tombstone,” Mac snarks, peeling the lid open. She elbows him, in what, for Mac, is an extreme show of affection, and he grins at her and belches. I raise my eyebrows at Logan, because something is GOING ON in my back seat. He rolls his eyes.

“Hungry?” he asks me, and I shake my head. “There’s a bag by your feet, just in case. When we get
to Big Sur, we’re stopping for dinner: but I don’t want Peanut clawing her way out, alien-style, in search of sustenance, meantime.”

I grasp the back of his neck and pull him down for a kiss, which turns deep and sweet, orange-flavored. Mac throws a Frito at us, to break it up.

“Ugh, we have road trip rules for a reason,” she says, pointing with a bean-dip loaded specimen. “No PDA, no histrionics, and no grunge. Don’t make me get out the spray bottle.”

“Ronica, Peanut and I are outlaws,” Logan protests, cranking the engine. “We think rules are for suckers.”

I sigh happily, arrange the pillow behind my back, and sip my drink. I twine my fingers with Logan’s on the stick, and he smirks at me as we upshift in tandem.

I will watch Easy Rider 15 times in a row, and spend an HOUR talking about my feelings, if it means I get to stay here forever.

“Dude, this road trip blows,” Dick says, after five minutes of silent munching, popping open another beer. “I’m the only one drinking, nobody’s mooning passing cars, and you’re playing music that was trendy before I was BORN.”

Logan adjusts the volume of ‘Wish You Were Here’ infinitesimally (and somewhat defensively), and says, “Dude, I’m chauffeuring my fiancée, my unborn daughter, and the brains behind my lucrative internet business, here. You want to blast Icelandic Death Metal, and throw rocks at Vespas? I’ll slow down by the nearest Hertz. You can drop and roll.”

“Man, you are ONE STEP away from penny loafers and a mini-van, lately. I miss the Logan who used to car-surf the PCH at night.” Dick steals the bean-dipped chip Mac’s about to bite into, eats it. “Can we at least play ‘I never’ or some shit?”

“Dick, ‘I never’ is a drinking game,” Mac chides, shifting her Frito bag away from him, slapping his hand when he reaches for it. “You may not have noticed this, but you’re the only one drinking. And just because you LOOK like an idiot surfer stereotype doesn’t mean you have to ACT like one.”

Her pocket buzzes, and she puts up one finger, schoolteacher-style. “Hold that thought,” she says, pre-empting his next comment. “It’s Lilly. ‘Tell V to check her phone. 105.7’.”

I pause Logan’s CD, and scramble for the radio dial. He rolls his eyes. “Seriously, Veronica? STILL? We’re almost TWENTY!”

The strains of the Spice Girls blast through the car, and I dig out my phone, hit speed dial #2.

“Tell me what you want, what you really, really want!” she’s yelling as she answers, while Wallace laughs in the background, and Jessica sings along.

“I’ll tell you want I want, what I really, really want!” I snarl back. Logan obligingly cranks the volume, familiar with the ritual.

“What the fuck does that even mean, ‘I wanna zigazig’?” Dick asks no one in particular.

But I’m busy singing at the top of my lungs. “If you want my future—forget my past! If you wanna get with me—better make it fast!” I trace my finger down Logan’s cheek, and he grins at me, lecherous. “Now don’t go wasting—my precious time. Get your act together—we could be just fine!”
“Ah, what the hell,” Mac says, from the backseat, and starts singing, too.

It’s dark when we reach Big Sur, and I’m drowsing on Logan’s shoulder. We’ve got the windows cracked to let in the Pacific breeze, and we’re listening to some weird Jefferson Airplane album called ‘Surrealistic Pillow’: Grace Jones’ droning voice is soothing. We curve up a hill, past a wood-burned sign that reads ‘Nepenthe/Phoenix Shop’, and Logan ducks his head close to mine to murmur, “We’re here.”

I rouse and yawn, kiss his cheek: in the back, Mac and Dick stir from their mutual sprawl, like puppies in a sleepy pile.

We park in front of a weathered redwood-adobe building, mount the stairs, all of us stumbling, somnolent. “Repent and quaff the fine Nepenthe,” Mac quotes, through a yawn, and we enter the brightly-lit cupola bar.

Logan wraps an arm around my waist, supporting me, and coaxes, “Big, juicy $40 steaks. World class view of the Pacific. And we have a surprise guest, too, if you can just manage to stay conscious.”

“Is it a pony?” I ask, and he says, “Better.” Kisses me on the nose.

We pass through onto the red stone deck, painted with a checkerboard dance floor, sporting a white stone fireplace that crackles ruddy flame. Benches line up by the railing, to maximize the amazing view, and old-fashioned streetlamps give it a quaint café ambiance.

Logan leads us to a round table, off on one side, where an old man sits, sipping a beer, gazing contemplatively at the dark shapes of the Santa Lucia Mountains. He’s tall and spare, slouched low, and his white hair sticks out every direction, Einstein-style. He rises as we approach, gazing down at me with disconcerting directness: and I realize with a shock that he looks like LOGAN. He’s got the same clever dark eyes, the same Roman nose, even the same quirk to the eyebrows that means he’s about to spout smarm. “Veronica,” he says, in a deep, gravelly voice, taking my hands in his, and kissing both. “My Angel of Mercy.”

I laugh at this, because really? Me? But I let him enfold me in a hug. He’s all bones, quite warm, and smells of cigarettes and something resinous. Maybe frankincense.

“Hey Pop,” Logan greets, and hugs him too, a hug that seems tight, and lasts a while. “These are our friends, Dick Casablancas, Mac Mackenzie. My grandfather, Victor Lester.”

Holy shit. I stagger back a step, and Logan rests a hand on my lower back to keep me steady. The slipstream’s been pretty eventful, overall, but this is the first time I’ve encountered someone who’s supposed to be DEAD.

Okay, technically that’s not true. Beaver, Lynn and Lilly are still walking around, here, both fortunately and un. But didn’t Victor die when I was like five?

Ugh, if I could just spend a day staring at the wall and eating Cheetos, this would all seem so much easier.

“And you’re NOT contestants in a 1950’s golf tournament?” Victor’s asking my friends, with a disturbingly familiar tilt of the head.

“Mac’s a nickname,” Mac says. “Because I like computers. My real name is Cindy.”
“My real name’s Dick,” says Dick, “and many people think I am one. So feel free to use it, I don’t mind.”

“I like your friends,” Victor says to Logan, which earns him a smirk. “And good for you, surrounding yourself with smart women. I was afraid you’d be doomed to gorgeous, scatterbrained pushovers like your mother, but you managed to buck the trend.”

“Are you saying my girl’s not gorgeous?” Logan slides his hand down my arm, entwines our fingers. “I knew you needed glasses, but I didn’t think your eyes were THAT bad.”

“She’s TAKEN,” Victor says, with an eyebrow wiggle. “If I charmed her away from you, I’d feel guilty. Besides,” his gaze rises past my shoulder, his grin blossoming, “I have my eye on her friend.”

“Grandpa Victor, you’re a cad,” Lilly croons, from behind me, and skirts us to throw her arms around his neck. She’s in a blue Berkeley sweatshirt and cat’s eye glasses, her hair knotted sloppily atop her head, yet she somehow looks more gorgeous than ever. “Stop hitting on all the ladies and buy me a drink. Wallace chugged my Gatorade while I was napping, and I’m PARCHED.”

“Lillian Jean,” he says, smiling down. “Be still my heart.”

She laughs at him, shoves him away, and Wallace offers his hand. “Sir,” he says. “Heard a lot about you. Most of it good.”

“Well, that’s surprising.” Victor shakes, grins at Logan. “Kid must be too naive to know better. And you,” he turns to Jessica, gives her the double-hand kiss, “look like your mother. We ALL won the jackpot with our dates tonight.”

I glance at Lilly as we take our seats and she winks, seeming undismayed by the claim Logan’s grandfather has staked. It’s Mac who freaks, and blurts, “This isn’t a date.”

Everybody looks at her, and she goes red. Turns to Dick like she wants him to back her up, waving her hand between them. He just grins. “I mean, we’re not…it’s not…” she does a little self-conscious hand toss, and subsides into silence.

“We’re not dating,” Dick elaborates, spilling a couple ice cubes from his water glass into his mouth, crunching down. He glances at Mac with ill-concealed glee and adds, “We’re just friends with benefits.”

Mac glares at him, kicks him under the table, and Logan buries a snort of laughter in his drink. Lilly and Wallace share a look, like this is an oft-discussed topic. And I flash back to the Freshman Yacht Ditch Day, when Logan, Dick and Mac all disappeared ‘to buy beer’, but Logan came back alone. Which means this has been going on since before I stumbled into Ideal! Reality...and everybody knew.

I wonder if Dick had anything to do with Mac’s love life exploding, in Prison! Reality. But I doubt, after all the changes I’ve made in the last few days, that there’s enough of Prison! Reality left for me to ever know.

I wonder if Mac’s compulsive relationship-denying has anything to do with my fiancée.

And I hope, fervently, that Prison! Reality has permanently vanished. Because, idyllic surfing outings aside, that one totally blew.

“I told dad we were coming to Nepenthe, and he said order the Ambrosia Burger,” Jessica informs us, smoothing over the awkward moment with an ease that screams good-match-for-Wallace. “He
ALSO told me Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor made a movie here once, and danced on the patio.”

“The Sandpiper,” Victor says, leaning back, reclaiming his beer. “Idiotic film, but Taylor was a real star.” He shakes his head, remembering young Liz, I guess. “Rita Hayworth used to own this place, you know.”

I raise my eyebrows and Logan adds, with a sideways grin at his grandfather, “Along with Orson Welles. They were in LOVE, unlike Dick and Mac.”

This makes Lilly collapse into giggles. I shake my head at him, which only causes his smirk to grow bigger.

“Yeah, for fifteen minutes,” Victor retorts, both amused and exasperated. “They bought it as a romantic hideaway, but split before they ever spent the night.”

“You know a lot about Old Hollywood,” Jessica observes, narrowing her eyes. “I guess that means the rumors are true?”

Victor grins, and I’ve finally figured out where Logan got his charm. “I suppose your dad told you that, too?”

“Dude, is your grandpa like an international man of mystery?” Dick asks. “Because this conversation is more secretive and pregnant than Ronnie.”

I make a face at him, and Logan bursts out laughing. “No secret, man. I’m just fourth-generation Hollywood royalty. Pop’s folks were silent film actors, and he was a CHILD STAR.”

“No shit.” Dick looks at Victor with new respect. “Man, your life is COLORFUL.”

“I was a Little Rascal,” Victor elaborates for the confused, with a slow smile. “I wore a beanie, and spoke in shrill falsetto.”

I can’t help it. This takedown of the legendary Korean War hero completely cracks me up. I laugh so hard tears leak out, and Lilly has to rub my back, hand me a napkin. “It’s just…” I gasp, when I start to calm. “I always thought Logan was a changeling. Turns out he’s NOT.”

Logan smiles at me, and Victor pats his shoulder. “Enh, the kid’s just high-energy,” he defends. “Nobody knew what to do with me when I was his age, either. Luckily, the war happened, and reckless sonovabitches with a wild hair for adventure were suddenly in demand.”

“You were a pilot, right?” I ask, as a waiter approaches the table, to hand out menus and take drink orders. I know this story, because MY Logan used to tell it ad nauseum.

“Among other things.” He smirks at me, and I’m afraid I’ll start laughing again. I blow a kiss to Logan instead: he catches it mid-air, and presses it to his heart. I roll my eyes, and he winks at me, and I never ever want to leave this reality again, not ’til I’m 30 years older than Victor.

I peruse the menu, while Mac and Dick debate the merits of Halo, and Jessica and Lilly discuss vegetarianism. When a young, dark-haired waitress with a batik top and nose ring appears, I order a pricey steak with blue cheese and Cabernet sauce, and a Brussels sprouts appetizer. Because fuck it. Fourth generation Hollywood royalty can afford to feed me.

“So what brings you to Big Sur, anyway?” Jessica asks Victor, clearly feeling more simpatico. “Vacationing?”
“I live here.” He jerks a thumb over his shoulder, towards the black bulk of the mountains. “I have a cabin. I’m big on wide-open spaces, and not so much on people. When you live up on a hill, you can always see who’s coming. And plan accordingly.”

I gaze at him, contemplative, and he meets my eyes squarely. I guess being a POW will do that to a guy, I muse. And wonder if being trapped in a house with Aaron for 16 years is what brought out the same traits in Logan.

“Have you seen the baby yet?” Victor asks me, his gravelly voice gentling, and I nod. Logan whips out his wallet, tosses a laminated copy of the ultrasound picture on the table. “Here, I made you a photo. She’s due in late November. We’re calling her Leilani.”

“We are not!” I protest, scandalized. He waggles his eyebrows at me in a way that says he’ll coax me into it, somehow.

Victor grins down at the picture, then sideways at Logan. “You remind me of your grandmother,” he says. “Now there was a dame. How she produced such wet blankets as Walter and Lynnie is beyond my comprehension.” He sighs, tucks the picture into his shirt pocket, gives it a pat. Shoots me a smile. “Thanks for this, I’ll keep it close. I want to meet the real article, as soon as she’s good to travel.”

“So, Logan’s grandma was sappily sentimental, then?” Wallace asks, and Logan flips him off while pretending to scratch his face. Mac tries to hide a laugh, but can’t, and Dick shakes his head at her. Victor chokes on his drink. “Jesus Christ, no,” he says, wiping his chin. “She was a ball-buster from day one. Always running head-first into trouble. But she could love like no one else I’ve ever known. No matter what shenanigans I pulled—and believe me, I pulled a LOT—she stood by me. I wish Logan could have known her.”

“I know her,” Logan says, and smiles at me, and great. My stupid hormones are making me want to cry again.

“Veronica,” Wallace says, with an amused head shake. “A long time ago, you told me you were a marshmallow, and I didn’t believe you. But man, look at you right now. You really, really ARE!”

“I am not!” I protest. “I’m a stone-cold, vicious badass!”

“But in a totally loveable, squishable way!” Lilly wraps me in an embrace, bestows a smacking cheek kiss. “BFF’s forever, Veronica Mars,” she whispers. “I’ll keep your shameful secret.”

The food arrives: and I don’t know what we were up to before we got in the car, but it must have been hunger-inducing. We fall on it, and conversation grows desultory, words and laughter drifting smokelike over the mountains, slowly out to sea.

Replete at last, I fight stupor, because I don’t want to leave this place. I lean my head on Lilly’s shoulder, gaze out past the lights. She puts an arm around me, pats: and across the table, Logan’s face softens. I mouth ‘I love you’ to him, just so he knows, in case I go. He reaches across the table and takes my hand, running his thumb over my ring.

“Ronica’s had it,” he tells the table. “You want pie for later, sugarpuss? You can eat it at breakfast, if you crash early tonight.”

“Apple?” I ask, and he wanders off, probably to covertly pay the bill.
“Imma check out the the gift shop real quick, before we head to the hotel,” Wallace announces. “You think your dad might like a book about this place, baby?”

“Oh yeah,” Jessica says, twining both her arms around one of his, smiling up at him. “Want help picking it out?”

“Do you even have to ask?” He pulls out her chair, extends a hand for Victor to shake. “Pleasure to meet you, sir. I can see why Logan’s so proud of you.”

“I can see why you’re his friend,” Victor counters, shaking. “Thanks for stopping by.”

“They’re my ride,” Lilly tells him, getting up too. She squeezes my hand and leans over to hug Victor. “You ever need a getaway driver, you give me a call.”

“You’re number one on my list, Lilly Jean,” he says. “Also two, three and four.”

She blows him a kiss, shoots me a twinkly-eyed grin, and sashays off into the dark.

Dick and Mac have wandered over to the railing, where they seem to be arguing, or maybe angry-flirting, half in light, half in shadow. I cock my head, studying them, and Victor says, “I’ve got something for you.”

I turn to him, raise my eyebrows. He extracts a small object from his shirt pocket, drops it into my hand. It’s a thumb drive. I glance up at him, surprised.

“That’s all the information I have on the Sanitarium,” he says, gesturing at the device with his chin. “I made maps for you, too, they should help. They’re to scale.”

Help with WHAT? I want to ask. Because what the hell are you up to, Ideal! Veronica?

“Thanks,” I say instead, tucking it into my purse. “I hope this wasn’t too much trouble.”

He laughs. “Everything worthwhile is trouble. I enjoy the hell out of espionage capers, as you’re well aware. It’s been too damn long.” He pulls out a pack of cigarettes, a dull gold lighter that’s etched on one side. Spins them thoughtfully in his hands. “You know you can count on me, Veronica. For whatever you need. My knees are pretty much gone, and like your boyfriend said, I ought to get glasses. But my brain works fine.”

I nod, and then Logan’s behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist, lifting me out of my chair. “Come on, bedtime,” he says, kissing my neck. “Pop, we’re set for the beach at 6:00, right?”

Victor thumbs-ups and winks, and Logan laughs, claps him on the shoulder. “Great to see you, man,” he says, and they do another hug.

“No offense to your mother,” Victor tells him, gruffly. “But you’re the only member of this family left who’s worth a damn. The two of you better take care of yourselves.”

Logan salutes, jauntily, whistles to alert Dick and Mac, points to the car. Dick nods, says something that makes Mac emit an audible huff of frustration, and they follow us down.

“You good for half an hour?” Logan asks, helping me into my seat, fastening the belt around me. “Pass out if you need to. You’re still light enough for me to carry upstairs.”

I smack him, and he laughs, kisses me softly. I draw my finger down the long, straight bridge of his nose, and he kisses that, too. Then he hops into the driver’s seat, the disgruntled maybe-lovers pile in
back, and we’re off down the highway, speeding through the night.

I rest against my window, trying to make my brain work. Fighting to stay awake, until I can unpack my laptop, read Victor’s files. Because the only Sanitarium I’ve heard of is the one where Duncan’s incarcerated. And I’m afraid whatever Ideal! Veronica’s up to will ruin everything: because I’m pretty sure Logan and Lilly are out of the loop.

Logan turns on music, soft and low, something I don’t recognize about a bed that’s too big when a girl’s not in it. His free hand comes to rest on my scalp, trails down my cheek, my shoulder, my arm. I reach for him, fingers twining with his….

And then sleep claims me, tugging me down. Flotsam on the slipstream, set to wash ashore who knows where.

THREAD EIGHTEEN INVERTS

I’m sprawled across a mattress, somewhere new: it looks like I’ve landed in a tropical photo spread for Architectural Digest. The canopy above me is honey-brown, made of polished logs, hung with gauzy white curtains that flutter in the breeze. To my right is a wrought-iron sofa strewn with sari-print pillows, a carved Balinese screen. A palm-leaf fan slowly rotates overhead: and through the French doors, past my feet, I can see the ocean, foaming up to a wooden deck.

I’m in one of those Indonesian houses, built above the sea on stilts.


“Almost didn’t happen,” Logan says, to my left.

My head whips around, and I locate him in the shadows by the bed: he’s curled up in a papa-san chair, glass of scotch in hand. He’s watching me, face blank and considering, and I wonder why he’s mad. What I’ve done.

“I didn’t see you there,” I murmur.

He lifts his glass and toasts me, so I get up. Pad across the floor, climb into his lap. I’m wearing a thin white gauzy gown, to match the room, I guess. His hand spans my abdomen to hold me in place, warmth seeping through.

“Welcome to Paradise.” He bends to kiss my throat, teeth scraping the skin. My breath spills out in a sigh, and I lift my chin to give him better access. He laughs. “I’d say let’s christen the bed, but that’s been taken care of.”

“We could christen the chair,” I offer, turning to straddle him. I wind my arms around his neck, toying with his hair.

“We could,” he agrees, watching me, “if we hadn’t already done that, too.”

I stare at him, and he stares back. We’re so deeply in shadow I can barely see his eyes.

“What, no glib explanation?” He supports my weight with one hand, lifts the drink to his lips. “Usually you’re quicker with excuses, when you flub Veronica’s life facts.”

“You KNOW,” I say softly. He smiles, the glittery-eyed, battle-ready smile, but doesn’t let me go.

“That you’re not my girlfriend? Yeah, I’ve had my suspicions since the night Aaron died. I don’t,
however, have a clue who you ARE, or how you keep turning up here, taking her over. Much less how you’ve heard every secret the whole TOWN tries to hide.”

“You’re delusional,” I venture. He smirks and shakes his head, sets his drink on the floor. His hands settle on my hips.

“She won’t remember this conversation,” he tells me, serious and intense. “I mean, she’ll know we sat in a chair and talked, but she’ll substitute her own opinions and words for yours. She’ll insist her version’s true, too, no matter how tortured her logic. Like, that time you turned up when she was napping, and told me never to screw Kendall Casablancas? She claimed Kendall’s dragon-lady fake nails were the dead giveaway to her mob status, and denied ever mentioning Mac.”

“Wow,” I say. I shift, to extricate myself. His grip tightens, then eases, like he doesn’t want to release me, and he starts to get hard. “So you KNEW a complete stranger was inhabiting your girlfriend that night, and you still boned her? Good to see your inner jackass is alive and well, beneath the World’s Best Boyfriend mask.”

He cocks his head. “Now, how have you met my inner jackass? Because I’ve loved Veronica since 6th grade, so she gets the 24/7 Cadillac Treatment.”

I laugh. “Yeah, that’s not the case where I come from. And he’s not so much your INNER jackass there, as a TMZ tabloid staple.”

He flinches at this, and I say, impatiently, “I’m still Veronica, Logan. I’m just Veronica from a different place and time, where different choices were made.”

He considers me. “And not a nicer place, I’m guessing. Since you’ve got DefCon 4 level defenses, and you keep hiding out here.”

I make to climb off his lap, and his hands slide away, unresisting. When I’m up, he stands too, gazing inscrutably down. He’s in a wife beater and sleep pants, thin and white like my gown: the aroused bulk of him emits so much heat and force, it scrambles my senses.

“I’m not HIDING here. I just show up,” I say. “It’s not on purpose. You and I had a knock-down, drag-out and split, where I come from: I went home and drank Nyquil, to help me sleep. And I dreamed about Sophomore Prom Night, when we ended up at the beach. I thought nothing of it: just a wish-fulfillment fantasy, you know? Just imagining I chose a red satin dress, instead of good-girl pink. After which, things continued on as normal, for like a week.

“Then I dreamed about the party you threw, when your parents went to Nepal. And afterwards, I noticed changes in my waking life—your memory of our breakup was different from mine. We got back together, because my reason for dumping you had vanished. And when I fell asleep, I dreamed about dad busting Aaron, and Duncan murdering him. It’s been happening every night since.

“There are big gaps of time where I don’t show up here, I realize that. But for me, it’s a constant, shifting slipstream. I alter an event in this timeline, sometimes on purpose, sometimes not, and wake up in the morning to a different current reality. They vary in quality from sucky to great. But always, I stay trapped in the cycle. I don’t know how to make it stop.”

“Back up to the beginning,” he says, putting his hands on his hips. “You say we broke up, and you went home. So where you come from, we’re not living together? I mean, before the fight?”

I shake my head. “I live in the Sunset Cliffs Apartments with my dad. You live in the penthouse suite at the Neptune Grand.”
“And this is at some unspecified point in the future, because what you do here changes YOUR present.”

“I’m a college freshman,” I say. “It’s not like I’m 35.”

“So, 19.” He takes a step towards me, and I back up against the bedpost, curling my hands around it. “Since your parents put you in kindergarten a year late, hoping you’d grow.”

I sneer at him. “As opposed to yours, who redshirted you in the mistaken belief you’d mature.”

He grins. “Yeah, you’re much more caustic than my Veronica,” he says. “It’s one of the main ways I tell you apart. Well that, and you punch people, and you’re confident and relaxed in bed.”

“Thanks to the Logan Echolls School of Hard Knocks,” I retort, nails digging into wood. “Jackass you DID bang Kendall Casablancas, along with hundreds of other girls. Got in fistfights on a daily basis. Committed petty crimes. There’s not a lot he hasn’t done.”

“He’d have to be aggressive, to cope with you,” Logan says, tracing a finger down my cheek and throat, between my breasts. “Because you? Are TERRIFYING.”

Heat pools between my legs, and my breath shivers. “I can’t believe you’re just accepting this. I figured anyone I told would call me crazy.”

“If you are, so am I,” he says. “And so is Carrie Bishop. I blackmailed her into confessing all. She believes this is a case of ghostly possession, by the way. Like you’re dead, but you don’t know it. She also thinks you’re Mata Hari.”

I roll my eyes. “Blackmailed her with what? And how did you realize she even knew?”

He waves a dismissive hand. “She made some crack about me not having a clue who I was banging, because she loves to feel superior. As for what I’ve got on her, forget it. You’d tase her. And it’s not smart to antagonize people who know damaging secrets.”

I snort. That’s Logan Code for ‘I got drunk and nailed her, sophomore year’. “I can’t believe your Veronica confided in her. Carrie Bishop is the LAST person I’d trust.”

“I agreed. Although, truthfully, do you trust ANYONE?”

I shrug. “I don’t generally see the best side of people,” I admit. “I’m a private detective. I work for my dad.”

“Which is how you know everyone’s secrets,” he surmises. “And I’m a jackass, and a tabloid staple, who douches it up in a ten-grand a night hotel suite, entertaining strings of groupies. Sounds like infamy is the only thing I’ve got going for me, back where you come from.”

“Far from it,” I say. “You’re brave and heroic. You try to be a better man. And you’ve worked to make amends, for the jackass things you’ve done.”

“What jackass things HAVE I done?” he asks, softly, stroking along my hairline with the back of his hand. Like he’s in love with me, even though he knows, now, that I’m the broken version.

“You burned down the community pool,” I say, on a sigh. “You paid bums to box each other, and ran a betting ring. You led a salt lick on me once, when I was roofied at Shelly Pomroy’s Sophomore Party. You gave Duncan GHB that night, too: and subsequently, he stumbled upstairs and raped me. After Beaver puked and left, I mean. He raped me, first.”
Logan recoils, taking a physical step back. “And you DATED me?” he demands, hands going up to tug his hair.

“Not right away,” I say. “I dated Duncan first. I wanted to pretend like what happened to me was just nature, taking its course. I was…unconscious….from the drugs, so I didn’t know Dick and Beaver were in the room, until end of Senior Year.”

“Wait, DICK was involved in this? Dick my best friend, who freaking ADORES you?”

“YOUR Dick adores me, and he did nothing wrong. But he lives up to his name, where I come from. He hated me for years, even more than you did. He fed me drinks, after Duncan chased you off from the salt lick. He convinced me to make out with Shelly, and then he carried me up to a guest room. Told Beaver to have at me. Learn to be a man.”

“Jesus,” he says, spinning in an agitated circle. “This is why you ran around the party, confiscating drugs. This is why you dragged Carmen to the hospital, and knew not to drink the soda Beaver brought. You explained what they were planning, too, and I said you can’t hold people responsible for evil thoughts.” He presses the heels of his hands to his eyes. “Please tell me Jackass Me at least put them in the ICU. Because no matter how much you think I hated you, I can guarantee I didn’t want you hurt. No way would I have stood by while you got VIOLATED.”

“You didn’t know. You left the party after the salt lick, with Cindy Gaugento. And I never told you what Dick did, because I didn’t want to take away your only friend. He was your roommate, even, at the Neptune Grand, after Duncan ran away to Mexico.”

“My ONLY friend?” He rubs the spot between his eyes. “What about Wallace?”

“Wallace is MY BFF,” I say, crossing my arms. “I’m the one who cut him down from the flagpole, and saved him from Weevil. He didn’t even LIKE you much, until end of senior year.”

A smile curves the corner of his mouth. “And Lilly?” he asks.

“Dead,” I say. “Aaron…”

“Killed her with a glass ashtray?” His voice is gentle. I nod. “Which is why Duncan was free to creep into the room where you were passed out, and climb on top. And I gave him something that blocked his anti-psychotics.” He laughs, a harsh exhalation. “Jesus, you know the worst part? I can believe it. Under the right circumstances, I can believe I would do all those things. Just not to YOU, Veronica. I’ve always PROTECTED you from the ugly parts of my life. I can’t imagine letting some other dude LICK your SKIN, just because I was pissed off. ESPECIALLY not when you were wasted!”

“I told Lilly you kissed Yolanda,” I say. “I broke you up. I was jealous, you know? I wanted it to be ME you chose, when you moved on. So you weren’t around to play hero, the day Aaron came looking. And you blamed me for her death.” I swallow, turn away. “You ostracized me—King of the 09’ers, and all that. You called me a slut. You bashed in my headlights once, with a crowbar.”

I’m crying now, trying not to. “And I struck back hard. I planted a bong in your locker, got you beaten by your dad. I accused you of crimes you didn’t commit, had you arrested several times. I found out Aaron was hurting you, Logan, and I did NOTHING to help. Maybe you didn’t deserve my forgiveness, but I was no helpless ingénue. I didn’t deserve yours, either.”

“Ah, but I had all the advantage, didn’t I?” he asks, tilting his head to study me. “I was bigger and stronger, richer, more popular. A guy. You had a rep for getting drunk and slutty at parties, and you
lived in a shitty apartment with your dad. No way could you have taken me on and won, let alone Two Time Oscar Winner Aaron Echolls. It wasn’t a fair fight.”

“I was smarter,” I say, with a faint smile. “And for all your posturing, meaner. I’m the only one who’s ever gotten the best of you. And I HAVE. Several times.”

He laughs. “See? Terrifying.” He moves a step closer. When I don’t sidle away, he puts his hands on my shoulders, thumbs stroking the sides of my neck. “Veronica,” he says. “The other me, the asshole me…you know he’s obsessed with you, right? You know all the anger, all the posturing, it’s just… it’s how I act when I’m pretending the person who hurt me, didn’t.”

“Yeah,” I say. “He’s in love with me, same as you.”

“Are you in love with HIM?” he asks. “I mean, despite the massive amounts of fuckery? Because I don’t see how you could be, but it sounds like you ARE.”

“I’m in love with every version of you I’ve met,” I say. “I’ve never loved anyone else.” I put my hand on his cheek. “Although, I have to admit. The you standing here, right now? And the person this you becomes? Hands down, my favorite. You’ve turned into the best version of yourself, and seeing that happen has been… a gift. This is who you would have been all along, if you’d felt accepted. I’m SO GLAD I could open up to you, here. Give you what you need.”

He kisses me, pressing me against the post, hands twining in my hair. Embracing me with his whole body, and everything inside it. I wind my legs around him, hands on his shoulders, and do the same.

“I’ve always been way into my Veronica,” he confides, when we finally break apart. He sounds both guilty and relieved, like he’s making Confession. “She’s brilliant, and funny, and gorgeous, and amazing. No one else compares. But she’s much more ambitious than me, and much less fucked up. And I’m not 100% sure she feels the same. When you showed up? It was like the scene in the Wizard of Oz, where everything turns Technicolor. You don’t even have to SAY you love me, although it’s nice that you do. Because I watch the way you act, and I just KNOW.”

I trace the curve of his ear with my thumb. I can hear piece-of-shit Lamb, in the back of my mind, taunting ‘Go see the Wizard, ask for a backbone’: and I guess, in a way, that’s what I’m doing, by having this conversation. “I love my Logan,” I tell him. “Really a lot, to the point where it feels like I’m always falling. But I’ve never been able to fully trust him. There’s a part of me that fears he’ll get mad and backslide, hurt me all over again. You, though…you have most of the same damage he does, yet you’ve never turned on me. I’m not scared you will. When I’m with you, I feel…safe.”

He presses his face to my throat. “Veronica,” he says. “You have to realize, I’d take a bullet to keep you that way.”

“Yes,” I agree. “And YOU should know, it’s you and me, in every reality where you’re willing. Consequences be damned.”

He curves his palms around my jaw, tucking hair behind my ears. “God,” he says, pressing his forehead to mine. “Maybe I wouldn’t hate Christmas so much, if it was more like this.”

I give him my wide-eyed fake-surprise face, to lighten the moment. “And we haven’t even started unwrapping presents!”

He laughs, but doesn’t take his cue. Instead, he traces a fingertip down the bridge of my nose. Meets my eyes directly, because he’s Logan, and never takes the cowardly route. “I need to ask you something, before we go there.”
“Oh, no.” A wave of embarrassment washes over me. “Of course. You don’t WANT to unwrap presents anymore, now that you know the truth.”

“No, I do!” he corrects, alarmed. “I SO do. And I don’t have to feel guilty about how MUCH I want to, after today, because even Veronica can’t call it cheating when you’re basically her. It’s just… look, I know you’re comfortable with sex. We’ve been very intimate, and you clearly enjoyed yourself. But every time we’ve done it, I didn’t realize…I mean…that there might be things you’d like to avoid. Things that make you uncomfortable, in light of your experience. Can you talk about it enough to tell me WHICH things? Because we’re so into each other, you and me, we tend to get carried away. And I don’t want to cross a line.”

I bite my lip. I feel a pang: MY Logan asked me something similar, the first time we slept together. I said I was fine, because I really didn’t know WHAT I’d be OK with, then. But it turned out to be a minefield, making him guess, and I want to do things differently. “I prefer you keep your full weight off me, when you’re on top,” I say. “I don’t mind you BEING on top, just don’t collapse. And I need the lights on. Feeling trapped in the dark makes me anxious.”

“Done,” he says, kissing the center of my forehead. “Thank you for being clear. I want you focused on nothing but pleasure, during.”

I close my eyes and shiver as he caresses my throat with his teeth. “That should not be a problem,” I say, and he laughs.

“Excellent,” he murmurs, gathering my hemline, easing it up. “I’ll quit talking, then, and get to work. Because this nightgown is see-through, and it’s making me INSANE.”

I smile, sliding my hands under his tank, and he ducks his head so I can take it off. He shucks his pants and notches us together, rocking to coax forth pleasure. “I’ve dreamed about that night,” he confides, sucking lightly at the skin beneath my jaw. “With the candles in the beach house, the things you said. I love Veronica so much, I would NEVER sleep around. But it’s painful, how much I want to get inside you. Jesus, I’d love to give you hickeys everywhere. I can’t, because Veronica would freak. But if it was you, your body, would you let me?”

“If you let me do the same,” I say, and he sucks harder, just the right pressure. I moan, twist my hips, trying to mount him: he shifts his cock back, out of reach.

“You come, first,” he chides, and spins, tossing me on the bed. He wraps his arms around my thighs and lifts, using the underside of his cock to tease my clit, torturously slow, decadent. His head is thrown back in enjoyment, eyes shut, all the muscles in his chest and abdomen bunched, and Jesus Christ, the visual. I stroke my hands down his midline, caress him as he presses me. He groans, full-throated, but won’t increase his pace.

“Fuck me now,” I say, and he says, “Make me.” So I say, “Use your mouth, and I’ll use mine.”

He spins into 69, his body all eager tension, takes me deeply with his tongue and fingers. I do, as well. He starts moaning, little eager pant-grunts: and I wonder if this Veronica’s scared to get non-coital, because he barely even moves. He does something amazing inside me, and I come hard, wracking spasms. He tries to pull away, but I lock my hands around his legs and he comes too, with a soft, helpless groan.

“Oh God,” he says, working me gently with his fingers as I continue to suck him. “Oh, God, Veronica, please…” He shudders through another wave of sensation, and I release him with a pop.

“I warned you,” I say as he crawls up beside me, sinks down with a grunt. “Never, ever piss me off.”
He kisses me, tongue staking claim, hand curved gently around my face. “I have no words,” he says. “I adore you. And in 15 minutes, I will make you pay.”

“Big talk,” I taunt. “I know everything about your body. Maybe more than you’ve learned yet. You’re a much nicer boy than my Logan ever was.”

He presses a series of soft kisses to my face. “You didn’t deserve it,” he says in my ear, voice sated-slow. Slurred with sleepy pleasure. “The other me, mistreating you. And you couldn’t have stopped Aaron, no matter how smart you are. Mom and I both tried, so many times, to leave, to get him caught. But he’d throw money around, and nothing would change. Your Logan knows that: he’d never blame you. He just…probably believes he’s not worth your time.”

“I nailed Aaron to the wall for killing Lilly,” I say. “Cold, hard, video proof, although it took until end of Junior Year. And you’re right, he threw money at it, got himself acquitted. But then Duncan had him assassinated. However you slice it, in every reality, I threw the softball, Donut hit the homer, and Aaron lost the ability to hurt you forever.”

“When did we get together?” he asks, stroking a hand down my side. He props his chin on his hand, watching my face. “And why did we split up?”

“We fooled around in secret, junior year,” I say, palms flattening on his biceps, testing the muscles. “I accused you of Lilly’s murder, and you dumped me. Then we fooled around all summer, after Aaron got caught.

“Then I broke up with YOU, for starting a crime war with Weevil, and hooked back up with Duncan. And every time you dated someone, I made both your lives a misery. So you moved into Duncan’s suite at the Grand, and I had to listen while you banged Kendall in your room.

“Eventually, you saved me from Beaver, and we dated openly, for half of freshman year. Until one day, you just dumped me out of the blue, said I couldn’t trust or need you enough. You saved me again, and I asked for another chance, and we got back together. After which, I found out that while we were split, you had sex with Madison Sinclair.”

“Who did you punch?” he asks. “Her, or me?”

“I had Weevil steal her car and ruin it,” I say. “You…I’m not sure what I would have done, if these dreams hadn’t happened. Dated some All-American Boy to make you jealous, most likely. Mourned in secret.”

He pulls me into an embrace. “You’re so fearless,” he says. “I would never physically hurt a girl, but I’m not a safe person to piss off.”

“You’re a pussycat,” I contradict, kissing his shoulder. “You just want to sprawl all over me, while I pet you senseless.”

“Veronica,” he says. “Cats kill for FUN. They’re just too small to take humans out. But yeah, I’m YOUR pussycat. I probably leave the things I murder on your doorstep, as gifts.”

“You DO,” I say, with a laugh. “You SO do. Oh my God, you are damaged and snarly and twisted as hell, and I really, really love you.”

“I can’t change anything about the choices he made,” he says, stroking my eyebrows with one finger. “But I promise you this. I’ll make better ones. I won’t dump you for stupid reasons, or jerk you around, or cheat. I’ll always be sarcastic, but I won’t tear you down. You won’t ever have to feel frightened of me, or any of my friends. And I can GUARANTEE no contact with Madison
“And I promise you,” I say, tracing his lower lip, “That whichever you I end up finding, at the end of this road? I’ll give him all I’ve got. I won’t freeze him out. Even if it’s someplace we can’t be together, he’ll never have to wonder how I feel.”

“We need a code word,” he decides. “And a response. So we can recognize each other, if we end up in the same room.”

“Like ‘the eagle flies at midnight’?” I push him onto his back, climb atop. Skim my nightgown off, toss it aside. “I’ll say, ‘I wore red satin, just for you.’”

“And I’ll say, ‘I lay all my victims at your feet’.”

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I burst out laughing. “Is it wrong that I’m glad you’re not as nice as you pretend?”

“Is it wrong that I’m glad you don’t bother to fake it?” he settles his hands around the curve of my waist. Gives me a smile that’s almost shy. “On which note. You told me what you DON’T like, in bed, and I appreciate that. It helps. But, for purposes of science, would you also tell me what you DO? Stuff that my Veronica will enjoy, with no qualms, but might be scared to suggest, the first time?”

I grin. “Are you asking me how to corrupt your girlfriend? Like suddenly I’m the Wife of Bath?”

He bobs his eyebrows. “Hey, you’re the one who showed up in my bedroom and crawled on top of me, Mrs. Robinson.”

“Hmmm.” I decide to torture him. “I don’t know. Can you be super slow and gentle, and make it seem romantic? Because I was never inhibited, deep down: but I needed romance, when I was her. I wanted to be coaxed, and flattered. Told I got you hotter than all the other girls. Unlike you, I was insecure about not satisfying an experienced lover.”

“You ARE hotter than all the other girls,” he says. “So MUCH hotter. 20 minutes ago you had me whimpering and begging.” He laces his fingers through mine. “Are you seriously worried about that? Because it’s not like any me would lie about emotions. It’s a total dick move to lead women on.”

“Maybe I’d be more secure if you’d saved yourself, just for me,” I say. “But you didn’t. No version of you that ever split with me did. The second we broke up, you were always inside some other girl. Usually gorgeous, with big lips and big tits and no hangups, who took you the way you came. And it hurt. I would pine.”

“I’m your weak spot,” he says softly, like he can’t believe it. “I didn’t think you had one, but you do, and it’s me. Wow.”

He disengages his hands and slides them up me, over my waist, my breasts, to cup my face. “I’ve never had anyone love me so much,” he says. “No one’s ever wanted MY love that much. You OWN me, Veronica. I’m YOURS. You’re so beautiful, and fierce. Like a blade. You’re my heart’s desire.”

His hands shift to my breasts, tugging and pinching my nipples, and my eyes drift closed. My head falls back.

He smoothes a palm down my belly, between my legs, toying with my clit as I begin to rock against
him. “I’m yours,” he repeats, free hand ghosting across my skin. “I’ll do anything you want.”

He sits up, a surge of movement against me, and I keep my eyes shut, crossing my wrists behind his neck. He bends, nibbling and sucking my nipples, using two fingers on my clit. Making me sigh. He strokes down my back, over the curve of one cheek, fingers dipping idly into the crease. He kisses me, rubbing in small, hot circles, thrusting languidly in time. One fingertip traces my second entrance, very gently, then again.

I smile, realizing I’ve given the fox keys to the henhouse. “Fast learner,” I say, and open my eyes. He grins at me, unrepentant, and pushes the questing finger in, just a little. Then a little more.

“Mmmm,” I say, and he takes that as permission, working very gently, using my own moisture. I lift up on my knees, grasp the base of his cock and impale myself, sliding slowly down. His breath goes out in a long sigh. I tilt forward, pressing him flat on the bed, and begin to ride.

“Oh, man,” he says. He tries to kiss me and I ease tauntingly back: he huffs a laugh. I widen my stance so he has room to explore, and we both groan as he goes after my clit with a vengeance.

“I meant it all,” he insists, thrusting up as he strokes me everywhere. “I fucking worship you. Oh, God, Ronica, I wish I could lick you right now. Your soft little sex, and your perfect little tits, for hours, while I fuck you, just like this. I’d slide my tongue everywhere, while you moan, and come, and then I’d tell you how much I love you, because I do. And I’d tell you how unbelievably gorgeous you are, all wet and hot and greedy, and how I’ve never wanted ANYONE this much, because you fit around my cock and in my heart like you’re made for me…”

I give a little shriek-gasp as I come, deeply, and he surges hard twice and spills too, like he was barely keeping it at bay. His fingers keep caressing, feather-light, and I push back against them. He moans, and lunges up to kiss me for real.

“Have we ever done this before?” he asks, against my lips. “Or…anything like it?”

“Maybe,” I say. “Or maybe this was the first time. Maybe you were so hot, and so sweet, I couldn’t help myself.”

“We will again,” he promises. “Now that I know how to touch. And when it happens, I’ll be tender. I will worship at your altar like the goddess you are, and you’ll feel nothing but pleasure.”

“I’ve created a monster,” I say, and he laughs, wraps me up in his arms and legs.

“I love you so much, Ronica,” he says. “You have no idea.”

“Show me,” I say. “Show me, every day.”

“I promise,” he murmurs, and kisses me again.
THREAD NINETEEN

I’m in the kitchenette of the penthouse at the Grand, and I’m making snickerdoodles.

Yeah, it happens again, me just appearing in the present. I stumble, spilling flour, before I recover and keep moving. Measure, stir. Roll, coat in sugar. Check the oven, six cookies per tray. Wash my hands, sip my water. It's Zen.

Logan walks in, tosses his books on the couch, notices me by the stove in a frilly white apron, and bursts out laughing. “Are there slippers and a pipe, waiting near my easy chair?” he wants to know. “And shouldn’t you be in heels and pearls?”

“If you enjoy cookies, consider shutting up now,” I say, pointing my wooden spoon at him, narrowing my eyes.

He surveys the two dozen snickerdoodles already cooling on racks, and says, “That fetus is half Mars, all right.”

I fake-chortle, which makes him grin, and he approaches to sit at the breakfast bar. “How was your day, dear?” he asks, all innocent-smarm, while stealing a cookie. He balances his chin on his hand.

I shrug. “At the moment, peaceful. Yours?”

“Aced my Latin American Studies midterm, scored yet another campus parking ticket, and had coffee with Wallace on the quad. Came home to find my live-in girlfriend in the kitchen, in an apron, but tragically, she was dressed beneath.”

I close my teeth on my tongue, studying him, and then I take a chance. “For all you know I’m hiding red satin lingerie inside these sweats,” I tell him. “Chosen just for you. But you keep giving me attitude, you may never see it.”

He sets his half eaten cookie on the counter. Spreads his palms out flat. “If that’s true,” he says, ‘I’ll lay everything I’ve got at your feet. Including the bodies of my victims.”

I close my eyes. Wind my hand around the towel rack, to keep from falling. When I open them, he’s staring at me, the corner of his mouth curved up in a smile.

“Long time, no see, Mrs. R,” he says. “Until you screamed at Piz in the food court the other day, I wasn’t sure you were ever coming back.”

“You knew it was me?” I ask, dusting flour off my sleeve.

“Hoped,” he corrects. “NOW I know.”

I walk around the bar, into his arms, and he squeezes me tight. “I’m sorry,” I say. “I don’t have any control over where I end up, or what the other Veronicas do when I’m not around. And don’t take this the wrong way, but your Veronica is my least favorite of the bunch. I mean, she let Piz kiss her on the MOUTH, which I just don’t GET. It’d be like Frenching a hyperactive spaniel!”

I do a full-body shudder, and I can feel him shaking with laughter, silent chuckles hot against the top of my head. “GOD, I missed you,” he says, and tilts my chin up for a kiss. He tastes like warm
cookie, and the guy I love.

“You’re you everywhere,” I assure him, putting my hand on his cheek as we split apart. “It’s weird, this the first time it’s truly registered. But you’re the only person, in every reality, who sort of stays the same. Like you’re my lodestone, my North. And you love all the versions of me, even the shitty ones, with equal loyalty.”

“Um,” he says. “THIS me was actually dating a very nice swimsuit model, until you set Piz on fire the other day, and danced among the flames. Not that I don’t love the Veronica you’re bodysnatching. But I remain by no means convinced she’s not just shacked up with me to placate Keith.”

“She was camped out in your parking lot, the last time I showed here,” I say. “I’m pretty sure she likes you more than you think.”

“Maybe she was just terrified to tell me we’re stuck co-parenting forever,” he counters, stealing another cookie.

“Maybe she was afraid to turn up unannounced, in case you were banging some Playboy Playmate in a champagne bath,” I retort, folding my arms.

Understanding blooms behind his eyes. “Right, I forgot,” he drawls. “Your Logan’s the douchebag in the penthouse, racing through his trust fund, nailing countless hot babes. I was amazed, once, at how together you were, compared to Ronnie Junior Year. But jealousy was your hot button issue.”

“And me leaving was yours,” I say, quietly, because his perceptiveness stings. “Every time I did, MY Logan came unglued.”

“Do you know why I live here, Veronica?” he asks, sitting back down on his stool. De-escalating, his voice losing volume. I’m struck, again, by how mature the Alternate College Logans are, despite the drama that surrounds them.

“No,” I say. “I don’t know ANYTHING about this reality. I’ve been here twice, before now, and both times I mostly talked to you. I wasn’t even sure if Wallace was ALIVE, until you mentioned him five minutes ago.”

“I’m building a house,” he says, calmly. “We’re moving in this summer, it has a private beach, and a nursery for the baby. Wallace is the big man on campus, thanks to his mad basketball skills. And before you ask, your dad’s doing great. He took up jogging last year. He runs marathons, now.”


Ah, yes. Logan’s favorite game. Reveal nothing, while gleaning all. “Not yet,” I counter, leaning against the wall. “Is he Sheriff?”

“Not since the second heart attack.” He settles in, well-pleased that I’m playing. “He’s retired. Every fall, he writes a true crime book for vacation money.” The timer dings, and he watches me extract the cookies, turn the oven off. “How many present realities are there, Ronica?”

“Four,” I say, perching on the counter across from him. “As of today. But the worst one may disappear, or change drastically, based on what happened last night. This reality is most like mine, because you’re living in the hotel, and we both go to Hearst. Where are Lilly and Dick?”
“Vassar and Hawaii,” he says, resting on his elbows. “She came out to her parents as bi, and she’s doing Women’s Studies. He owns a string of surfboard shops, but his business input is minimal. What happened last night, that’s going to drastically affect the worst reality?”

“I turned up in the bedroom in Fiji,” I say, and his grin goes naughty. “In the worst reality, I was indicted for murder during the Fiji trip, and you and I had split, so Lynn went alone. Have I ever had a run-in with Meg Manning?”

“Not to my knowledge,” he says slowly, clearly not expecting this. “She was very supportive, when you and Lils accused her dad of child abuse. Why do you keep asking where all our friends are?”

“Because I’m trying to figure out what’s variable and what’s fixed, between the different realities. Why did we break up, here?”

He frowns. Looks down at his hands. “I kept telling you I loved you, and you kept not answering. So one day, I hid in the cafeteria and phoned you, and watched you send my call to voicemail. And I decided I was tired of being a disappointment.”

My eyes fill with tears, as I make the connection to my own Logan. He asks, more softly, “Is there any reality where we’re happier than this?”

“Yes,” I say. “But we’re together in all of them. And in love. I mean, assuming we’re in love here, and not just going through the motions. Is this baby really yours? Because I actually wasn’t sure, when I told you it was. I mean, I can’t imagine your Veronica would jump in bed with someone else, right after being dumped…I certainly didn’t…but…”

“It’s mine,” he interrupts. “She swore, and I believe her. I think she got jealous when I started dating Candace, and found a way to make me suffer. Are any of the other Veronicas in a family way?”

I shrug. “Sort of. In my reality, I’m not so fertile, because Beaver gave me Chlamydia, and it went untreated for two years. In one, I turned up pregnant by chance, after you and I got engaged. In the prison reality, you slept with all my female friends while I was in the big house, and eventually knocked up Mac. So yeah, short answer, there seems to be a fixed ‘accidental pregnancy’ theme, with you being the dad, occurring about three months ago. Guess we can chalk it up to your generally shitty karma.” I sigh. “This is exhausting, and my back hurts. Can we sit?”

He reaches across the counter, traces a finger down my hairline, my jaw. Holds his hand out, palm up. I place mine in it. He leads me around the bar, to the couch, and pulls me onto his lap. Kisses the top of my head. “I love you,” he says. “I don’t want to fight.”

“Words I never thought I’d hear Logan Echolls say,” I murmur, and kiss his throat. “I don’t want to fight’, I mean. Look, here’s what I think. Whatever this is that happening to me? It’s about you. You’re the center. Because I have yet to appear anywhere that you don’t show up, except, of course, jail.”

He shakes his head, like jail is an excessive level of suck, even to him. I say, “Yeah, that reality was hard to take, although I did have a really great dog, there. So. The pregnancy seems important. The Felix Toombs murder is a wild card: five or six people seem to have it in for me, in relation to him. And there’s a missing gun with my prints on it, which could cause trouble. Getting to Fiji, having it be a good vacation, was cited in a couple realities as critical. I don’t know for sure, but I’m guessing making you my confidante was the thing that needed to happen.”

I toy with his fingers, thinking. “Meg Manning and her dad went after me over Felix, and I’m not sure why. I mean I guess I’ll find out soon, since all the Meg drama happened first half of senior
year, but right now I’m running blind. I’ll have to get a handle on Weevil, too, whether he’s my friend or enemy. I need to know if he’ll screw me over for protecting him, from whatever puts him in a coma. Oh, and there’s this one moment where I have to say something specific, and if I don’t, our relationship goes straight to hell.” I sigh. “Plus, a very important event happens on ‘The Nautilus’. I assume that’s a boat, and not Captain Nemo’s submarine?”

“The Nautilus was Jake Kane’s yacht,” Logan says, like I should know. “Celeste got it in the divorce, no clue if she kept it. Nobody ever found the gun that killed Felix Toombs, or at least it never went into evidence. And Meg Manning and her father are both dead.”

I sit up straight, but he keeps tracing circles on my back with his nails. “Dead how?”

“Car wreck.” He leans us sideways, watching me. “He was supposed to avoid contact unless a court-appointed supervisor was present, while the abuse charge was investigated. But they ended up in a car together anyway. They drove right off a cliff. Nobody knows if it was murder-suicide, or an accident.”

I suck in my breath, and he shakes his head. “He was killed on impact—the car went into the water—and she was in a coma for a while, and then she had, I dunno, a hematoma maybe? Something happened to her brain, and she died too. It was a bummer. Dick was really into her, and it messed with his head for a good year, after.”

“Wow,” I say. “So that’s two people I can save from comas, who tried to send me to jail. Talk about your double jeopardy.”

“No,” he corrects. “You’ve already successfully stayed out of jail, remember? They indicted you BEFORE Fiji.”

“Doesn’t mean I won’t end up there later, if I don’t figure out why I took the fall the first time. Wait, you said last night that we almost didn’t make it to Fiji. What did you mean?”

His mouth twists, sardonic. “Okay, that’s last night for YOU. It was a year and a half ago, for me. But basically, as I recall, you didn’t want to go. You were all fired up about some favor you were doing someone, which you wouldn’t discuss: and you were mad at me because I got smashed against a rock, surfing, and had to have stitches. You were on me about test results, too, getting accepted to good colleges. And then we took the SAT, and I scored higher than you did on verbal, and you were piiiiiissseeeed. Part of the problem my Veronica and I are having, here, is that Hearst wasn’t her first choice. She blames all the screwing around we did senior year, both literal and figurative, for the fact that she didn’t get a perfect 1600. And when I say ‘screwing around’, I mean ‘me’. She thinks I’m lazy, because I know I’ll never have to work for a living. I pointed out that I’ve knocked her up, so now neither will she, but that proved to be a bad move.”

I scrunch up my face. “You think?” I ask, mock-blonde. “What was her school of choice?”

He grimaces. “KEITH wanted her to go to Stanford. SHE wanted to go to Berkeley. So Stanford, plus a lot of angry cognitive dissonance, while she pretended Stanford was her idea, and the non-qualifying score was my fault. And Keith wasn’t angry, just disappointed. And Hearst was a better choice than Berkeley, being closer to ‘family’. Like she gives half a shit about being anywhere near Jake and her mother.”

“Wow,” I say. “This reality IS a lot like mine. Although I totally DID get into Stanford, and my SAT score was higher than yours, overall.”

“In other words, YOU do whatever your dad says, too.” He lifts me off his lap, kisses my cheek, and
wanders into the kitchen. In a minute he’s back, with a tray of cookies and milk. “Brain food,” he informs me, setting it on the coffee table with a flourish. “While your brilliant deductive mind unravels the Gordian knot.”

“Piece of cake,” I say through a mouthful of snickerdoodle, making a slashing motion with my hand. “Cut it in half. Wait, lightbulb moment! I know you meant that dad crack to be insulting, but you raise what may be a key point. About his importance to the overall scheme, I mean.

“Dad barely shows up in any of the alternative realities: even in this one, where I apparently crave his approval, he’s peripheral to my life. But in my own reality, he’s like my most important person. I live with him, I’m his partner at work, he dumps all his girlfriends to take care of me. He doesn’t want me to date you, so I mostly don’t. He expects me to get straight A’s, and choose a boyfriend with a future, and eventually leave Neptune forever: and the idea of failing him gives me stomach cramps. Because he’s the only one who stuck by me, when Lilly died, and you turned mean. The rest of my world went to hell.”

He studies me for a long minute, then looks down at the plate, tracing a finger around the rim. “Veronica,” he says, after a while. “I have a theory. Can I lay it out for you, without being accused of rampant bias?”

I nod, and he half-smiles. “In MY past, your dad loved you, but he was never around. I mean, he helped out when you needed him, and gave advice via chimp metaphors, and he’s a great guy, for sure. But he didn’t opt for joint custody, even though Lianne offered. And he worked ALL the time. He wasn’t really involved in your life, except as a heroic figurehead. It sort of broke my heart, to be honest, watching you jump through hoops to include him, while he gave you maybe two grudging afternoons a month.”

I absorb this, shocked. Logan does the one-eyed apologetic squint, and says, “Thing is, Jake and Lianne ignored you, too. I’m the person you confided in. The one you came to, when things got tough. And yeah, my Veronica gets mad at me a lot, for being frivolous and flighty. For any number of things. But like you said: she turns up pregnant, she heads straight to my parking lot, because I’m safe harbor. I’m her best friend.

“It sounds like, though, in your reality, I’m basically alone, and deeply unhappy. And I express that idiotically, sure, by making you a target, by lashing out like a tantrumming toddler. But I think I’m lonely there because we love each other, yet you kept away, to please Keith. Whereas, in all the other realities, the ones that stem from your dreams? I’m a lot more at peace, because you made US a priority.”

I press my lips together. “Red satin,” I say. “That first night, that first dream, I decided to be honest about who I was. And what…who…I really wanted.”

“And you stood naked on the beach, with your dress clutched in front of you, giving me come-hither stares.” He smiles, reminiscently. “You held my hand in the car, too. And cleaned my tux, to save me from a beating. That was the first night I even considered that you might actually be interested in me. Not just for harmless flirting, I mean: but like I could maybe kiss you, and you’d let me. Or tell you secrets, and you’d keep them. It wasn’t the day I fell in love with you, but it was day the seed was planted.”

He sighs. “So, at the risk of sounding like an egomaniac, which, no quips, please, could it be I’m central because this is your do-over? Like this is you, living the life of your choice, instead of staying stuck in weird co-dependent limbo with your dad until you’re thirty? Because the main thing you seem to want to do differently is make us work. That’s actually how I learned to recognize you as not-my-Veronica: every time you appear, you fight hard to get next to me and stay there, decimating
anyone who stands in your way. Often with hilarious results.”

“Okay,” I say. “The part about my dad is extremely upsetting, but I’ll cope with it later, because the rest sounds right. Assuming it’s true, then: how do we make the dreams stop?”

He shrugs. “Well, if it’s a total do-over, it lasts until you end up back at the moment this began. And return to your own reality, with the chance to take a different road. Or it could be like Groundhog Day, and it’s done when you get things right. Which means your choices shape where you wind up, and which version of me you wind up WITH.”

I lean against his shoulder, and he puts an arm around me. “Oooh, look at you, citing film examples! You’re so pretty, I forget you’ve got a brain.”

“That’s always your first mistake.” He crosses his feet on the table, next to the cookies.

“Hey Logan,” I say, after a long moment of reflective silence. “It’s been an exhausting week. Can we just lie on the couch all day, and watch bad TV, and gently banter?”

“You got it, angel face.” He reaches for the remote.

“And Logan?” I ask again, drowsily, a long time later, as the ‘Baywatch’ theme blares in the background.

“Mmm?” he murmurs, into my hair. I’m sprawled out full-length on top of him.

“Do me a favor, kay? Tell your Veronica you love her, and you wanting her has nothing to do with the baby. And tell her you’d never cheat. And the only reason you broke up was because you thought she didn’t love YOU anymore. I think she’s enough like me that she needs to hear those words.”

“I don’t see how it will help, since she’s aware of the things you just said,” he mutters. “But you know if you ask me to, I will. Because you’re my girl among girls, and I’m a sucker for your face.”

“Make sure you do,” I warn. “You’re too awesome to have an unhappy reality.”

“Back atcha,” he says, and switches over to the A Team.

It never occurred to me, I think, nestling my cheek into his sternum (where his heart beats strongest, and he smells most intensely him). That I would have to choose between Logan and my dad, I mean: between their competing visions of my happiest future. Sure, I always knew dad didn’t approve of Logan. But it’s not like he was the only one. Between the string of petty crimes, the lurid family history, the promiscuity and the mouth, Logan was every father’s nightmare for his Pretty Pretty Princess, even BEFORE he turned mean. Lying here on top of the non-criminal version, though, I can see that there may have been prejudice. Maybe dad chased all my boyfriends away at least partly out of possessiveness, just like I did his girlfriends. And maybe he chased Logan the hardest because Logan was the one I really wanted.

There’s no pressure here, in this moment, to prove my ineffable rightness: so I can admit I had trouble leaving the nest. And while I by no means want to lose my dad from his spot at the heart of my life? Maybe I clung too tight. Maybe when MY Logan vented his personal sense of betrayal, because I chose my dad over…basically, him…. he was making a deeper point. Teens grow up, and leave their parents. They go home for holidays, or when they’re out of clean clothes, and they ask for care packages, sent by mail. But if you really fall in love, you might stick with your lover forever. You might move in, get engaged, get pregnant. Your dad might find someone else to talk to, redecorate your room. He might buy a sports car, take up a hobby. And maybe that’s OK. Maybe
I press a kiss to Logan’s heart, and he reaches up lazily to stroke my hair. “Thanks,” I say. “For being accepting, and letting me rest. It’s been rough, this slipstream, and I’m always SO tired.”

“Veronica,” he says. “I love you. Whatever you need, it’s yours.”

“And that,” I say, “is why, if I can, I’ll always come back.”

He puts his arms around me, and turns the TV off. We drift slowly, as the dusk gathers, into sugar-crash sleep.

**THREAD NINETEEN INVERTS**

I’m drowsing in a hammock with Logan, just outside the Fiji cottage: we’re naked and entwined. It’s approaching dawn, the sky growing pearly at the edges, and I can hear the rhythmic surf, beyond the garden wall. I feel weightless, content, as if the world’s momentarily on hold.

“Logan?” I ask, softly in case he’s sleeping, watching the breeze blow through the palm leaves, the red-flowered vines. “Why were you drinking in the dark, last time I showed up? Why were you sad?”

He smirks, not opening his eyes. “Why, Mrs. Robinson. Are you trying to seduce me?”

I shove him, and he laughs. Tucks me closer, kisses the top of my head. “I wasn’t sad, exactly,” he says. “More…melancholy. Coping with my issues, of which I have many.”

“Sad,” I say. “You drink when people hurt you. Spill.”

“You know, you don’t LOOK like a relentless force of nature. Your big-blue-eyed face is the perfect mask.” He sighs. “OK, let me ask you this. Did your Logan ever talk to you about Aaron? And his…routine?”

“No,” I say, and this is sort of a raw wound. He didn’t trust me not to use it as a weapon, and part of me can’t blame him. Because I might have. “He deflects and banters. He’s not a sharer. In his defense, a Vanity Fair reporter did pose as his illegitimate brother once, to get dirt for an expose.”

Logan winces. “OK, so maybe both of us will benefit if I tell.” He takes a deep breath. “Aaron had…a ritual he stuck with, most times. You know, to make him feel like he was disciplining his kid, and not just getting off on random torture. I’d pick a belt, and go to his office, and the number of lashes varied based on the seriousness of the ‘crime’.” He toys with my necklace, and I stay very still, afraid to say or do anything to break the spell. “But before he’d beat me, he’d trot out the lecture. Or I should say, the monologue. The stirring speech. About how I needed to try harder to be a good person, because I was living life wrong. And if I had just listened, and learned from his example, he wouldn’t have to punish, and it hurt him more than me, yadda yadda. Working up his righteous wrath.”

I wince, because I know where this is going now. “Yeah, you told me what Veronica’s up to yesterday. In the future. She’s judging you, right? Asking you to change, acting like you’re not good enough? And it’s pushing your buttons.”

“I don’t think she means to,” he says. “I think she just feels a lot of pressure to please and impress h….your dad, and it spills over. Which I GET.” He turns on his side, spooning me, as if he needs more skin contact. “I mean, your dad is great, I want to impress him, too. And it’s not like I can’t admit I’m headed downhill, when I am. But I’m not going to quit surfing or scuba diving or
whatever, just to focus on test scores. That’s my release valve. Plus, my test scores have ALWAYS been high.”

I wrap my hands around his, tucking them between my breasts. “She’s afraid,” I say. “Of intimacy, of failure, of being wrong. Of you moving on to someone easier, because you love so openly, and she doesn’t. And that fear comes out as blaming you, and judging you, and withholding approval—push ‘em away, before they break your heart. She doesn’t know she’s mimicking Aaron. She’d be appalled, if she realized. And she’s probably only bitching about the extreme sports because she wants to keep you safe. I heard you got stitches, at some point in the recent past.”

He extends his right arm, and I notice a row of black x’s, just below his armpit. I kiss them, and he wriggles like it tickles. “You don’t mind, though, right?” he asks, nibbling on my ear. “Because you seem fairly Zen about me not planning to quit.”

“Like you would, no matter what I said,” I snort. “Look, she’s a risk taker too, no matter what she pretends. There’s no way she’d date you if she didn’t live on the edge.” He shoves me with his shoulder, and I shove back. “You and I, we both live for the thrills. It’s just, you’re more about the physical and emotional risks, while I get my fix solving crimes. Sometimes I investigate awful ones. And you HATE it, but you let me, so I return the favor. I DO worry, though. SO much. About you, not me. Because me in danger, I can handle. However, living without you? Would be like living without my heart. I actually dumped you once, because you kept putting yourself in harm’s way, and I couldn’t stand to look.”

“Cruising around in the banana mobile, with Dick and Enbom?” He quotes, and I nod. He presses his face into my shoulder, and there’s silence for a long minute. “You really need me that much?”

“Yes,” I say. “And my biggest Logan-related regret is, I was too scared to say so out loud, and it tore us apart.”

“You need to be in control to feel safe,” he murmurs, into my skin.

“Me more than her,” I say. “I was raped. She’s just…the child of an alcoholic, you know? Trying to make sure everything looks perfect on the outside.”

His head jerks up. “KEITH’S an alcoholic?”

“No, Lianne.” I turn back to look at him. “That’s my big secret, like Aaron’s yours. Maybe she’s not one anymore, in this reality—she got what she wanted here, she’s married to Jake. But she started drinking ‘til she passed out when I was about 9, and I had to step up and fill her role. Grocery shopping, cooking, putting her to bed. Scrubbing her puke out of the carpet, making myself late for dance team. Dad had his hands full with work—he tried to help, but it was mostly me.”

“My mom abuses prescription meds,” he offers. “Xanax, Valium, even now. She prefers to be numb.”

“I know. It’s one of the first things we bonded about, in my reality. Both our moms are weak. But pretty!”

“I would never marry anyone weak,” he says, fervent. “I’d a million times rather cope with a bitchy withholding control freak than that.”

“Someone weak couldn’t handle you,” I scoff, ignoring the jab. “Talk about your relentless forces of nature. You’d Dangerous Liaisons anyone wimpy or naive into tears, every morning before coffee.”

“I’ll bet that’s why you like me,” he says, and he sounds smug. “I’m not meek, so you’re not bored.
You need to FEEL in control, but when it comes to us, you aren’t, always. And that infuriates you, but it also makes you hot.”

“I enjoy matching wits with you,” I concede. “I love how smart you are, how you dance around my demands, and play with words, and never bend. When you’re in the room, I feel AWAKE.”

“I’m going to have to do you again, if you don’t stop with the dirty talk,” he warns.

“Oh no!” I gasp. “The horror!”

“Prickly sweet,” he says, with a sigh. “Vinegar and honey, dealing in secrets. Thanks for all the dirt. It’ll help.”

“Ditto,” I say. “I feel like we’ve become each other’s video game cheat sheet. She’s lucky to have you, Logan. I hope you know that.”

“When will we be together?” he asks. “This you and this me, I mean. Not just to visit, but for good?”

“Year and a half?” I guess. “Maybe a little less. When is it, now?”

“End of summer,” he tells me. “Next week we start senior year.”

“It’s April, where I am. I have to wear jackets. My favorite is this shitty brown cardigan of yours. You leave it on a chair for me because it’s soft, and I like the smell.”

“I thought we were broken up,” he says, stroking the back of his hand across my cheek.

“Before I started dreaming, we were,” I correct, yawning. “But everywhere I go, I try to win you back. Sometimes I don’t have to, because you’re already mine.”

“Any tips to tide me over, ‘til the next time you appear?” he asks, lips to my ear. “Other than no Kendall Casablancas, and no fighting Weevil?”

“We’re past the part where I dumped you for fighting Weevil,” I say. “We’re at that stupid fortune cookie. Next week, you say you’ll miss me, and I act mad, but really I want to cry. Oh! There’s a field trip. But Woody’s in jail, right, so maybe not to Shark Stadium? Anyway, don’t get on the bus. There may be a crash, where everybody dies. Or the bus could be safe, but there’s a car crash, instead.”

“Who dies?” he asks, gently.

“Meg,” I say. “In the bus OR the car, she’s the only one who bites it either way. Peter from drama, the one who played Malvolio. Dick and Gia and Duncan got a limo, so they were safe. Beaver used his cellphone, to set off the explosives.”

“On it,” he assures me. “What about you and me?”

“You were boning Kendall, in Dick Senior’s bed,” I sigh. “I was…arguing at the gas station, with Weevil. I followed Lilly’s ghost…”

“Arguing about what?” he asks, but it all goes black, and he’s gone.
It's My Party and I'll Cry if I Want To

Chapter Notes

This chapter's extra-long, so get comfortable. :-) Trigger warning for references to canon assault and murder, made AU.

THREAD TWENTY

“Veronica, we’re here,” Logan murmurs in my ear. I come awake to the sensation of fingertips, gently stroking my cheek.

“Mmm, hammock,” I agree, but that’s not right, because I’m shifting through layers of bedding, against hard surfaces. “Why’d we leave Fiji? We should have stayed.”

“While I agree with the sentiment,” he whispers, amused, “we’re currently at your dad’s house. You need to clear your mind of tropical hammock fantasies, and put your good girl face on.”

I open my eyes to bright California sunlight: a styled and gelled College Logan grins at me. We’re in the green Range Rover, and the back doors hang open, so Mac and Dick can unload luggage onto the driveway. “And here’s our happily ever after,” I say sleepily. He kisses my temple.

“Like there was any doubt,” he scoffs. “We’re fated. Murder, mayhem and familial dysfunction can’t make a DENT in the Teflon indestructibility of us.”

“Badasses in love,” I quip, and we share a smile. He kisses his fingertips, presses them to my belly, and hops out of the car to help with the bags.

I fight free of the travel blanket wrapped around my legs, and gaze at the grey clapboard Craftsman. Heave a sigh. Dad didn’t want me, in this reality I thought was so much better: yet here I am on his doorstep, anyway, begging for scraps. The urge to run, and ostrich all afternoon, is almost unbearable.

Logan comes around to my door, helps me down. He registers the look on my face, and the corner of his mouth quirks. “Chin up, armor on,” he says. “You deal with her a little better every time.”

Bettina, right. I completely forgot. By all means, let’s add some Casablancas dysfunction to this already treacherous Swamp of Suck. And oh, crap, the thumb drive. I hope it’s still in my purse, because no way can I sleep until I check that thing out. There’s enough trouble brewing without me running around blind.

I search for the car containing Lilly, but don’t see it. Which blows. Because I could seriously use one of her ‘we’re so awesome and everybody else is jealous’ pep talks, right about now.

We walk into the house, a showplace in blues, grays and tasteful French Provincial, which still manages to look homely. “Yoo-hoo!” I call, with completely forced gaiety, towards murmuring in a distant room. “Anybody here but us chickens?”

“VRONK!” a high voice screams, and someone about two feet high comes barreling around the corner, tackles my kneecaps. I wobble, but Logan grabs me so I don’t go over.
“HI VRONKA!” the little guy says, beaming sunshinily up at me. He has big brown eyes, silky dark hair, about six teeth total in his wide, cheerful smile, and chubby cheeks that even I have to admit are adorable.

And, minus those cheeks, he’s a dead ringer for Mr. Rooks.

“Hey, buddy,” I say, laying a tentative hand on his head. “How’s it going?”

“LOAG!” he yells, instead of answering, and flings himself with equal enthusiasm on my boyfriend. “Hi! Up up up!!”

“BOBBY!” Logan replies, crouching down to accept an actual hug. He grabs the kid around the waist, stands, and tosses him about three feet into the air, while the boy shrieks with laughter.

“Up!” Bobby insists, after five repetitions, but Logan shakes his head, tucks him under his arm like a football.

“No more up,” he announces. “It’ll make you puke.” He takes my hand and draws me towards the back of the house, calling out, “Is there a Sheriff Keith Mars in these parts? I caught a dangerous outlaw in the foyer, trying to make off with my girl.”

We emerge into a huge kitchen, done in blue, white and gold, with a red-chicken motif. Dad and Bettina are presiding tandem over a six-burner range, bumping hips companionably while Frank Sinatra plays. They turn, smiling, as we enter.

“I’ll take that,” Dad announces, and Logan hands Bobby over so he’s hanging upside down. More giggles and shrieks ensue, and Dad grabs, and pretends to eat, one of the wildly flailing feet. “He won’t make it far without his TOES.”

Dad sets the kid down, and he runs laugh-squealing off again, screaming “RICKY!” from the next room.

“Sweetheart!” Dad says, flashing his public-relations smile, opening his arms. “Who’s your daddy?”

“Ugh!” I groan, hugging him. Hopeful, because this at least SEEMS normal. “Will you QUIT with that, already?”

“Not a chance,” Dad tells me, winking at Bettina. He extends a hand to Logan, and they shake, then do one of those back-slappy brief-contact guy-hug things. “How was the drive?”

“Dick made us play car-trip games,” Logan says, while Bettina kisses me on each cheek, European-style: then he offers his face for the same treatment. “And Ronica made us listen to the Spice Girls, while she and Lilly sang over the phone. Other than that, it was cake.”

“Dude, there’s cake?” Dick asks, striding into the kitchen with Bobby on his shoulders. “Cause I’m freaking starving. Oh hey, mumsy dearest!” He leans down, and Bettina kisses him, too.

Bobby shouts, “MY MOMMY!” and winds his arms around her neck: she extracts him from his teetering position deftly, tucks him against her side.

“Of course I’m your mommy, darling,” she says, locating a tasting spoon, offering him a sip of whatever’s on the nearest burner. “But I’m Ricky’s mommy too. Isn’t that crazy? Someday, you’ll be as big as he is, and I’ll have to get a second stove so I can cook enough food!”

My brow furrows, but a glance at Logan shows he isn’t fazed by Domestic-Caring-About-Children
Bettina. I wonder if this is how Cinderella felt, watching the wicked stepmother cozy up to her dad. Waiting for the ax to fall.

God, I hope Bobby has zero contact with Beaver.

“That child’s resemblance to Mr. Rooks will prove problematic someday,” I tell Logan in an undervoice, instead of naming my fears.

“Are you kidding?” he murmurs. “That’s the luckiest toddler on the planet! We need to check out the yard. I heard they installed a whole bouncy VILLAGE in back.”

“Yeah, right. All my childhood parties were the bowl-of-punch, ice-cream-cake, pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey type. Dad doesn’t forget, but he’s not a large-scale event planner.”

“Never underestimate my mom,” Dick says, from his position by the window. “It’s like neon plastic Deadwood out there.”

I look, and what do you know. The yard is several acres, with at least 10 Old-West-themed inflatables ranged across it. Lilly and Jessica have claimed the saloon: Lilly’s demonstrating an old Dance Team routine, in between daring Jessica to do flips. As I watch, Dick drains his beer, races into the yard, somersaults between them, and joins in.

“I have to grit my teeth and pretend to be OK with this, right?” I mutter to Logan, who’s observing their shenanigans with the half-giggly/half-exasperated expression he saves for Dick.

He shrugs. “I’m good either way. You know how entertaining I find it when you tear a piece out of someone.”

This makes me laugh, in spite of myself. “I’m about to marry the world’s biggest shit-stirrer,” I marvel, and pat him on the shoulder. “I think I’ll get some air while I digest that.”

“Aw, peaches, you know you’ll never quit me,” he calls, as I retreat. “I may be infuriating, but I’m insanely smoking hot.”

I blow him a kiss and fan myself, and he grins. I push the screen door open, wander outside.

There’s a picnic table set up, with a whole Martha Stewart place-setting thing going on, safely distant from the action. Lawn chairs are arranged at intervals, with iced buckets of drinks between, about half supporting chatting adult partygoers. The patio is festooned with expensively cutesy cowboy decorations: even the carefully tended rosebushes sport Roy Rogers cutouts, planted below on stakes. I’m getting a major overcompensating-with-the-second-family vibe: I’m also guessing Bettina has WAY too much free time.

Then again, the Casablancas Christmas Extravaganzas of my childhood always DID rival Lynn Echolls’ for sheer over-the-top wackiness. Especially the circus-themed one with elephants, which ended so badly.

I find an empty lawn chair and sink into it, digging out a Snapple because there is no Sunkist. I drink, slump back in the chair, watch Bobby cavort among the bouncing college students: and I wonder if my life will ever be sane again.

Assuming, of course, that it was sane in the first place.

“Veronica!” someone yells, and I glance up to see Carrie Bishop and Susan Knight approaching. Susan looks to Carrie to lead, as always, while Carrie’s all dimpled smirks and good cheer. Susan’s
in jeans and a t-shirt, Carrie’s in an Indian-print sundress: they both seem slim and tanned. They’ve probably been hanging at the yacht club again, scamming drinks off rich playboys, and doing surreptitious laps in the pool.

Bobby abandons the Bouncy OK Corral (where he’s having a shootout with Dick) when he sees them. He comes barreling across the yard, screaming “SUZE!” at the top of his lungs. He tackles her so hard she actually does fall over, but she laughs and hugs him anyway, cuddling close.

“Hey pardner!” she greets, managing to stand with him in her arms, surreptitiously brushing off grass. “You need some help getting rid of that dangerous desperado?”

“Wave a cold Corona at him!” Carrie calls, settling into the lawn chair beside mine. “I guarantee he’ll take a dive!”

Susan laughs, discreetly flipping her off behind Bobby’s back, and heads towards Dick, who’s still bouncing. Carrie pops the top of her Diet Coke, and takes a grateful gulp.

“Are there any children coming to this children’s party?” I muse, watching as Dick resumes playacting. He pretends to shoot Susan, who mimes ducking the bullet.

“Other than Damien there?” She gestures lazily at my stomach, smirks her tiny smirk. “Maybe one or two. Wallace’s little brother is a tween, I guess he qualifies.”

“Wow,” I say with lifted brows, sipping my tea. “Spawn of Satan. It’s almost like you’re not FOND of my fiancée.”

She snickers, so I guess this is an understatement. “I miss Norris,” she confides. “I wish you hadn’t tased him. He wasn’t as hot as Logan, but at least he took the direct approach when he went for someone’s throat.”

Interesting. “Logan’s sneaky that way,” I agree. “But it’s not like his boundaries are unclear.”

“Oh, they’re crystal,” she agrees. “He’s got a barbed wire fence around his beach house and his five friends, with a sign up front that reads ‘Keep Out, Unworthy Bitchez’. I’m just sorry you’re trapped inside.”

“I’m not TRAPPED,” I protest, beginning to lose patience. “I’m right where I WANT to be.”

“For now,” she says. “My fear is that someday you’ll change your mind.”

“Carrie, I’ve loved him since Junior High. I’m fairly sure it’s permanent.” I scowl, because what the fuck? “I don’t get why you think he’s some slick Svengali. He’s NEVER tried to prevent me from doing what I want. Even when he HATES it.”

“Well he doesn’t have to, does he?” She gestures at my belly. “Damien’s his. You’re bound to him for the rest of your life through that kid, and he knows it. He never has to be afraid of you running off again.”

OK, I’m mad now. Like genuinely losing-my-shit mad, because even the most messed up versions of Logan pretty much worship me. And Peanut is his treasure beyond price.

“There’s this funny thing called love,” I snap, “that makes committing to someone feel positive. You should try it! Maybe you’d stop framing all relationships in terms of coercion and rebellion.”

Across the yard, my dad yells, “Who wants CAKE?” and I get up, dusting myself off. My entire
body is shaking with rage, and I’d like to tear into her with feral relish. But I can’t stalk out smugly, after. And Carrie knows too much to be handled the way I would a perp. And it’s a kid’s birthday: my little BROTHER’S birthday, which means no blood spatter. Much as that appeals.

“Well,” I say, instead of all the things I’d WAY rather. “They’re playing my song. Thanks for your concern, but I’d guess what’s pissing you off is Logan Echolls’ protective mask, not Logan Echolls the real human. There’s a significant difference, which you’d get if you bothered to look.”

I march off towards the house. It’s not until Dick stares at me strangely and whistles an alert that I realize my hands are curved into claws.

Lilly drapes an arm around my shoulders as I stomp across the patio, clearly the whistle-ee. “So this is a surprisingly eventful party,” she teases, gripping tight enough that I’m clear she’s not letting go. “SOMEONE just did a dramatic cat-fight/storm-away, and left her victim on the verge of tears. Now, I can’t name any NAMES….”

A smile tries to win through, but I’m too pissed. “Carrie called Peanut DAMIEN. She made Logan sound like AARON. And I couldn’t rip her in half the way I wanted, so I AM NOT HAPPY RIGHT NOW.”

“Duh.” She shoots me a wry, amused look. “She’s been loaded for bear all semester. Nobody ENJOYS being on Logan’s shit list.”

“She tried to poison me against him! It’s like she doesn’t know me at all.”

Lilly shrugs, unconcerned. “Huh. I thought she was smarter than that. Guess it’s no fun being on the other side of the line from all the people with money. I don’t get why she fights so hard to stay close to us, when you’re the only one she can stand. But then again, even if I were the world’s poorest nobody, everyone would line up to adore me.”

She tosses her hair dramatically, and I shake my head at her. “I’m SO glad I have you in my life again, Lils.”

“See? And you could care less about worldly trappings. That’s the best thing about you, Ronica: all you require of friends is loyalty, and you pay us back in full. It’s why Logan worships you. You don’t care if I’m bitchy, or he’s emo, or Wallace acts like an ass, pretending to be a player. As long as we’re there with bells on, any time you need us, you love us just the way we are.”

She rubs her hand over my belly. “You’re not sweet little Princess Veronica anymore, requiring protection. But just know, I’ve got zero problem steamrolling coke-snorting wanna-be’s who call my goddaughter names.”

I hug her, but my brain sticks on the word wannabe. It’s an epithet I grew to hate, the first time around, along with gold digger, social climber, and outcast. I didn’t enjoy being on Logan’s shit list, either, once upon a time, and the realization burns me.

Because I’m really MAD at Carrie. And I do NOT LIKE sympathizing with her right now.

I spot Logan and Wallace by the door, strategically close to cake, and my angst eases. I thread my way through the crowd, put my arms around them both.

“Ten deep breaths,” Logan murmurs, against my hair, and I realize he saw, too. “Let it roll off. I don’t give a fuck what people think of me, present company excluded, and I never have.”

Wallace smirks and mouths “LIE!” at his back, and Logan says, “I heard that.” I smile and bump
Wallace’s shoulder with mine. He bumps back, and I decide I’m going to be OK.

Dad boosts Bobby up on a chair in front of a giant cowboy cake, and we all sing Happy Birthday as his small face glows. Bettina takes pictures of him blowing out the candles, and Lilly says, from behind me, “You remember your 8th birthday? When Madison got overexcited and did your flame-extinguishing for you, and you ripped her a new one?”

“How could I forget?” I ask, as she slides between me and Wallace. He drapes his arm around her, and she leans her head on his shoulder. “Stupid of her, not to learn her lesson the first time.”

The pile of presents proves theme-coordinated, with a precision that has my fingerprints all over it. By the time Bobby’s waded through the boxes and bows and shiny paper, he’s got a cowboy outfit any movie star would envy, Stetson to six-guns to custom boots to badge. He’s so excited he’s running in circles, ambushing everyone with loud POW-POWS, shrieking with shrill laughter.

Logan glances over at Lilly, who nods, and he gently corrals the kid. “Hey hombre,” he says, “we haven’t gotten to the BEST part yet. Come on outside for a minute.”

He jerks his head at me and I approach, taking Bobby’s sweaty little hand in mine, leading him onto the patio. Where there’s a Shetland pony waiting, in full silver-concho tack, with a lackadaisically grinning real-life cowboy at the reins.

Bobby screams, goes at the horse running. The cowboy helps him feed it a peppermint, to get acquainted, then boosts him gently into the saddle. He leads the duo around the yard, while Bobby yells “GID YUP!” and laughs at the sky.

“It was Veronica’s idea,” Logan tells Dad, with a wink at me. “She said you guys could never afford to keep a pony, but things would be different for Bobby. We’ve donated the horse to this therapy camp for kids Lils told us about. But BOTH Mars offspring have special permission to visit. And Bobby can ride it whenever he wants, until he gets too big.”

Dad shakes his head, watching the boy make his circuit: his eyes are suspiciously wet. “You’re good kids,” he says, gruffly. “All of you. Thanks.”

He hugs me, and then Logan, then Wallace and Lilly. Turns back to watch Bobby, shakes his head again. “I think you made his year,” he says. “I hope that camp isn’t far.”

I wait for the private moment: him saying “I’m proud of you, kiddo,” pulling me under his arm, ruffling my hair. Cracking a bad Dad joke. But that’s MY father, not this one. Instead, he hugs Bettina, who approaches with a smile, and they wander off together to meet the pony.

It’s Logan who looks down at me and says, “One of your top ten finest moments,” kisses both my eyebrows. And it’s Logan who gives me the long, warm embrace I desperately need.

I watch, inside the protective curve of Logan’s arm, as Bobby flings himself at Dad, beaming like a new day rising. Dad hoists him up, out of the saddle, strokes the pony’s mane: he’s clearly making some smart remark, because Bettina covers her laughing mouth. I mentally frame the picture, bald head bent to dark one, Dad keeping him aloft, and feel the most horrible wave of jealousy. Worse than yelling at be-toweled Logan, while I stood in his sex-scented room. Worse than Jackie scamming Wallace and Logan BOTH, because she was tired of her old toys. Keith Mars is MY dad, and I’m his special only angel. Only he didn’t even want WEEKENDS with me here: he chose this kid instead. I can’t imagine a worse betrayal. The one person I trusted implicitly, who was always
there, has left me hanging.

It makes me wonder if he really wanted me, in original reality. Or if he just did the honorable thing, taking charge, because he was left with no other choice.

And it helps me understand, with painful clarity, why Logan lashed out, Original Junior Year. Because I’d like to wound my dad, as viciously as possible, for abandoning me when I NEED him. Logan obviously felt the same.

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Dick drags Logan off, then, to settle some argument about hotels in Hawaii: I park myself on the retaining wall that bounds the yard, the better to skulk and brood. Mac finds me there, after 15 unpleasant minutes, and nudges my shoe with her elbow.

“So Operation Will Rogers was an unparalleled success,” she observes, perching beside me. “General MacArthur couldn’t have planned it better.”

“Yeah,” I agree, gazing wistfully at the grass-munching pony. Trying to maintain. “Thanks.”

She sits silently for a minute, as if debating, then says, “Hey, Veronica.”

“That’s me.” I turn to look at her, and her customary poker face is marred by a slight frown.

“This kind of conversation isn’t my forte, so forgive me in advance. But you’re acting weird. My question is, why?”

“I am not,” I deny. “No weirdness here. Perfectly well-adjusted and normal and FINE, that’s me!”

Her frown deepens. “Let me amend that to ‘very weird’. Are you…mad at me for some reason? Like maybe because I’m not ready to acknowledge a relationship with your step-brother? It’s just that I’m not sure, yet, if I actually love him. And if it turns out I don’t, making a commitment would be unfair.”

I shake my head. “Any sane person would think twice before dating a member of that family. No shame.”

“OK, then why have you been avoiding me for this entire trip? And don’t say you haven’t. I recognize your Scarlett O’Hara tactics.”

Because you screwed my fiancée in an alternate reality, I want to say. And I don’t trust you anymore.

But I can’t. Because how crazy would it be, to blame THIS Mac for something she didn’t even do? How crazy is it that even the MEMORY of Logan smiling down at her, curving his hand around her belly, makes me all kinds of homicidal inside?

God, I’m a mess. But Mac was always my loyal SIDEKICK: we NEVER fished from the same pool. So the fact that she usurped my guy stings a hundred times more than Lilly doing the same. I mean, it’s not like Lilly didn’t act out the entire Kama Sutra with him, before we ever shared a kiss. It’s not like Lilly’s loyalty to me was stronger. And besides, she’s Lilly Freaking Kane: the most beautiful girl I’ve ever, personally, met. Of course he’d slink back to her, in his weak and lonely moments. Whereas Mac is someone a guy like him dates because he CARES.

“Okay, I HAVE been avoiding you,” I admit, finally, since she won’t believe a lie. “But it’s because
I’m dealing with stuff I can’t talk about, and you’re too darn perceptive. You haven’t done anything wrong, honestly. And you’re not the person who made me mad.”

“Oookaaaay.” She’s nonplussed, no doubt, by the ambiguous wording. “Well, that wasn’t illuminating at all. I’m going to take you at your word, and not push. But let the record show I was willing to endure excruciating girl talk for the sake of our friendship. And I’ll do it again, should such extreme measures become necessary.”

I smile, in spite of myself. “You’re a hero for the ages,” I say.

She nods. Subjects me to another penetrating stare. Walks off.

And I wish, not for the first time, that I could trade a fraction of my MENSA IQ for some warm and friendly people skills, of the non-bridge-burning variety.

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Dinner is excruciating.

We’re eating at a picnic table, in an informal setting, so I expected burgers and coleslaw, like mom always made. But Bettina goes to cooking school, on the days when Bobby has play group: so the table groans under the weight of pates and terrines, exotic-cheese salads and wine-sauced meat. It’s not that the food is BAD, per se…it’s just not to Peanut’s taste. And the faint but persistent nausea I feel, as I try to pretend I’m eating, adds an extra-special something to this Day of Trials.

“So school’s out next month,” Dad observes, with the fake heartiness I remember best from his campaigns for Sheriff. “What’s everybody up to this summer?”

“Jessica and I are doing a UN Goodwill Ambassador tour,” Wallace says, with cheerful nonchalance. “Some of her industry friends invited us. We’re bringing public awareness to the political crisis in Uganda, and we’re gonna build a school. Jessica’s dad’s cinematographer is coming along: he plans to make a documentary of the whole thing.”

“That’s fantastic, Wallace,” Dad says. “Your mom must be proud.”

Wallace shrugs. Jessica elbows him, grinning, and I smile into my spoonful of Bitter Orange Nightmare, because they really are non-cloyingly cute.

“Richard, are you still taking that surf trip?” Bettina asks, not looking up from her plate. She’s cutting meat into kid-sized bites for Bobby, who sits sleepily in a high chair beside her.

“I can’t go,” Dick says glumly, starting in on his third serving of duck. “Dad asked me…”

Bettina holds up a hand, presumably for Dick to talk to, like she doesn’t want to hear it. “Just don’t loan him money,” she warns. “I didn’t sign over your trust fund so you could use it to finance his…activities.”

Dick rolls his eyes, because all his money CAME from those activities, but only says, “Logan and I are opening a surf shop next month—custom boards and gear, beginner lessons. He’s the silent partner, and I’m the loud partner. Because he knows all about business shit, whereas I’m a surfing badass, oozing Casablancas charm. Our swag totally has my FACE on it.”

He grins at his mother, as if daring her to comment, and I glance towards Logan. He’s fiddling with his silverware, and looks, amusingly, shy.
“I’ve been building my own boards for about a year, now,” Logan explains, manning up with a faint smile. “I enjoy the work, it calms me down and keeps me focused. Might as well monetize the skill, right? Support my wife in the style to which she’ll surely become accustomed?”

I put my hand on Logan’s, and he bobs his eyebrows at me. This plan plays to his strengths and reputation, while also giving space to the quiet-loving introvert inside him. It’s ambitious enough to not repulse my dad, and it gives Dick a constructive job. I approve.

Dad nods, donning his poker face, which is more positive than his response to MY College Logan. “How about you, Veronica?” he asks, and I realize with a start that he has no clue what I’m up to. And neither do I.

I gesture at my belly, like that’s my answer, and Logan says, “Come on now, sugarplum, don’t hide your light behind a bushel! Ronica just got an almost-perfect score on the California Private Investigator’s exam. She and Mac are starting a DETECTIVE agency.”

“We’re just picking up research jobs, at the moment,” Mac contributes, with a nervous glance at me, like I might not approve of her telling. “Veronica wants to be an FBI profiler, and I’m designing data-mining software, to make internet searches and ad-targeting easier. So she does the analysis, and I do the web work. We have a partner who prefers to remain anonymous handling the man-on-the-street stuff, since Veronica’s…she’s…”

“Pregnant?” Dad asks, setting his knife and fork down. The glare he shoots Logan this time is MUCH less neutral. “Is that what the hand gesture meant, Veronica? You got my nineteen-year-old daughter PREGNANT?”

“Um,” Logan says. “In my defense, I asked her to marry me first.”

Okay, that’s it. Temper officially engaged. Peanut and I have had ENOUGH of weird food, and strained relationships, and people driving wedges into our perfect little triad. Maybe I AM too young to be a mother: but I’m old enough to recognize hypocrisy, when it stares me in the face.

“No WAY,” I pronounce, shoving my chair back and standing. “You do NOT get to go off on Logan. Everything happening in my life right now is by MY CHOICE, and Logan has been loving, supportive and kind at every turn. If you cared about my future and safety, you shouldn’t have pawned me off on Jake and Lianne, back when I was a minor who needed guidance. And you should NEVER have married the woman whose son…who…”

I trail off, because Bobby is staring at me with big, unhappy eyes, and I can’t talk about what Beaver tried (what he DID) with a kid in the room.

“I’m not kissing your ass anymore,” I say to Dad instead. “It won’t make you turn back into the hero that stays. If you love me so much, you can be the person who tries.”

I toss my napkin down on the picnic table and storm off, and yeah. It feels good.

My name is Veronica Mars, and I HATE secrets and lies.

XXXXX

Logan finds me sitting in the front seat of the car, staring at the full moon, eating Cheetos from my emergency stash. He climbs in next to me and just sits, waiting to see what, if anything, I need.

“Look,” I say eventually, pointing at the sky. “Now we know why I turned into a werewolf.”
“Honestly? I’m glad you finally told him off,” he says. “Suppressing the urge has given you acid indigestion for years.”

I put my hand on his, where it dangles from the end of the armrest, and he entwines our fingers. “I have to show you something,” I confess. “Do you remember where my laptop’s packed?”

He nods. “Back in a flash,” he tells me, kissing my nose, and bounds off. In less than a minute he returns, with my laptop switched on and booting.

I plug the thumb drive I’ve secreted in my fist into the USB port, navigate down into the file directory. “This is supposed to be a secret,” I say, turning the screen so he can see. “But I’m not keeping those from you, anymore.”

He looks, as I do, at the folders Victor’s made. There are five: ‘Maps’, ‘Conversations With Patients’, ‘Conversations With Staff’, ‘Responsible Parties’, and ‘Notes on Duncan Kane’. The data is extensive—it fills up most of the drive’s available memory. And the Duncan file is the biggest of all.

The v-shaped wrinkle between Logan’s brows deepens as he reads. He turns an intent gaze on me. “Where did you get this?” he demands.

“Your grandfather gave it to me,” I say. “At Nepenthe.”

He laughs, unexpectedly. “He’s got serious ISSUES with waiting. Like other people I could name. Have you read it yet?”

I shake my head. “Haven’t had a chance until now.”

“If you think THIS is a chance, you’re wrong,” he informs me. “I give us five minutes, tops, before someone…”

A knock on the window interrupts, and he quirks ‘I told you so’ eyebrows. I roll the pane down and there’s Lilly, gym bag over her shoulder, grinning mockingly in the driveway.

“Sorry to interrupt the covert porn viewing, but I’ve got a situation brewing back home,” she says. “I can’t stay the night. Drive me to the airport?”

“Sure.” I power down the laptop, toss the USB in the glove box. “Let me just grab my purse from the guest room. I could use a cool-down period, before I suck it up and apologize.”

I hop out of the car and the world spins around me, going fuzzy and dim, spotted with black. I fall to my knees, feel denim tear: grip the door tightly, to protect my face. I know this sensation, because I had a heatstroke once when I was 11. I’m about to pass out. But I’m not sick, or weak, or dehydrated: so what the hell?

I feel Lilly’s hands on me, then Logan’s, rolling me onto my back. Faintly, I hear shouting. But it’s like my brain’s a radio dial, stuck between two stations: because I hear horns honking, and groups chattering, and my own voice, sharp and angry, too. I know it’s night, and cool outside. When I blink, though, my lids go orange, as if sunlight’s filtering through.

“Red satin,” I manage, I don’t even know why: it feels like the most important thing that hasn’t been said. “Wore it…just for you…”

Logan squeezes my hand, and I hear him talking…I hear two of him talking, one angry, one scared… but can’t make out words. The last pinpoint of light fades. Darkness swallows me.
Then the static fades, and the sun comes out.

I’m walking through the Neptune High parking lot, tossing car keys with short, sharp jerks, which means I’m pissed off (because that’s the only time I fiddle). Logan’s keeping pace, long strides to match my angry bustle, and he’s doing the half-frustrated, yet deeply sardonic, vocal intonation that means he’s mad, too.

I manage not to stagger, to keep my gait smooth, but internally I’m freaked. Because what just happened? It’s like the slipstream got tired of waiting for me to sleep, and TOOK me.

Logan continues his rant, oblivious. “Come on, Veronica, you know it’s true. You wouldn’t recognize ‘normal’ if it punched you in the face, and that’s a GOOD thing. It’s a GREAT thing. You’re BETTER than normal. Don’t hide your light just to pacify losers. Everyone with a brain admires you for who you ARE.”

“Look at you, getting between Veronica and her quest for perfection,” I say, because the first order of business is to make sure he knows I’m me. “Didn’t they teach you not to rip steaks from the mouths of dogs?”

He stops, so I stop too: and this look I can’t even describe comes over his face, like a light’s turned on, within. He grins widely, and grabs me, spins me like 3 times through the lot, dizzyingly fast. Pushes me up against some random car, kisses me breathless.

“It’s you,” he says, when he finally pulls away, smiling the boy-in-a-girl’s-bathroom smile that makes me stupid.

“Hi,” I say, smiling helplessly back.

“Hey.” He presses his forehead to mine. “You’re here.”

I put my hand against his cheek and he nuzzles into it, and we stay that way for like a minute before he remembers to put me down. He takes my hand, running a thumb across my knuckles, and I lean into his side. He drapes his arm around my shoulders, kisses my temple.

“Where was I going?” I ask. Because if I tell him what just happened, he’ll only worry. He doesn’t have any more answers than I do about the slipstream. And even if he did, knowing likely wouldn’t help.

He shrugs. “Away from me? I dunno, Ronica, you have so many irons in the fire lately it’s hard to keep track. Maybe there’s a clue on your Sidekick?”

I extract it from my bag, check the date and time, then the schedule, but there’s no appointment listed. “Was I talking to anybody else, before you started chasing me? Or did I ask some weird random question? Because you wear that outfit like every week, it tells me nothing about why I’m here.”

“Hey, I just GOT this shirt,” he protests, inspecting the hem of his short-sleeved, green-plaid button down.

“Oh, shit,” I say, realizing. “It’s Field Trip Time, isn’t it?”

Understanding dawns. “Don’t worry,” he tells me. “I organized a ditch day. Nobody we even vaguely know will choose the county courthouse over a party of MINE.”
I start to laugh. “Is THAT why I’m pissed at you? For shirking your academic responsibilities, to extend sought-after invitations?”

He smirks and shrugs, and I shake my head at him. “You would make a great spy,” I say, and press a kiss to his chest. He puts his palm against the spot when I pull away, and looks down at me, and I think yeah, you’re formidable. I was intimidated by that, during my own Senior Year. But right now? Kinda turning me on.

“So when does the disco ball drop?” I ask, twining an arm around his waist.

He bats his eyelashes. “Whenever I SAY it does,” he brags, tugging me close. He slides his hand into my back pocket, and uses it to steer me towards the front of the lot, past the empty school bus, into the pockets of people standing oh-so-casually near their cars.

“My MAN!” Dick shouts as we approach, bounding over like the human Labrador he is, to do some dude handshake with Logan, and muss my hair. “Let’s get this party STARTED! Caravan to the hotel?”

“I rented the penthouse suite at the Neptune Grand,” Logan informs me, an unholy twinkle in his eye. I find it impossible not to grin. “For maximum douchebaggery. We’ve got 10 kegs, a full bar, Deputy Leo’s band at one, and a performance by the Pussycat Dolls. I’m calling it ‘School is for Later’ on the flyers.” He leans in close to my ear. “And I sent Wallace around to clue the have-nots in to the code, because he’s universally likeable. So we should attract a good chunk of the student body.”

“Onward and upward!” I say, in my fake cheerleader voice, to Dick. My gaze glances off Beaver, who’s leaning unobtrusively against the jeep behind him. “Next stop, mayhem!”

Logan sticks two fingers in his mouth, whistles, does a rally-round circling gesture with one finger, and opens his passenger door for me. He extends a hand to help me up: then ruins the chivalry by smacking me on the ass, before I can sit, and shutting the door, before I can chide. I stick my tongue out at him, when he gets in, and he leans over and kisses me until I can’t breathe again.

“So what’s our plan?” he asks me, gunning the engine like he’s drag racing in ‘Grease’, squealing out of the lot. “I mean, since you showed up to quarterback, and I no longer need to pull one out of my ass.”

“We’ve got to steal Beaver Casablancas’ phone,” I say, reaching up to run my nails through the hair at his nape—something instinctive, something I know he likes, which I often do when he drives. This Logan’s clearly surprised by it, but he smiles and leans into my touch like a cat, puts his hand on my thigh.

“You mean Cassidy,” he corrects, but lazily. Like I’m stroking somewhere less G rated.

“No I don’t,” I say. “He’s a raping, murdering sociopath, he gets no respect from me.”

“In YOUR reality,” Logan corrects, turning smoothly, giving me an admonishing look. “Here he’s just a presumptive sociopath and Goodman victim, and we don’t want him to know we’ve seen through him. He prefers to be called Cassidy.”

“We’re not AWARE of his crimes,” I retort. “That doesn’t mean he’s presumptive. He admitted to some pretty vile things, right before he tried to shove me off a roof, and I doubt they occurred in a vacuum.”

“He WHAT?” Logan’s hands clench on the wheel. “What roof? I thought he raped you and blew up
a bus?! There’s more?!”

“Sugar lumps, that’s the tip of the iceberg. Although, now that you mention it, it WAS the roof of the Neptune Grand, during one of your ostentatious parties. So we’re gonna need to steal his phone AND make sure he doesn’t sneak up there with anybody. Or find some other way to screw with me. Since I was his favorite torture victim, for years.”

“Jesus, Veronica, is there any shitty person in your reality who ISN’T fixated on you?” He looks at me instead of the road, while he shifts gears. “Myself included? It’s like you’re a vindictive asshole MAGNET!”

I’ve got a rare talent for pissing people off,” I say. “And not so much of one for the warm and fuzzy. I envy you your easy lovableness like you would not BELIEVE.”

“Mmm, I think you mean my money and celebrity,” he corrects. “Because you’re one of maybe 4 people on Earth who actually find me lovable.”

“Okay, adorable,” I concede, tracing his ear. “You can’t deny you are that.”

“It’s a gift,” he says, flinching away with a laugh. “But come on, you are too. That cute scrunchy-nose thing you do, right before you smack me down? Or when you laugh, and show your entire gumline? Or when you get all mad, and look like a pissed off Siamese cat, and clench your tiny fists? And I sort of want to hug you, but I know you’d punch me, so instead, I try to make you madder? Yeah, that’s the one!” I slug him in the arm, and he laughs. “Face it, Mars, you’re a sassy little kitten-voiced pocket blonde, and no amount of solid steel cojones will make you any less DARLING.”

“You ever hear the phrase ‘fiddling while Rome burns’?” I ask, pointing at him. “Because substitute the word ‘flirting’, and that’s what you’re doing.”

“You ever hear the phrase, ‘all work and no play makes Jack an ax murderer?’” he retorts.

“Says the guy who managed to turn our quest for Teen McVeigh into a penthouse suite orgy.”

“You know, you’re pretty handsy, bantery and provocative-word-using, for someone who claims to be all business,” he says, eyeing me as he pulls into the Grand’s parking lot.

“Because you keep kissing me!” I protest, indignant. “And flirting! And touching my ass! How am I…..”

He leans across the parking brake as he jerks it up, and kisses me again. I sink into it, arms twining around his neck. Consuming him, as he consumes me. I wish we could just call the party off, lock ourselves in the suite with room service, and turn on the hot tub. But that’s not what Philip Marlowe would do, so I can’t either.

“Ready to kick ass and chew bubblegum?” he asks gently, when we break apart, tucking back a strand of my hair.

“I’m all out of bubblegum,” I say, and he smiles, and we head off to face the lions.

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“Fuck, Meg Manning!” I groan, as he backs me into the corner of the Neptune Grand elevator, doing his patented undulating hip swivel, and sucking the spot on my neck that makes my brain blank.

“You want to WHAT?” he asks, lifting his head, messy now thanks to my clawing fingers. “Why
Veronica Anne Mars!”

“No, where is she?” I demand, pushing at his chest, budging him exactly none. “We have to keep track of her. So quit being sexy and distracting, because if she goes over that cliff I’ll feel like a murderer.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, don’t worry!” He draws my hands out of my own hair, now as messy as his, and grips them in his. Leads me off the elevator, around a corner to an empty stairwell. “Meg’s not going on the field trip. You said she died, back in Fiji, so I made sure.”

“No, you don’t get it. You told me yesterday, when we were eating snickerdoodles, that even if she doesn’t get on the bus, she still goes over the cliff. She climbed in a car with her dad the next day, in at least one reality, and he took them both out.” I start pacing. “I need you to help me make a spreadsheet. And possibly, some ethical calls. I mean, I can’t let her die, right? But how do I keep her from betraying me, somewhere along the line?”

“Meg Manning betrays you?” he says, with a snort of laughter. “Meg Manning who makes Maria Von Trapp look like a surly crackhead? Ok, A) no way, and B) she’s been up in the hotel suite decorating all afternoon, she’s not going anywhere near cliffs today. Tomorrow I can fix, too. Also C) I normally don’t give a fuck about the prospective futures of girls who aren’t you: but I like Meg, and Dick likes her even more. So I’m gonna have to shut you down, if you’re hatching murderous schemes.”

“Wait, Dick likes Meg?” I demand. “God, Dick dates EVERYONE! Last night it was Mac, and where I come from, it’s Madison.”

“Sinclair?” He sounds incredulous. “Your Dick stuck with Madison past ninth grade? Wait, is douchebag me such a jerk that he’d cheat on you with Dick’s ACTIVE GIRLFRIEND?”

“He’s not a DOUCHEBAG!” I hiss, because really, I’m tired of all the other Logans slagging mine. “And he didn’t cheat! And Madison and Dick were only involved until she started sleeping with Sheriff Lamb!”

“Hoo-kay.” Logan does his hands-off gesture. “Message received. How about we put Meg on the watch list next to Beavs, and nip any potential betrayals in the bud? And maybe also get over to the party, ensure he doesn’t push her off the roof? Because you just made me think way too much for a Tuesday, and now I seriously need beer.”

I sigh. “OK,” I say. “But next time we decide to fight crime over cocktails, I want a more glamorous Thin Man scenario. Or at least Hart to Hart. Not ninety entitled assholes blasting Green Day in a hotel suite, while doing beer bongs.”

“You’re lucky I like high maintenance women,” he grouses, holding the door open for me.

When we walk into the suite, Meg’s there decorating, as promised: she graces us with the cheerful, sunshiny smile-wave of a third-year head cheerleader. She’s manning a helium pump, releasing countless balloons to hover hear the ceiling, and she’s wearing a bikini and flip-flops.

I shoot Logan an accusing look: he dons his most innocent face. “That had better not be the dress code,” I hiss.

‘Innocent’ changes to ‘gently chiding’. “Veronica,” he says. “You of all people realize how important it is to fly under the radar, while fighting crime. I have several selections in the bedroom bureau for you to choose from. Do you WANT to blow your cover, by sticking out like a sore
“There is NO WAY high school me agreed to this,” I hazard, poking him in the sternum to emphasize.

“Hence the fight.” He spreads his arms wide. “But you’re a confident woman of the world, right? You’re not gonna let a little thing like unexpected beachwear slow your roll.”

“I hate you,” I say, and he says, “Show me how much.” I shove him into the bedroom, and kiss him until my shirt falls off.

“You have to change,” he explains when I gasp, deftly working down the zip of my jeans. “It’s not like you can put the swimsuit on OVER your clothes.”

“Logan,” I murmur, “Whoever said the female of the species is deadlier has never met you.”

“Mmmm,” he agrees. “Come into my parlor.” He lifts me onto the dresser, skims all the clothing off my lower half, spreads my thighs apart, and goes down on me for a good fifteen minutes. I forget all about the party. Then he stands up, smiles at the look on my face, and pushes into me, and I forget all about my name.

I remember his, though. So I say it, a bunch of times.

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We emerge, much more relaxed, to find the party in full swing. I’ve got on the most modest bikini he offered (which is to say, not very) in emerald green, and he’s doing the unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt thing, in solidarity.

“Ronnie!” Dick calls, ambling up with a pony keg under his arm, bro bonhomie on full display. ‘I’d tell you you’re lookin’ goo-HOOD rocking your non-optional costume: but I feel weird about perving on you when you’re practically my sister. Plus, Logan would kick my ass. So how about I just say you’re a fine young flower of womanhood, who I love COMPLETELY for her mind, and offer you a brewski?”

He extends his fist for Logan to bump, and I roll my eyes as they do.

“Dude,” Logan says, putting an arm around Dick’s shoulders and leading him over to the bar. He gestures theatrically for Dick to set down the keg, and takes over assemblage of the tap. “I have an extremely important job for you, man, and it’s gonna take total devotion to the task. Can you step up? Have you got the right stuff?”

Dick shrugs, ripping open a sleeve of solo cups, tossing them on the counter. “I’m hoping this involves hot babes or cold waves, and not one of Ronnie’s weird investigations.”

“One hot babe,” Logan corrects, presenting him with a beer. “Waves at your discretion. Meg Manning needs a bodyguard for the next 48 hours: Ronica’s sources say her dad has something unsavory planned. You need to play it totally non-suspicious and creepy, though, man. She has to feel comfortable, like hanging with you is her idea, but you can never let her out of your sight. Can you handle that, or is it too much to ask? Because you’re the only guy I trust who she finds cute.”

Dick laughs. “Candy, baby,” he boasts, swiping the cup of beer Logan’s just poured for me. “Observe the master at work.” He saunters off in Meg’s direction, and Logan smirks.

“One down, one to go,” he says, dusting imaginary dirt from his hands. “Let’s play some Spy Vs.
Spy with the Littlest Casablanca.

I laugh. It never occurred to me, in original high school, how useful Logan’s manipulative skills could be, in an investigative capacity. But they are, they really ARE. He was BORN to mess with peoples’ minds.

“You are VERY good at this,” I say aloud, as Dick begins his chat-up routine, to which Meg seems surprisingly receptive.

Logan wraps his arms around me from behind, rests his chin on top of my head. “Haven’t you figured it out by now, Ronica? I’m good at EVERYTHING.”

I snort, sipping beer to disguise the fact that I’m casing the room. There are like 75 people in the suite already, half of whom I know, and it smells of coconut oil, sweat and beer.

I spot Mac, standing over by the balcony doors, drinking from a solo cup and people-watching. She seems to be alone: but frankly, I’m still not ready to deal. And I won’t send Logan over there so she can hit on him. My gaze slips past her, tracking: I notice Beaver slipping quietly into a bedroom.

“Logan!” I hiss, elbowing him in the stomach. He turns from the conversation Ashley Banks is having at him, ducks his head down by my ear.

“Beaver went into the bedroom,” I breathe, and he nods.

“What do you want to do?” he asks. “Check if there’s anybody in there with him? Because we could act like we’re looking for privacy to make out.”

“Perfect!” I say, and grab him by the hand, dragging him through the crowd (which is mostly bouncing in unison, singing ‘My Humps’ off-key).

Logan manages to get the door open and grab my ass simultaneously, and then we’re stumbling into the room, feverishly kissing, which provokes a response of…nothing. It takes me a minute to extricate myself, because neither of us wants to stop, only to find that we’re alone.

“Did he go out the window?” I murmur, and then we hear the toilet flush. We look at each other, appalled.

“Into the closet!” I whisper, and we stumble through the doors, slide them almost shut. I press my face to the crack, so I can see: Logan sits down behind me, pulling me onto his lap.

Beaver comes out, wiping his hands on his jeans, sits down on the bed. He pulls out his phone, reads something, then starts texting.

Logan’s hands curve around my waist, stroking the stretch of skin below my navel. I still them with my own: the idea of getting aroused with Beaver nearby makes me not-so-faintly queasy.

The door opens abruptly, and Peter Ferraire strides in. He checks after 3 steps, surprised the room’s occupied, but gestures with his chin in greeting. “Hey Cassidy,” he says. “You doing all right?”

“Dandy,” Beaver says with a brief smile, and turns back to his phone.

Peter rolls his eyes, brushes past dismissively to the facilities. So much for the big Goodman-related confrontation I half-expected.

Beaver closes his phone and gets up: shoots a look of distaste at the bathroom door, leaves. I let loose
a breath, and Logan strokes his knuckles down my cheek.

“You OK?” he asks, tenderly, and I nod, softening against him. He kisses my temple, then my cheek, then my mouth, gentle, languid: in that way he has of expecting nothing, while being fully willing to give all. I kiss back, sinking into it. Really, I just want to make out for days, the way we used to, original Junior Year. When my joy at finding an outlet for the passion thrashing inside me overrode my common sense. When I both yearned and feared to lose myself, every time his mouth touched mine.

His hand slides into my bikini bottoms, his other up under the top, kneading and stroking like he’s rapidly losing the plot. He releases my mouth to press kisses along my shoulder and I gasp for air, spreading my knees to give him room. He groans, very softly, shifting his hips to align us. “I love you,” he breathes, everything about him tender. “I missed you SO much.”

My head falls back against his shoulder as he caresses me, and it all jumbles together behind my closed lids. Beaver, Mercer, Dick, Aaron. Sean, Lilly, Duncan, Parker. Yolanda, Madison, Kendall, Troy. The wear and tear of the slipstream, the sense that one wrong choice could spell death or doom. There are so many ugly parts of my life I’ve pushed down and never dealt with, so many moments where I’ve seen humans exploit and wound: and every bit of that is juxtaposed with THIS. Logan, who loves me, who gets pleasure from mine. Logan, the only person who apologized for the events of Shelly’s party, who learned from his mistakes, and changed. The only guy I’ve ever wanted inside me, sexually and emotionally. The man I most love.

I’m reaching some kind of crescendo, physical sensation and mental chaos, and I want him with me. I want us in this together, through the ugly and beautiful, the pain and tenderness. I fumble behind me at the drawstring of his trunks and he helps, lifting, easing, shifting. I take him into me, my back to his chest: he opens his mouth against my throat, silent gasp of pleasure. We begin to move.

He plants a hand on the floor for balance, and I brace against the door frame: his thrusts are deep and slow, excruciatingly good. His fingers are gentle on my clit, his lips sweet and soft against my jaw. As I slide into orgasm, tears rise up in my eyes. I’m on overload. It so much, so intimate, this joining. I’m not sure I’ve ever felt these things before.

He comes with a faint whine, panting exertion in hot bursts against my shoulder, and he kisses me there as his arms band around me tight. I cover them with mine. My tears fall, unchecked, hot splashes on our twined limbs, and he grips me tighter as he perceives my agitation.

A voice in the next room. Laughter. Peter.

I look up through the crack, and he’s sitting on the bed, talking on the suite’s phone. “Yeah,” he chuckles, toying with the notepad on the night stand, gazing out the window. “Crazy SOB. Right? Why would you WANT to? Whatever, loser, this party is awesome. All the 09’er perks you can imagine. You SHOULD! I DEMAND it! Ha, OK, picture me air-kissing. Yeah, 9:30. Sure, I will. Hasta!”

He twirls the pencil around his finger as he hangs up, shaking his head, laughing to himself. Tosses it down and ambles out. Silence falls.

Logan eases the closet door open, lifts me gently off him. Strides to the door, locks it. Comes back to pick me up, and carries me to the bed, cradling me against him.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, brushing my hair back from my forehead, intent concern, total focus. “Did I hurt you? Were you embarrassed?”
I shake my head and kiss him, curving my palm around his cheek. “I think I’m…healing,” I say. “Or falling apart, I don’t know. All the little compartments in my head cracked open and spilled together, and it was SCARY.”

He tucks me into him, chin on my scalp, caressing my back in long, slow strokes. “I wish I could have saved you,” he says, softly. “I wish I was there that night. I would never have let anyone hurt you. Not EVER.”

(I can’t take that I hurt you, when all I want to do is protect you. I’m responsible for what happened.)

“You didn’t,” I say, with a half-laugh. “You took the keys away, and talked me down. When Beaver tried again, at Bettina’s house, you lied like a pro to get me out. No version of you would LET it happen, Logan. Not this one, and not the one who was there.”

I cry harder, sobbing, and he makes an inarticulate noise of distress. “I’ll protect you from now on, Veronica. I always will. I swear.”

“I know,” I say. “You’re secretly a hero.”

He kisses my forehead, and I grab his hand, wiping my face with one forearm. “I need my clothes. I need to be dressed. And we have to watch Beaver today, all day, without getting distracted again. It’s important.”

He nods, goes over to the bureau, extracts our things. Helps me into them, and I help him, with gentle hands that can’t stop touching. I kiss him, slow and sweet, and he curls his fingers into my hair. “I love you,” I say. “Thanks for understanding.”

“I’m Frankenstein,” he says, with a half-smile. “My emotions are a cesspit. Like I’d judge other people, for the ways they’re broken.”

“You’re beautiful, scars and all,” I tell him, and his smile blooms.

“Wow, that….makes me both embarrassed and happy.” His focus turns to his hands, buttoning and unbuttoning the bottom of his green over-shirt. He looks up at me from under his brow. “You asked me before what we were arguing about, when you showed up in the parking lot.”

“I did,” I say, keeping still. Because it sounds like he’s about to give me information of his own free will, which would be the first sure sign of the Apocalypse.

“She told me she wished I could be more normal,” he says, quietly. “Instead of throwing crazy parties every week, and getting all kinky in bed. And I asked her what normal even means to her. Because this IS my normal.” He pins me with his gaze. “Do you understand?”

“She might wish she could go back,” I venture, stilling his hands with mine. “To the Fab Four days, when everything seemed easy. But she can’t. Once we lose our innocence and start growing up, we don’t get to be children anymore. We have to move on.”

He nods, two, three times, quickly. “If I pushed you too far,” he says, “in bed, or emotionally, you’d tell me, right? You’d say no?”

“I would definitely say no,” I assure him. “But you never have, and I’m not afraid you will.”

He takes a deep breath. “Good,” he says. “Now come on, back to work. A competent host mingles. And an effective detective spies.”
When we emerge, Beaver’s nowhere to be seen, again. But Chardo’s here, along with Hector, and a couple PCH’ers whose names I never bothered to learn.


He approaches Chardo, who’s picking over the refreshments, while singing along to ‘Candy Shop’ in falsetto. Wallace materializes from the crowd to provide reinforcements, shoving his beer off on a random gawker. “We’re not ready for the cleaning crew, yet,” Logan tells the intruders, tossing a cherry tomato into the air, catching it in his mouth. “You guys need to come back MANANA.”

Dick appears beside me, where I’m paused near Corny’s DJ stand, leading a sublimely unruffled Meg. “These douchebags,” he groans, with a head shake. “You already stabbed that one guy right in the heart, and now they’re back for MORE?”

He wanders over to Wallace and Logan. Meg raises her eyebrows at me, seeking explanation, and I shrug, embarrassed. I am NEVER gonna live that down.

“We got a message for you,” Chardo says, loud, like he WANTS the whole party to hear. “We had some great play-dates this summer with you rich assholes, but fun time’s over. We’ve got shit to do. So you have one week to produce Weevil, or turn in the person who killed him. And if you don’t, well…let’s just say Weevil ain’t the only thing around here that’s gonna disappear.”

“Are you threatening to commit CRIMES?” Logan asks, with mock incredulity, widening delighted eyes. “At this very crowded party, in front of a hundred witnesses? Wow, I guess IQ really ISN’T genetic.”

“I’m just the messenger,” Chardo says, with a clenched-tooth smile. “The people you pissed off are a lot meaner than me. One week, starting now. You decide whether protecting your girlfriend from the consequences of her actions is worth the price.”

He snatches a tray of canapés from the table and saunters off, friends closing in behind him. I shake my head as I watch them go, because the ‘sound and fury’ line from Shakespeare was MADE for guys like these.

“Well,” Logan says once they clear the door, spinning abruptly towards me, “not even the helium-voiced rendition of ‘Candy Shop’ could save THAT performance. I give it…the finger.” He turns again to direct two middle fingers at their wake, mouth flattened in disgust.

“Loan me your phone,’ I say, instead of responding, because really we’re on the same page.

He fishes it out of his pocket and hands it over, glaring like he wishes Chardo would come back and be his punching bag. I click ‘add contact’ and type in a name and number.

“I don’t know how long I’ll be here today, or when I’ll show up next,” I say in an undertone, by his ear. “First thing tomorrow, you call this guy. He’s unethical and greedy, and his taste in clothing is worse than yours, but he’ll find Weevil faster than anyone but me or dad. Provided you pay him enough.”

“Vinnie Van Lowe.” Logan reads the name off the phone, arches his brows. “I think I’ve seen his ad on a park bench.”

“Oh, believe me, Vinnie frequents ALL the worst places. Just don’t…trust him. And wash your hand, after he shakes it.”
He makes an OK sign with his fingers. “Beaver?” he reminds me.

“Fuck, there is WAY too much happening at this party.” I spot-check Meg, who’s over by the half-assembled stage, flirting with Dick again. Then I grab the first person I see, who happens to be Casey Gant, and ask, “Have you seen Beaver?”

Casey, clearly drunk, stifles a giggle with a side-eye at Logan, and says solemnly, “Casablancas, right? He WAS here, talking to some girl on the balcony. But I think he left. Or at least, I saw him in the lobby like fifteen minutes ago, when I went to buy gum.” He blows a bubble to illustrate, salutes us with a grin, and heads off towards a gaggle of cheerleaders.

“Great, wonderful,” I say. “All right, let’s quarter the suite. You go right, I go left, we check the bathrooms and bedrooms and under the coffee table. If that turns up nothing, we ask around discreetly, and you start with Dick. If he’s gone, we try to figure out where he went.”

Logan kisses me on the forehead and skips off to mingle, and we determinedly pursue what turns out, 20 minutes later, to be a lost cause. Nobody notices Beaver, so few people remember seeing him, and not a soul cares where he went.

“OK,” I say, when we reconvene by the stage: the band is setting up, checking their watches, and bitching about something. “Plan B. Does Tina work here yet?”

“Tina…” Logan drums fingers on his thigh, looking up at the ceiling. “Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Blonde, pretty, stationed at the front desk? Maybe has a crush on you, but is totally willing to spy for me?”

He snaps his fingers in recognition. “The one who disabled the smoke detector in the stairway, so she could take Camel 100 breaks!”

I point, click my tongue and wink at him. “That’s our girl. She sees all, knows all. Find a picture of Beaver on your phone. We’ll head downstairs, and I’ll quarter the lobby while you charm her.”

He grins at me. “You know?” he asks. “Being a detective is FUN. Death threats, disappearing psychopaths, Seven Minutes in Heaven and all.”

“It IS.” I smile back. “Because we like to live on the edge.”

We kiss in the elevator, all the way down.

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When we get to the lobby, it’s clear there was an accident outside: several car alarms are going off, and cop-lights flash red/blue through the sliding doors. We split up to complete our tasks, wading through the rubberneckers: I’m so busy searching for Beaver that I run into Deputy Leo head-on.

“Hey there!” I greet him, backing out of his body space. Since the tape-stealing fiasco, I’ve regretted dating him for five minutes: but I can’t deny, he IS cute. Then again, he’s in full uniform, and I have a well-established fetish. “Aren’t you supposed to be upstairs with the rest of your band?”

He gives me a half-frantic look that screams, “SHUT UP!” and says, “Official police business. Were you at the party just now?”

I nod, and gesture at Logan, who’s conversing intently by the desk. He’s running a hand through his hair, never a good sign. “It’s Logan’s brainchild. Did we get a noise complaint?”
He shakes his head. “You know a guy named Peter Ferraire?”

“Sure,” I say. “My grade, former jock, wants to be a Shakespearean actor. He was up there a while ago, but I think he left.”

“Yeah, he did,” Leo confirms, grimly. “Via the roof. He’s splattered all over the street outside.”

I retreat a step, right into Logan, and he puts his arms around me. A glance up at his face tells me he knows. Fuck, I think. I was so focused on Meg, and Beaver, and my own emotional issues, I forgot the most important thing about the bus crash.

It wasn’t meant to take out Meg, or me. It was meant to silence Marcos and Peter. And even though the secret’s out, and Woody’s in jail, it seems that’s still Beaver’s intention.

“Marcos Oliveras,” I blurt. “He was Peter’s friend. You should find him, make sure he’s all right.”

Leo nods, looking at me strangely. “We’ll need to question everybody who might know what happened. Let’s go up to the penthouse, and make sure no one else leaves.”

I spot Dad, striding through the doors with several deputies, and sigh. Yeah, we’re smack dab into the fire, now. The more things change, the more they stay the same.
THREAD TWENTY ONE

Refrigerated air strikes my face and my eyelids flutter. Someone is holding my hand.

I open to bright fluorescent light, Logan gazing down at me. He looks strung-out, haggard, but he smiles. “Hey,” he says. “Welcome back.”

My hand goes instinctively to my belly—still convex. But I’m in a hospital bed, and Logan’s wearing the thin green sweater from Bobby’s party, torn at one elbow. So I’m freaking. “Peanut?” I ask.

“Fine,” he says. “Both of you are fine. Just hungry, exhausted and overstressed, apparently. So your body took a time-out.”

“How long was I unconscious?” I ask, twining my fingers with his.

“Not long,” he says. “A couple minutes. You keep waking up and drifting off, though, so they held you overnight for observation.”

“Sorry I frightened everyone,” I say, because he’s missing all his usual bounce.

He shakes his head. “Enh, you know. I got a nice religious moment out of it. I prayed, and for the first time, somebody actually listened.”

I bring his hand to my lips, kiss it, and he curls down onto me, pressing his face into the slope of my shoulder. “Ronica,” he says, very softly. I curve a protective hand around his scalp.

A plump, sixtyish woman in a lab coat walks in, long grey hair braided and wound around her head. She’s reading a clipboard: when she notices us embracing, she cocks her head like a curious bird. Her eyes are a very bright blue, Mediterranean.

“Miss Mars. Good to see you awake. You gave your family quite a scare.” The doctor glances down to make a note, and Logan straightens, unobtrusively sniffling. "Your father, Mr. Fennel and Mr. Casablancas stress-consumed all the Cheetos AND coffee on the third floor, while they waited for news."

“You seem to be none the worse for wear, after your misadventure,” she continues, approaching the foot of the bed. “All your lab tests were normal: no gestational diabetes, no blood cell abnormalities, no indicators of disease. You’re not gaining as much weight as I’d like. I encourage you to eat healthy fats, peanut butter, avocado, perhaps an extra meal a day. And you clearly need more sleep.”

She hangs the clipboard on the bed and laser-focuses, which makes me feel, weirdly, like I’m being judged by an older me. “Miss Mars, I know you appreciate frankness, so I’m going to be very frank with you. You’ve got to take better care of yourself. Eat well, sleep well, possibly meditate to reduce stress. I understand that you’re young, active and ambitious: but pregnancy is physically demanding, and you’ve been pushing too hard. I’ve tasked Mr. Echolls with making sure you take your prescribed prenatal vitamins, and get enough calories. I’m also mandating two weeks of bed rest. Relax and watch some movies, study for finals if you like. The world will still be here to challenge you, once you’re back to full strength.”

I digest the reprimand in silence, both frightened and furious. Because it’s not like I can put the
slipstream on hold, based on my OB’s say-so. “So basically I’m grounded?”

“Consider it license to self-pamper.” She extracts a pad and pen from her pocket. “I’m writing down
the names of several superlative therapists, who can talk you through anything you find upsetting. If
you don’t feel the need to consult them, of course that’s fine. But I strongly recommend that you
discuss your problems with someone—if not your partner, a non-judgmental minister, a friend,
perhaps a support group. Physical health and emotional health are deeply entwined, in ways we
doctors can’t always see.”

I hold out my hand, and she tears off the prescription sheet, extends it. “Two weeks,” I say. “After
that I’m good to go, right?”

“Two weeks and we’ll SEE,” she corrects, with a faint smile. “Nice try.”

“I’m not paying a shrink,” I warn. “I’d break her by the fifth visit. Logan’s the only one who can
handle me.”

“Good thing you’re, marrying him, then,” she quips, and shakes my hand.

“This is going to test our relationship like nothing ever has,” I tell Logan, once she’s vanished down
the hall. “I HATE sitting still.”

“I’ll start practicing my balloon animals,” he says, kissing my forehead. “Gotta keep the little woman
happy.”

The Logan/Veronica détente holds through the morning (while we arrange to ship the cars back to
Berkeley, and hitch a ride home on Jake’s jet), then for six hours after. I watch TV, finish a paper on
(ironically) impulse control, and leaf through notes for exams I won’t take. It’s when I get bored of
academia, decide to study Victor’s files, and clock their absence on my laptop, that shit really hits the
fan.

“Where are they?” I demand of Logan, who’s in the garage wearing safety goggles, serenely sanding
a surfboard. He straightens, powers off the tool, and swipes the glasses back with his forearm, eyeing
me warily. “The sanitarium notes Victor gave me. They’ve been wiped from my computer.”

“Do I play dumb here, or just brace myself?” he asks, of an invisible audience. He pulls a bottle of
water from his pocket,uncaps it, drinks.

“I can review those files while sitting perfectly still,” I snarl. “I NEED to review those files. You
have grossly underestimated my curiosity, if you think I can wait until later.”

His mouth wavers between a grave straight line and a smirk, succumbs. “It’s gonna be hard to do
anything BUT wait, when you have no idea where they are.”

“YOU ARE NOT HELPING MY STRESS LEVEL!” I yell, and he laughs.

“What’s our rule?” he chides. “Ten deep breaths. Think of the ocean. Think of surfing. I promise that
Victor is fine. I promise the files will keep. Mac has agreed to handle all the investigations for the
next two weeks, and she knows where to go for help, if necessary. If anything of critical importance
happens, you will be told. YOU need to gain ten pounds, sleep nine hours a day, and trust that the
rest of us have your back, Veronica. You cannot continue to push this hard, or you will hurt
yourself.”
“Don’t patronize me, Logan Echolls,” I warn, pointing. “You know I can make you pay.”

“I’m ready,” he says, steadily, setting the sander down. “Come at me. Nobody ever said loving you would be painless.”

“UGH!” I shout, my voice so loud it echoes off the garage walls. “I HATE you when you get all smug and un-forthcoming like this! I OUGHT to punch you! And I’m HUNGRY!”

“You know Dick went shopping for us this morning, so I wouldn’t have to, right?” he asks. “He bought SIX FLAVORS of ice cream. Sea Salt Caramel, Chocolate Cappucino, Strawberry Basil, Lemon Cheesecake, Butter Pecan, Double Brownie Rocky Road. And real whipped cream. And fudge.”

I glare at him, calculating.

“And Jessica arranged to have her dad’s chef’s catering company deliver pre-packaged meals, so we wouldn’t have to cook during finals. There’s a plate of filet mignon in the fridge, with your name on it.”

“You’re still not forgiven until I see those files,” I say.

He does his hands-off gesture. “It’s out of my control. I don’t have any idea where they are. You need to convince Mac you’re taking adequate care of yourself before she lets you near them. And for the record, removing temptation was not my idea. We had an emergency strategy meeting last night, and I was overruled.”

“You guys have MEETINGS about me?” I demand. “And why is MAC in charge of what I get to know?”

“Because Mac is not swayed by displays of emotion,” he says, in his reasonable voice. “And Mac is not a sucker for your face, like Lilly and myself, or a sucker for doing the right thing, like Wallace. Dick is too loyal to be trusted. It’s easy to press the right buttons with him, make him fold. But Mac can take you on, without getting trampled.”

“You guys are fiendish,” I say, not without admiration. “I’m going to enjoy kicking ALL your asses.”

“Ice cream first?” he asks, pulling the goggles off, tossing them on the board. “Steak?”

“Both,” I say. “I want all the chocolately ones in a bowl. With fudge.”

“Then nap,” he warns. “I will wear you out, if I have to.”

“I’d like to see you try,” I say, and he smiles.

It takes him an hour and a half of unremitting labor. But eventually, he does.

THREAD TWENTY ONE INVERTS

I’m barreling down I-605 in the X-Terra, headed North, and Logan’s behind the wheel. ‘Sitting, Waiting, Wishing’ is playing on the stereo, something age-appropriate AT LAST: I have my feet up on the dash, and I’m eating a foil-wrapped taco.

“You know, Veronica, I’ve seen crash-test dummy videos with passengers in that position,” Logan tells me, snagging a Big Gulp from the cup holder, slurping at the straw. “They ended badly.”
I smile, because he reminds me of Ideal! Logan, fussing over me on the road trip from Berkeley. Through a mouthful of food, I say, “What, you’re not gonna fling yourself between me and the approaching car, roll us out the door to safety? Don’t you WANT to be the kind of hero Aaron was, back in his ‘Long Haul’ days?”

He opens his mouth to answer, and a voice from behind me says, “We should be thinking less about bad action movies, and more about how Tracy Flick here will convince Navarro to care about her problems.”

I choke on my bite, and erupt in a fit of coughing: cover my mouth with my hand. “Jesus, Vinnie,” I gasp, after managing to swallow. “I forgot you were in the car. Although, I must say, I’m glad it’s not my BOYFRIEND, rocking Axe Body Spray in an enclosed space.”

Logan glances at me sharply, and I lift my eyebrows. The corner of his mouth quirks, and he switches off the radio: begins, nonchalantly, to whistle ‘Mrs. Robinson’. I write ‘Hi!’ on his thigh with my fingertip, and his smile deepens. He captures my hand, kisses it.

“I’ve been thinking about Weevil,” I tell them, settling my feet in a Logan-approved position, crumpling my trash. “He told my dad he didn’t see anything, when he was questioned about the kidnapping, but my sources say he watched it go down. So why would he lie?”

“Your SOURCES?” Vinnie asks, from the back seat. I look at him in the rearview, and Jesus Christ. He’s in a bright blue Members Only jacket, sporting his fake moustache. “Who are you, Bob Woodward?”

“Why, you wanna be my Deep Throat?” I arch a brow at him, and Logan barks out a laugh. “Weevil saw it all happen, after which he made a call. Then he left. And didn’t appear again, anywhere we know of, until he turned up at his shop. At which point, of course, Logan was lying in wait. When was this, again?”

“About seven the next morning,” Logan says. “I got agitated at the police station, after you told me about Trina. Smashed a trash can, tore a bulletin board off the wall. Your dad locked me in a cell for a while, so I’d calm down.”

I squeeze his hand. Vinnie rolls his eyes and says, “So Navarro calls his cousin, confirms they’ve got you, and heads off to arrange the frame. Then he returns to his place of legal employment to meet his uncle, who runs a Chop Shop. That’s where he’s nabbed by The Mouth, here. Navarro then denies all knowledge of a kidnapping, when detained and questioned, and ignores the friendly police warning not to leave town.”

“You got his phone records?” I ask, and Vinnie smirks, smarmy as ever. “Good, I knew I could count on you to dive as deep into the mud as necessary. So Weevil called Chardo, right after they took me?”

Vinnie nods, and I say, “OK, for the sake of argument. Let’s say Weevil DIDN’T orchestrate the kidnapping. He’d realize he’s the obvious suspect, possibly even the original intended patsy. So he’d turn to family, right? He’d seek help from people he thinks he can trust.”

“You’re saying he CAN’T trust his cousin?” Logan asks, ever-observant.

“Chardo wanted to ride away with Caitlyn Ford on a motorcycle last year, just like in that old teen movie ‘Reckless’,” I tell him. “He stole credit cards so they could date in style, and let Weevil take the fall. He does NOT hold the interests of the Navarro Clan foremost in his heart.”
“Seriously?” Logan shakes his head. “I’m sure THAT relationship ended well.”

I make a face in reply. “So clearly, whatever Weevil was up to, in between me getting nabbed and 7:00 a.m., didn’t damage him: at next sighting, he was unharmed and alone. And if he WAS waiting for Angel, that means he wanted an untraceable car. He was already planning to disappear. He knew there was a gang coup going on, and he wasn’t safe from the cops OR the criminals.”

Logan grimaces and clicks his tongue. “See, this is the sticking point for me. Weevil wouldn’t run. Whatever witnesses saw him watch the kidnapping? Also saw him not commit it. So unless they get proof the guy in the ski mask was Chardo, how could he be charged with anything?”

“We don’t know if he left town that day. We just know he wanted to slip under the radar. Maybe he was scared to stay at home? He’s tight with his Grandmother and niece. He wouldn’t endanger them by leading cops, or drive-by shootings, to their door.”

“We’re talking the leader of Neptune’s most beloved street gang,” Vinnie interjects. “He and the dead guy were the ones with the brains. I remain unconvinced the paint-huffing morons who followed them around could execute the elaborate double-frame of which you speak.”

“You know Thumper Orozco?” I ask, giving Vinnie a pointed look. “Drug dealer, fond of Lucky Charms? Believe me, he’s capable.”

Vinnie sits back, studying me with what looks like increased respect. “I’m more of a Frosted Flakes man, myself.”

“Suuuuure you are,” I croon. “Logan, you paid this guy a LOT, right?”

“Just like you told me,” he confirms.

“And there’s more where that came from,” I say to Vinnie. “Just so you don’t forget who your true friends are, in this scenario.”

“Aw, we’re FRIENDS? Gotta tell you, VMars, that warms the cockles of my heart.” Vinnie presses a hand to his chest, smiling insincerely, and I repress the urge to shudder. “Hey, remind me to trade addresses, when this is all over. I want to put you on my Christmas card list.”

Logan shakes his head, but I can tell he’s amused. Of course he’d find Vinnie hilarious—and see straight through the dated, bumbling-douchebag disguise.

“So how long to our destination?” I ask, hoping Logan will clue in that I have no idea where we’re going.

“Five minutes,” he says, with a smirk. “We just passed Huntington Park. It’s a hop, skip and jump from here, to the condemned rat trap where Weevil’s holed up with his sister.”

“And how will we encourage him to sit still and listen, while I persuade him to help?”

“Scooby snacks?” Logan offers, and I shove his shoulder. He laughs. “My rapier wit?”

“Money works best,” Vinnie puts in. “It’ll turn 95% of the human race. That last five percent is trickier, they require more concrete inducements.”

“Weevil won’t take my cash,” Logan says. “Unless he wins it at poker. He’s all about the dick-measuring contests, when it comes to Yours Truly.”
“He’s a man with a code,” I agree. “Like an Old West shootist. But he’s also pragmatic, and he believes in an eye for an eye. If we offer him something useful, like a way to make his enemies pay, he won’t let petty rivalries stop him from helping.”

“Also, I’ve got a foot in height, and maybe 30 pounds on him,” Logan says. “He’s a sturdy little Engine That Could, but I took him down in 30 seconds with surprise Krav Maga.”

“Krav MAGA.” Vinnie folds his arms. “So you’ve got fists of fury to go with the attitude.”

“Logan’s right hook is a thing of beauty,” I say, and Logan bobs his eyebrows at me, apparently clear on how MUCH I like it.

“Keith Mars and I don’t always see eye to eye,” Vinnie says. “Maybe we have different Meyers-Briggs types, I dunno. But I’m pretty sure he’d like me, at this juncture, to give a friendly warning to his only daughter. While copping attitude may seem impressive, when you two practice your George and Gracie routine at home? It won’t wow an audience with two strikes on his record, and a demonstrated ability to pull a trigger.”


“You’re something,” Vinnie says, with a chuckle. “What, I’m not sure yet. But I’m starting to see why even The Mouth shuts up and listens, when you talk.”

“That’s a REALLY good nickname for you,” I tell Logan, who grins at me. “Vinnie, consider the moniker stolen.”

“You know why I listen?” Logan asks Vinnie, slowing to make a right turn. “Because nothing dull, stupid or unimportant EVER comes out of her mouth.”

Vinnie returns from casing the hideout, a run-down white clapboard with vinyl siding, in a mostly-decayed neighborhood. He climbs into the car with a sigh. “No one there but a kid, watching Ren and Stimpy on a crappy TV. What do you think? You wanna question him?”

“How old is he?” I ask.

“What do I look like, the Kid Whisperer? Not old enough to smoke. Old enough to use the remote and make popcorn. Kinda runty.”

“All right,” I say. “Which of us would seem least threatening to a nine-year-old in a bad neighborhood, who distrusts rich people on sight?”

Nobody says anything, because let’s face it. All of us ooze privilege, and none of us come off nice.

“Oh, let me rephrase,” I say. “Which of us HASN’T been all over the TV news in the last year, in conjunction with a high-profile murder?”

Logan and I both look at Vinnie. He sighs. “Fine,” he says. “Give me a hundred in twenties, I’ll see what I can do. But making me deal with children is gonna cost you extra.”

“Fair enough,” I say. I lean forward and rip off his fake mustache: he yelps and claps a hand to his face. “You had to lose that,’ I explain, with a smirk. “It does NOT inspire trust.”
Logan hands over cash, and Vinnie sidles out of the car. “I’m not getting any of that back, am I?” Logan asks, as our highwater-jeaned cohort disappears into the night. He rolls his head along the neck support to look at me.

“I’d bet it’ll cost EXACTLY what you gave him,” I say. “Make sure I pay you back, though, when we get home. I’m sure this version of me is ROLLING in dough.”

He laughs. “We’ll count this as date night.” He gathers my hand up in both of his, toying with my fingers. “The ‘School Is For Later’ party is the last time you visited, right?”

“Yeah,” I say. “I blinked out while we were in the lobby, talking to Leo.”

“So that was five days ago. Peter’s death was ruled a suicide this morning.” He looks up at me from under his brow, gauging my reaction: I manage to keep it together. “If we don’t present Weevil to the PCH’ers in two days, we’re gonna have problems, and the odds that he’ll go quietly to his doom are nil. I need your help on this, Veronica. I don’t know how to protect everybody from whoever’s pulling the strings. And I have no idea what Beaver is planning.”

“The Fitzpatricks are pulling the strings,” I say. “They’re using PCH’ers to distribute their drugs.”

“Yeah, I got that when you taunted Vinnie about his secret cereal preferences. What I DON’T get is why the Fitzpatricks care about framing you.”

“My theory is that Stewart Manning is their money man,” I say. “But I have no proof. As to why he wants to take me out? Either it’s the Grace thing, which means he’s also gunning for Lilly. Or else your Veronica knows something about him I don’t, and it’s made him lose his cool. As far as Beaver, he caused the bus crash to keep Marcos Oliveras and Peter from telling the world that Woody Goodman molested all of them. Only the world already knows that here, right? So I’m as clueless as you are, about what made Beaver kill Peter anyway.”

Logan shrugs. “I quit asking why evil things happen when I was like 8. People who are wrong inside just DO shit, and there IS no why, really. It’s important to know their triggers, though. And the names on their shit list.” He strokes his thumbs across my palm, massaging the muscles. “Oh, by the way, Meg lived. So that’s good. Dick really came through, protecting her, and they’re now officially dating.”

“OK, but that means Meg remains on the possible list of Stewart victims, along with me and Lilly. Now, as for Beaver’s plot… do we know who blew the whistle on Woody?”

Logan does his apologetic wink-squint. “That would be us, or more specifically me. Anonymously, of course. But your dad did theorize that Beaver was working with a hacker, so maybe he’s aware.”

“Well, that’s just dandy,” I say, grimacing. “We can now assume that Stewart Manning, the Fitzpatrick crime family, the PCH gang, and Beaver Casablancas are ALL trying to murder us. So much for cruising through Senior Year, playing Beach Blanket Bingo.”

“Nobody’s killed us yet,” Logan offers. I smile at him. He leans across the seat and kisses me, and my hands curve around his jaw.

“Thanks,” I say, when we break apart. “For your loyalty, and for working so hard to help me fix this. Thanks for not cutting me loose, when things got hairy.”

“You’d do the same for me,” he says, like he’s got no doubt, and oh GOD is that a fist to the gut. Luckily, Vinnie sprawls back into the car before I have to formulate an answer.
“Navarro’s at Magic Mountain,” he says, buckling in. “Meeting some dude named Rico at Batman: the Ride, around 11:00. The kid wants an X-Box. Sold him out without a qualm.”

“XXX

“I can’t believe how expensive this place has gotten,” I say, as we walk beneath the white geodesic archway that’s the Magic Mountain entrance. “On the other hand, I just REALLY enjoyed paying with my very own black Amex.”

“It’s good to be the queen,” Logan agrees, with an amused glance. “Which way to Batman? And do we have a description of Rico, our mysterious informant?”

“He’s suave?” I guess, pointing right, and Logan fake-laughs. Vinnie shakes his head, like maybe our banter’s getting old, and I feel a spurt of satisfaction because I’ve managed to annoy him.

“He was described as ‘some vato with girl hair who lives in Neptune’,” Vinnie says, shading his eyes with his hand. “When I asked what girl hair was, the kid said, ‘You know, long. Curly.’ When I asked how TALL the guy was, he said, ‘I don’t know, man, bigger than Weevil’. He then reiterated that our conversation never happened, and asked for his money.”

“Charming. No wonder Weevil lives with his grandmother.” Logan points, and we cut across the section with the little-kid rides. “She’s the only one in his family with any loyalty.”

“His grandma knew about the credit card thing, and planned to let Weevil take the fall,” I correct. “Her logic was, he was still juvie, whereas Chardo was 18. If the girl involved had been less annoying than Caitlyn Ford, I doubt I could have swayed her.”

“See, it’s times like this I really miss Trina,” Logan says. “She bitched non-stop about me puking in her car, but she never quit giving me rides.”

“Trina was messed up,” I say, taking hold of his hand. “But she loved you.”

“I know.” He smiles down at me, glances back at Vinnie. “So how do you want to do this? Distract and surround, like a wolf pack?”

“The easiest plans work best,” Vinnie tells him, squinting against the sunlight. He sidesteps a herd of tourists drinking Slushies. “This place is crawling with security, in case you haven’t noticed. If you want to avoid getting arrested, I suggest we herd him into the trees behind that theater, before we induce him to cooperate.”

“Fine,” Logan says. “Ronica and I will chase, you bag him once he’s out of public view. I’ll whistle when we’re close.”

Vinnie salutes mockingly and heads off, hands in pockets. Logan glances down at me with a grin. “Luckily Weevil’s short: assuming you’ve actually been GOING to your dance team practices, you should be able to keep up.”

“I’m dating you,” I say. “I feel confident I’m getting plenty of exercise.”

He laughs and puts an arm around me: there’s a skip to his step as he guides me past the Lex Luthor Drop of Doom.

Batman: the Ride looms up ahead, big and dark blue, with the yellow and black emblem prominently displayed. Instead of cars, it has individual barred yellow seats, and the track loops around in demented corkscrews. It looks way more fun than chasing gang members through stifling September
I guess Logan agrees, because he stops in front of me, head tilted back: watches the riders flip upside down, with much screaming and flailing of feet. He looks wistful.

“You want to try Batman: the Ride, don’t you?” I ask. “And all the other roller coasters.”

He smiles down at me. “I like the ones that loop.”

Me too, I think. Stupid constant crises. I want a date with my boyfriend.

“Tell you what,” I say, patting his shoulder. “When things settle down, slipstream-wise? And I’m not pregnant anymore? It’s just you and me, amusement park junk food, and every scary free-fall we can find. Twice.”

“When you’re not WHAT anymore?” he yells, then grits his teeth, as people turn to stare. “You’re PREGNANT?” he hisses, reducing his volume to the world’s loudest whisper.

Fuck. “Um,” I hedge. “Not…at the moment?”

Both his hands creep up into his hair and grip there, as if he’s considering tearing it out. “But you WILL be, is that what you’re telling me? I knock you up in HIGH SCHOOL?”

“No, college,” I sigh. “Look, you’re ecstatic about it, I promise. You keep a laminated photo of the ultrasound in your wallet. Now get it together, because I think that’s Rico, over by the ticket booth.”

The guy I’m scoping is medium-height and Latino, with a prominent nose and jaw. He’s handsome in a surly way—there’s a downward curve to his lips. He’s got on a Motley Crue t-shirt and baggy jeans, and his long, dark hair’s in a tail, bound at intervals with rubber bands. He’s flipping keys over his finger, again and again: his perusal of the crowd is not subtle. He’s nervous about whatever Weevil’s asked him to do.

I tug Logan back behind the Green Lantern coaster line, so we can observe without being seen. We stalk our prey.

“I go left, you go right?” he asks, pulling on his right elbow to stretch his bicep. He’s focused, now, battle-ready. His eyes glint, and he sports a faint, anticipatory smirk.

I nod, and he kisses the top of my head. “Don’t let Weevil grab you, Ronica. He’s short, but he’s strong. Once he’s got a grip on you, you’ll have trouble tearing loose.”

I thumbs up and wink, and he says, “We WILL be discussing this pregnant thing later.” Then Weevil saunters out of the crowd, in a white t-shirt and jeans, and it’s go time.

I’m impressed with Logan’s stealth. He gets right in Weevil’s blind spot and strolls up casually: he closes to three feet before whistling an alert, and the half-hearted grinning grab he makes almost works.

Rico freaks and takes off left, past the Batman ride, towards parts unknown. Weevil mutters “Chingado!” and goes the opposite direction, straight between Green Lantern and the Tidal Wave boat ride. He barely slows down when drenched by a splash.

Logan jerks his head at me and I veer right into the Midway Arcade, to intercept. I pop out between a ring toss and a shooting gallery, taser tucked close to my leg, and Weevil skids and swerves towards the Johnny Rocket’s. He knocks into a table as he surges past, sending fries and shakes
flying.

Logan’s almost on him by the time he reaches the Drop of Doom, scary fast on long legs: but Weevil feints left and evades us both, making it past.

Weevil ducks between the Gearworks Theater and the First Aid center, right where we want him to go, and Logan heads around instead of following, miming a hide-and-punch with his hands. I nod, do the same in the opposite direction. Weevil disappears into the woods just as I clear the building.

Logan whistles, shrill and loud, as he jogs past the Wonder Woman Lasso of Truth, and says, “Let’s go, that chase was noticed.” He takes my arm, and we head after Weevil at a run. I grip my taser so tightly it hurts my hand.

Logan whistles again, and there’s an answer. We follow the sound and holy shit, Vinnie’s got Weevil handled, all right. Weevil’s hands up, facing towards us, and Vinnie has him pinned with a big-ass GUN.

“You brought that thing to an AMUSEMENT PARK?” I demand of Vinnie, my voice going shrill. “With KIDS? Are you INSANE?”

Vinnie shrugs. “Never leave home without it,” he says, adding a whole new dimension to my impression of him. Weevil glares at Logan like he won’t be forgetting this soon.

Logan smirks, the angry hate-smirk, circling up to Weevil in the loose-limbed way that means uh-oh: then unexpectedly punches, straight to the face. Weevil goes down, a smear of blood across his nose, and Logan shakes out his hand with zero regret.

“MISTER Navarro,” Logan says, doing his best Agent Smith. “Fancy meeting you in a place like this. Funny how, regardless of setting, the dynamics of our relationship never change.”

Weevil gets up, wiping his nose, rolls his head to loosen his neck. Checks Vinnie behind him, gauging his resolve. “THIS pendejo,” he says, an aside to me, deciding I’m most liable to help him. “If Dad Jeans back there wasn’t holding a piece, I’d teach you some manners, Echolls.”

Logan sneers, glancing pointedly at his knuckles, and I say, “Don’t do that. That thing where you crack jokes at me out of the side of your mouth, like we’re friends. We’re NOT friends anymore. You’re a fugitive, and I’m the unsuspecting dupe you dragged into your ‘bike club’ drama. You know how many people are trying to kill me right now, because of you? Like TWENTY!”

“Make it nineteen, then,” Weevil says. “Because I ain’t one of ‘em.”

“Hmmm.” Logan jerks his head sideways in disagreement. “Either that’s a fib, or you’re not keeping effective tabs on your minions. Your idiot cousin and his friends have done nothing BUT attempt murder, since you left under cover of darkness. Recently he extended the threat to our loved ones, unless Veronica confessed within the week. Or we managed to produce your corpse.”

“Wait, who did WHAT?” Weevil narrows his eyes. “You’re talking about CHARDO?”

“I’ve got two days left until the deadline. I won’t be bullied by my social inferiors. And I believe I expressed my dislike of people roughing up Veronica the LAST time your face met my fist.”

“You morons sure know how to win friends and influence people,” Weevil mutters, rubbing a tired hand over his face. “I leave town for a few weeks, and you end up dodging bullets. Didn’t you learn ANYTHING from that lame-ass fake frame-up?”
“I learned the Fitzpatricks were behind it,” I say. “And Stewart Manning. And Thumper. I think I have a fair idea what’s going on. And I want the death threats to stop. I lose my usual sunshiny optimism, when people I love start getting hurt.”

Weevil laughs at this, a sharp burst of sound. “You’re like the world’s smallest pit bull,” he says, surveying me with a jaundiced eye. “Fine, white flag, peace talks, whatever. Let’s call this park neutral ground. You corral your goons, V: we’ll go somewhere private, and talk.”

XXXXX

We end up at the Mooseburger Lodge, because my special catered Jessica meal did not include fries: we’re sheltered from eavesdroppers by jukebox Top Hits Country, and the screaming of countless kids.

“So first thing, I’m not the one who set you up,” Weevil says, when we’re at the table with sodas in hand. “Which I think you know, or I’d be duct-taped in the trunk of your car, not sitting here sipping Fanta.”

“If that’s true, someone sure went to a lot of trouble to make you look like a liar.” I poke a straw angrily into my Sunkist. “Did you ride off into the sunset with Thumper’s dream girl or something? Pants him at the public pool?”

“It ain’t just ME that pissed the wrong people off,” Weevil says, shaking his head like I’m unbelievably dense. “Did you ever stop to think about WHY this went down like it did? Why it was you that got framed, when you’re an unlikely suspect at BEST? Why it happened when you were with ME?” He makes a disgusted face. “Or are you so focused on yourself and your own problems, you just naturally think you’re the linchpin? Twenty cops saw me climb in your car, V, and drive away from that bridge. A sweet mom and daughter, with crosses around their necks, can testify I left you alone on a barrio street. You know why I stopped at that house? Because Mona CALLED me, while I was waiting for Thumper. Said my niece left her Barbies, last time she came over to play. And Ophelia loses her SHIT, if she doesn’t have the Barbies on her nightstand at bedtime.

“You got popped because you were asking the wrong questions, and you shoulda known it was coming, because I TOLD you to quit. Thumper figured if the murder charge sticks, great, you’re out of the picture. If it doesn’t, great, he kills you in ‘retaliation’, you’re still gone. And your little dog, too.”

He sneers at Logan, who gives a toothy, dangerous smile in response, then continues. “And if the cops believe you were kidnapped? Who’s the obvious candidate to set you up? Who’s the leader of the gang where Felix was second in command? Besides, real talk, this is Neptune: your stepdad is Jake Kane. He’s gonna come down on anyone he thinks hurt you like an Old Testament God. I show my face back home, I’ll end up a lifer. This plan was designed to take all THREE of us down. And the two-week ultimatum was about making Echolls lose his shit, so he’d turn to crime. Which seems to have worked, as a strategy.”

“I’d like to contribute, at this juncture,” Vinnie puts in, “That my interest in this situation is purely financial. I’m sure the three of you will compensate me accordingly, if I have to move to Brazil.”

“As if you’re not storing away every word of this conversation, to sell to your Fitzpatrick cronies,” I scoff. “Don’t worry, we’ll make it worth your while not to slip us the Vinnie Special.”

He turns to me, tries his stupid pretend-ignorant duck face. “Have we MET, prior to this job? Because it seems to me I’d remember such a vision of loveliness as yourself, but I’m drawing a blank.”
“No comment,” I say. “And save your dubious charm for 80’s night at Singing Swingles.” I turn back to Weevil. “So why didn’t you hop on your bike and run?” I ask. “Why’d Logan find you puttering around at your shop, all those hours later?”

“Because I went looking for YOU,” he says. “I boosted a car, seeing as yours was gone, and drove to the warehouse where we have…friendly meetings sometimes. Checked out all the places my boys like to hide. But nada, and Chardo told me it wasn’t safe to go home, so I headed to the shop for my cash. I had it stashed there, you know? And I asked my uncle to bring me a car. If Mr. Vigilante Justice here, and his wake-and-bake friends, hadn’t ambushed me and called the cops, I would have done you the world’s biggest favor, and gone missing by morning. As it was, it took me three days of sneaking around to get my shit together and disappear, and this idiot forced me to say on the record that I didn’t see you get nabbed.”

“See you say ‘forced’, but I think that was a CHOICE,” Logan tells him. “You CHOSE to leave Ronica twisting in the wind, despite her saving your ass on multiple occasions. If you can’t control the backlash when your peons go off map, you don’t DESERVE to be their leader.”

“I’m no narc,” Weevil retorts. “I let my boys rot in jail, for following some coup-starting asshole’s orders? THAT would make me a bad leader. Once I take care of this little problem, they’re gonna need me, and some or all of them will come crawling home. Provided they still know they can trust me, to have their backs.”

“And you plan to RELY on this guy?” Logan spreads his arms, palms flat, gestures aggressively at Weevil. “He just ADMITTED he lied to your dad! Hell, he showed his hand when he saw us coming, and took off at a run!”

“Yeah, because it’s a GOOD idea for people from Neptune to see me with the two of you, acting friendly,” Weevil says. “You’re not so popular in my part of town.”

“I’m crushed,” Logan says. “Maybe I should double Christmas bonuses for the household staff.”

“Look, we’re all victims here.” Weevil turns his shoulder on Logan, with a scowl. “It ain’t the average Joe carrying out orders that’s the problem for us, it’s the people ordering him around. I didn’t tell the Sheriff V was guilty, I said I didn’t SEE nothing, which is what EVERYBODY in my neighborhood says, when the cops come calling. And besides, we got a common enemy. With my contacts, and V’s brains, we can stop whoever’s shaking things up in this town, and get the balance of power back to normal.”

Weevil looks at me, devoid of cockiness, dark eyes limpid. “I’ve been trying to handle this clusterfuck myself, but I’m stuck in LA until I get the law out of my face. I need your help, V. I need you to work your magic with the Sheriff’s department, so I can go home, and fix this in person.”

Logan settles back with a nasty, anticipatory smirk; he makes a production of putting his feet up, folding his hands. “GOD, I wish I had popcorn.”

“You got a problem?” Weevil wants to know, shooting him a look of distaste. “It ain’t easy for me to ask this favor.”

“I’ve just never actually WITNESSED you using Ronica’s sense of fair play to manipulate her, prior to screwing her over. It’s a RIVETING display of assholery. Please, continue.” He waves a hand, granting dispensation, but his eyes glitter like his temper’s frayed.

“I’m not that easy to manipulate,” I protest, clenching my teeth. “I’m kind of an overachiever, about uncovering the truth.”
“Which he KNOWS. So all he has to do is bat his big cow eyes at you, and go, ‘Oh, PLEASE save me from injustice, Veronica!’ and you’ll move mountains to play hero. Meanwhile, back behind the curtain, he’s using your moment of distraction to pull off some unsavory crime. You scratch his back by getting him cleared of charges? I want to hear how he’s scratching yours.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, did I steal your schtick?” Weevil demands. “Was your toying-with-people thing patented? Like you haven’t jerked around everybody you’ve met, since you got your big-boy teeth.”

Logan snorts. “Says the guy who rearranged Dad’s videotapes, every time Letty dragged him to my house, because he knew I’d get in trouble.”

“How many bike tires did you slash?” Weevil asks, pushing up from the table in a threatening move. “Who made Carmen the 09’ers 6th-grade pet, because he found out I had a crush, resulting in her getting stuck for YEARS with that douchebag Tad Wilson? I do what I do because I HAVE to. The cards are stacked against me. Whereas you get life handed to you on a plate, and you’re STILL the world’s biggest prick!”

“Children,” Vinnie says idly, balancing the penny he’s been toying with on its edge, giving it a spin. “How about we stick to the topic at hand? ‘Cause I gotta tell ya, I prefer the love stories where the characters were FRIENDS in childhood. Like ‘Splash’. You remember ‘Splash’? Tom Hanks, John Candy?” he sighs, reminiscently. “Now THERE was a movie. What ever happened to Daryl Hannah, anyway?”

Weevil sits down, still locked in a glaring contest with Logan, and I survey the assembled company with a sigh.

“My life would be SO much simpler,” I say, “if people used their powers for good, and not evil. Logan, I count on you to protect me from any nefarious plots: but use your brains, not your fists. Weevil, what do you know about Stewart Manning that might help us?”

“I know he hates drugs,” Weevil says, surly. “He’s always making speeches about it. And all the dead junkies lately give some oomph to his narrative. Once he calls Lilly a crazy slut enough times to get the CPS off his back, he wants to run for Mayor.”

“What dead junkies?” I ask.

Vinnie says, “Bad drugs. It’s happened twice for sure in the last couple months, pot with angel dust, meth cut with some cleaning product. Episodes of psychosis out of some after-school special, people trying to fly. Seizures, poisoning, brain damage. It’s why the Fitz-P’s switched suppliers and dealers, why they went after your guys so hard to sell. There’s no dime in the drug trade for them, if their customers end up dead.”

“So Manning’s distributing bad drugs, and making political hay out of the carnage?” Logan’s lip curls in distaste. “Why couldn’t we all grow up in Pleasantville, where the biggest dilemma is who will win the Pine Box Derby?”

“What’s Thumper’s motive?” I ask, ignoring this. “Why does he want you down and gone?”

Weevil shrugs. “Power? No clue, V, I thought we were tight. And I’m still not convinced Chardo sold me out.”

“The lady who called you about the Barbies,” I say. “She’s clearly vulnerable to threats or bribes. I’m hoping bribes? Like would she respond well to Jake Kane money, delivered quietly?”

Weevil laughs. “Mona? She’s a single mom, feeding four kids in the barrio. You frame it so she’s
“Good,” I say. “She’s our ticket. She’s proof I got kidnapped and you got framed, because she knows who asked her to call you. And she saw the whole thing go down, same as you. She walks into my dad’s office, tells what she knows, and there’s no more threat of jail hanging over our heads, without you having to narc. She can relocate to Miami if she wants, afterwards, and never worry about food again.”

“I’ll pass the word,” Weevil says. “Make sure it comes from someone she trusts.”

“Do we have ANYTHING on Thumper?” I ask. “Any hard evidence of a crime?”

Weevil shakes his head. “Nothing comes to mind. But it shouldn’t be hard to find some. Or PLANT some. It’s not like he’s a choirboy. And it’s not like we even need the cops to take him out. Fitzpatricks would do it, no sweat, if he crossed them.”

“Nobody gets murdered on my watch,” I warn Weevil. “I’m not kidding. You start killing or disappearing people, I become unhelpful.”

“No murder,” Weevil agrees. “It’s not my first choice for a fun afternoon, anyway. But if anybody decides to quietly leave town, you can’t hang that on me.”

“Uh-huh,” I say. “My ultimatum stands. Now we’re letting you go today, despite Logan’s better judgment, because you volunteered to help. But we need a way to stay in touch. We’ll set up an untraceable email address and phone, and send you a text on your cell. Give me the number you’re using now.”

Weevil pulls a napkin from the dispenser, quirks a brow. Vinnie hands him a pen with a topless Hula girl on it, and Weevil writes.

He pushes the napkin across to me, and I give it to Logan, who sticks it in his pocket. “Anything you want to tell us, or if you need to arrange a meeting, send a text, mail or voicemail. In the meantime…” I snatch the receipt from the table, make sure it’s dated but without an address; offer it to Weevil. “Take this, stand by that nice white wall, and say cheese.”

He does what I ask, stone-faced, and I snap a photo. Check to make sure there’s nothing distinguishing in the background. “Proof of life,” I explain, to Logan. “Hand this over before the deadline, it might buy us time.”

“I’m skeptical,” Logan says, peering over my shoulder. “Chardo’s handler doesn’t want a photo, he wants a body.”

“It’ll separate the wolves and lambs,” I say. “Some members of that gang may care about Weevil, and be unaware Thumper’s turned. This photo will cause internal strife, which can only help us all. It could even win us an ally on the inside.”

Weevil offers the pen back to Vinnie, who waves it away. Weevil shrugs and pockets it, and I suppress a smile.

He slaps his palms on the table and gets up to go, and I stop him with, “One more question.”

Weevil quirks a brow, and I say, “Rico. Who is he, and why were you meeting?”

“Cousin,” he says, straightening. “Lives in Neptune, tight with Hector. He called me, said he had important info, needed to talk. So I arranged a meet. I doubt he’ll be back, after this circus.”
“Fair enough,” I say, waving goodbye. “May the force be with you.”

He makes a face, saunters off. Logan throws some bills on the table, and we all stand.

“I want a tracker for the bug in that Hula pen,” I tell Vinnie, pointing. “Give it to Logan. I want to know where Weevil goes over the next few days, and what he does. And I want you,” I turn to Logan, “to pay Vinnie more to locate Rico. We should find out what, if anything, Weevil may be up to, behind that curtain you mentioned.”

“So we don’t think Navarro is telling the truth?” Vinnie asks, frowning. No doubt wondering how I caught on to his pen trick. “Because I’m no talent scout, but that kid’s acting is on par with The Mouth's dear old dad.”

“I think he’s being honest about the kidnapping,” I say. “But Logan’s suspicious, and I’ve learned to listen when HE talks, too.” I pat Logan’s arm. “By the way, great job with the Bad Cop routine. I’m impressed by how well you kept him on the defensive. I didn’t even have to ask.”

Logan gazes off into the distance and doesn’t reply, but there’s a faint smile playing around his mouth: it looks like pride. He hands me my Sunkist, lifted from the table, and puts an arm around me as I sip.
THREAD TWENTY TWO

I wake in a library, a magazine on my chest; I can tell it’s Hearst Liberal Arts by the layout of the stacks. There’s a stale odor of paper and dust, sweat of a thousand humans coating the couch where I’m sprawled. My head’s pillowed on my jacket, Logan’s hoodie covers my legs; he’s seated next to me, reading, a pencil behind his ear. He absently bites his thumbnail, engrossed in his notes, and fails to notice I’m up.

I sit, embrace his shoulders, kiss his cheek. He smiles without taking his eyes off the page, so I dip and nip his neck. He wiggles impatiently away, saying, “Come on, Veronica, you know I have to finish this by 10:00.”

I slump back, arms folded. Because no Logan, in any reality, has EVER shut me down when I tried to get busy. I don’t care how tight his schedule is, Logan Echolls ALWAYS makes time for kisses. I am abruptly, intensely curious about the state of affairs with Other Veronica.

“Fine, maybe I’ll go socialize, instead of bothering you,” I say, in lieu of identifying myself. This earns a smirk, directed at his outline. I extract my phone from my bag, scroll through the contacts; Mac and Lilly (who lives in New York) are the only names I recognize. “I wonder what Weevil’s up to,” I muse, toying with the buttons.

“Theft, most likely.” He flips the page with exasperation. “Do we REALLY need to discuss this now? I have a final in 3 ½ hours, and another 2 hours after that. You’ve mandated straight A’s, right? And you KNOW how hard it is for me to focus, when shiny pretty things distract me.”

I check the date, just to be sure. “I still don’t see why you have to take these tests two weeks early.”

He sighs, exaggerated. “Veronica, we’ve been over this. I want to visit Victor and make sure he’s taking care of his gout, before I…”

He stops, and his head cocks to the side, like he’s considering something. He sets his papers down, and looks across at me appraisingly. “But I didn’t tell YOU, did I? That’s why you’re fishing. And I’ll bet it chaps your ASS, not knowing all the answers.”

I fight to keep the corners of my mouth from turning up. “Before you WHAT?” I challenge.

He smiles and topples me backwards, pressing me into the couch, trapping me between braced forearms. “Forget it,” he says, nuzzling my ear. “You’re bored and understimulated, Mrs. R, and that’s always dangerous.”

He kisses me, abruptly invested and passionate; I wind my arms around him and kiss back, even as my mind scrambles. His verbal slips have set off red strobes and Klaxons in my head: LYING! HIDING THINGS! NEFARIOUS! SHENANIGANS! He’s worked his way between my legs, and
his cock feels REALLY good; but he is deliberately covering something up, and the mystery kills my focus.

“You may be able to distract me temporarily with these tactics,” I tell him, when he releases my mouth. “But don’t insult me by believing I’ll give up.”

“Privacy is what we need,” he decides, tucking my t-shirt aside with one finger, biting my shoulder. “Maybe the corner behind ethnographies? Is Hearst a big anthropology school, do you think?”

“I’m not agreeing to a quick and dirty public fuck until you stop lying, Logan,” I insist. I try to ignore his hand, as it slides inside my jeans.

“Veronica.” He lifts his head to look at me, and there’s something pleading, almost DESPERATE, in his eyes. “You’ll be gone an hour from now, at most; and who knows when, or even if, you’ll show back up. Please don’t let’s waste this time we have together on a stupid fight. Please?”

I curve my palm around his jaw. I’m sure I’m missing something that matters. Blowing this off is not smart. But my mind strays to the night he asked me to trust him, to let the Mexico trip with Mercer lie. Out of anger, I refused. Then shunned him, after he caved and confessed. And he felt like such a disappointment, according to this Logan, he actually dumped me.

A week later, I checked my calendar and realized: the night I blackmailed him into telling all? The night I stomped off, self-righteous, and left him lying there, ashamed? It was the anniversary of Lilly’s death.

I’ve felt guiltier than I did that day, in my short yet sordid life. Not a whole lot guiltier, though. So fuck it. I owe him one. I’ll offer trust, here, not because I believe his inept cover up; but because I love him, and he asked.

“Fine,” I say, and let him kiss me. Let him lead me to a dark corner of the library, hoist me onto a shelf. (I make him pack up our stuff first, though, and bring it along. Because, seriously. No way could I cut loose enough to come, while worried about property theft.)

I frame suggestive replies to his dirty propositions; he uses every skill he’s got to please me. And when his thrusts devolve into unsyncopated desperation, and he’s whisper-moaning, “I love you,” every time he goes deep….I make sure he knows it’s mutual. I’m clearly, vocally appreciative.

I feel worn out when we’re done; I cling to him like a monkey, while he rights my clothes with shaking hands. “I’m so TIRED all the time.” I yawn, as he buttons my shirt. “I just woke up half an hour ago. Why do I want to sleep?”

“It’s a rough pregnancy.” He strokes back my hair with a sweaty palm. “You’re losing weight instead of gaining, and you’re still barfing all the time. I keep telling Veronica to take it easy, but you know. She thinks she’s invincible.”

“She needs to be careful,” I tell him. “I passed out in the other Knocked-Up Reality, because I pushed too hard, and woke up in the hospital. You need to convince her to rest, somehow. Surely you can play her, if you try.”

He rolls his eyes, opens his mouth to snark, but it’s Lilly’s voice I hear.

“I want that tiara,” she says, with a lilting laugh. “I deserve it, don’t you think? As two-time, virtually uncontested Neptune High Prom Queen?”
“….have any bright ideas that don’t involve pudding, you let me know.” Logan is saying. He notes the look on my face. “What’s wrong?”

“The slipstream,” I manage. “It’s yanking me to another reality again. Like the other day, only worse. Keep hold of Veronica, she might pass out. And promise me you’ll take care of her!”

“True royalty does not need bling,” Wallace says, and the light in the library goes blue, strobing. “Queenship is about DIGNITY. It’s about owning your power, rocking on with your bad self, not some lame-ass pretend crown.”

“VERONICA!” Logan yells. We’re sitting on the floor and he’s holding me, clearly scared shitless. “Do you hear me? I SWEAR I’LL MAKE SURE SHE STAYS SAFE!”

“I hear you,” I murmur. “Love you, cookie.”

Then the library goes blue and I can’t feel him anymore; there’s a sense of twisting, falling, morphing. Becoming. For a moment, I’m not sure I exist. I’m a shifter between worlds, a victim of non-linear time, possibly no longer real. Maybe stuck in a funhouse forever, just another one of the mirrors.

I don’t know what the slipstream wants from me. But I’m pretty sure, at this point, it’s not interested in being kind.

THREAD TWENTY TWO INVERTS

When my perception settles, I’m sitting at a table in the Neptune High gym, with Wallace, Lilly and Meg. It’s decorated for a dance, and the Faders are playing: so even though I’m in plunging-neckline emerald green, I’m guessing this is Fall Senior Prom.

Lilly’s leaning into Wallace, whispering what looks like wickedness in his ear, and he’s grinning his response. They seem, for all intents and purposes, a legitimate couple: but I can tell it’s fake. He’s relaxed with her, not showing off, and there’s nothing ferally calculating in her gaze.

“Cut it out, you two,” I say, throwing a wadded up napkin at them. Wallace bats it aside, laughing. “You’re making everybody jealous. What are you even DOING here tonight, Lils? Didn’t you GRADUATE?”

“I’m helping Wallace with his CRED, of course,” she tells me, widening delighted eyes. “EVERYONE wants to bang the guy who’s banging Lilly Kane!”

She gestures with her chin, and I follow her sightline to a striking girl with dark curls, trailing a desultory finger across Wallace’s teammate. Her tinkling laugh carries, pitched high above the music.

“I’m helping Wallace with his CRED, of course,” she tells me, widening delighted eyes. “EVERYONE wants to bang the guy who’s banging Lilly Kane!”

She gestures with her chin, and I follow her sightline to a striking girl with dark curls, trailing a desultory finger across Wallace’s teammate. Her tinkling laugh carries, pitched high above the music.

“Of course,” I say. “Jackie Cook. Wallace, I agree she’s a better catch than average. But if you want a long-term girlfriend, you’re wasting your time. She’s only in Neptune for a year.”

He does his squint-eyed scoffing face, grins. “I’d LOVE to waste time with that girl,” he croons, giving an admiring head shake. “Lots and LOTS of time.”

“TMI, Wallace,” I say, making the time-out gesture with my hands. I turn to Meg. “On which note, where are OUR dates?”

She looks up from the napkin she’s pleating, rolls her eyes. She’s wearing something floaty and modest, with a shallow v-neck; but the color is atypically rich, caramel-bronze, and her hair hangs in flirty waves. “Having ‘punch’,” she says, making air quotes. “They were pissed that Wallace forced
us to actually ATTEND the dance, so they’re drunkenly rebelling.”

She gestures towards the refreshment table, where Logan and Dick are huddled with Luke Haldemann. Dick’s snickering as he slugs from a flask, Luke looks faintly bored. And Logan’s lounging back against the table, jacket off, cuffs unbuttoned, shirt untucked, tie dangling. In other words, he’s wasted. I sigh.

The last time I lived this night, Duncan and I ended up carting his projectile-vomiting ass back to the Grand, instead of dancing ‘til our shoes wore out. It seems this bit of history is doomed to repeat.

“Ugh, excuse me,” I say, getting up. My dress is slinky, body-hugging satin, and it tangles around my ankles. “I need to go wrangle my boyfriend. Who should know better than to court my wrath this way.”

I stride across the floor, pissed because I thought THIS Logan was better than alcoholism. I stop in front of him, fold my arms. He grins, sleepy and seductive, curls a hand around my waist. Slinks upright.

“Hey gorgeous,” he says. He trails a finger across my temple, around the curve of my jaw. Down my throat, into my cleavage. “You look AMAZING tonight.” His voice has gone husky, and he bends to kiss the juncture of my shoulder and neck, which both turns me on, and makes me more upset.

“And YOU look like you can barely walk.” I snap, jerking my head away from the temptation of his lips. “These are NOT the Senior Memories I want to be making.”

“Mmmm, not drunk, just…mellow,” he corrects, his hand slipping down to join the other at my waist. His pinkies dip lower, stroking the upper curve of my ass. “It’s you, right? My favorite you, the one I always miss.”

“How can you be sure?” I’m disarmed in spite of myself. I find the ends of his bowtie, hook them together. “Rumor has it, Veronica and I are hard to tell apart.”

“Not for me,” he says. “YOU’RE standing in front of me, lecturing while you pet my chest. SHE’S spent the last hour with her back turned, way over there.” He tugs me closer, into the cradle of his spread legs. “Come on, let’s go make NAKED memories somewhere. Ride around the block in the limo. It’s better if I don’t…but I at least want to TOUCH you.”

“Logan, you are blackout wasted,” I say, struggling to balance as he lists sideways. “If you think I’m having sex with you in this condition, you have a very low opinion of my morals.”

“No sex,” he agrees solemnly; pulls me, firm, against him. “I just want to make you come a bunch of times. I love the way your face gets after, all dreamy –eyed.”

I laugh, and he smiles too, like he just enjoys seeing me happy. “Logan, you are so…there are no WORDS for what you are.”

“In love,” he whispers, a hot secret against my ear. And in an aside, as if to himself, “Also, scared shitless.”

It all comes clear in that instant, a flash of insight: why he’s drunk, why he doesn’t want sex, when that’s what Logan ALWAYS wants. I’d completely forgotten my amusement park Freudian slip. “You don’t need to worry about the baby,” I murmur, twining my arms around his neck. “It’s a year away, and you’re not your father.”

“I won’t have children, Veronica,” he tells me, and he’s dead serious. He meets my eyes directly; I
almost believe he’s sober. “Not ever, no matter how much I love you. If I hurt them, even by accident, I would DIE inside.”

“You WOULDN’T,” I say, putting a hand on his cheek. His eyes tear up. “I TRUST you.”

“You shouldn’t,” he says. “I mean well; but when it comes to doing the right thing, I almost always fail.”

I gaze up at him, hurting in so many parts of my heart. Because this is what he thinks of himself, beneath the competent cockiness: and not without cause. Because his damage is like the Bermuda Triangle, threatening to suck all the brilliant, shining parts of him down. Because it kills me, when I have to watch that happen.

“You know I’m right.” He reads me the way he always does, his smile relaxing into cynical resignation. “Your Logan’s failed you spectacularly, time and time again.”

“What I KNOW,” I correct, lifting a loose suspender from his hip, easing it over his shoulder, “is that you are the most maudlin drunk the world has ever seen. Now put your clothes back on; your best friend needs advice on how to ask out Jackie Cook. I’m going to buy you a Red Bull, which will hopefully sober you up enough to salvage everyone’s Prom Night.”

“Wallace is using Lilly to make Jackie jealous,” Logan explains, leering down at me. “I seem to recall that worked well with YOU.”

I smack his chest, and he grabs and kisses me. His breath could anesthetize a buffalo, but I sink into him anyway.

“Never leave me,” he whispers, when we break apart. “I don’t deserve you, but please stay.”

“I’m done running,” I tell him. “And YOU need to be done falling apart. Everything Aaron told you about yourself is WRONG. The best way to make him spin in his grave is to prove that, every day.”

“If I drink the Red Bull, will you help me live out my limo fantasy?” He lifts his hands obligingly as I tuck in his shirt.

“You want me to ride you until you beg for mercy?” I ask, glancing up from where I’m buttoning his cuffs.

“Mmm, that’s a rhetorical question, right?” He sniffs my hair. “You always smell like flowers.”

I locate his jacket, wadded up behind the punch bowl, shake it out. “Sober up,” I tell him, with my most dangerous smile. “And we’ll do it all the way home, you dressed, me nude.”

He groans and kisses me again, not even trying to be coy this time about grabbing my ass. I wiggle out of his grasp, finish grooming him, and jerk my head at Luke to help me get him to the table. Dick follows, still laughing. I guess after a fifth of whatever’s in the flask, the whole world seems funny.

“Look, Meg, I brought our Prince Charmings back!” I say, as Luke sprawls Logan into a chair. “Will one of you keep him from choking on vomit, while I find some caffeine?”

“I’ll go with you,” Lilly says, rising. She plants a kiss in the center of Wallace’s forehead. “I could use a break from the noise.” She’s wearing form-fitting silver sequins, which rise up to a collar around the throat, and her hair’s in a chignon. She looks elegant and glamorous, but not like she’s trying to enthrall. She looks…mature.
I bite my lip, because my mental version of Lilly is frozen in time, forever bubbly, secretive, hedonistic and young. But here, she’s growing up, too. Maybe even faster than me. And this is the first time I’ve noticed.

“So, A+ job jerking around Logan,” she praises, as we stride down the hall together. She flashes a sly grin. “First you drag him off for an LA weekend, and he comes back twisted up in knots. Then you saunter over just as he reaches peak drunkenness, straighten his tie, and all of a sudden he’s leaking sunshine. I feel like the proudest mama at the kindergarten talent show. I can see I’ve trained you well.”

I roll my eyes. “He got it into his head that he’s going to knock me up. The resulting abstinence is messing with his brain.”

“Switch to oral,” she says, with a shrug. “Or anal. No chance of getting pregnant, and that boy has a true talent for perversion.”

I burst into laughter at her matter-of-fact tone, because honestly. Only Lilly. “I’ll take that under advisement,” I say. “Meanwhile, how are things in the world of you?”

“Well…” she slumps, flat-palmed, against the soda machine as I root through my clutch for change, eyes wide, mouth puckered. She arches mischievous brows. “I’m thinking of declaring a Women’s Studies major. I’m volunteering at a shelter on weekends, which is difficult, but makes me feel useful. So THAT’S a novel experience. Also, I had my first overnight with the girl from biology class which didn’t involve a boy in the middle.” She grins. “Really, I’m a typical college student, except I haven’t gained the freshman 15.”

I smile at her, as the Red Bull tumbles down. “Was the boy missed?”

“Less than you’d think.” She shrugs. “Thanks to an impressive array of appliances. Take note, Veronica Mars. The key to happiness is a well-rounded education.”

I put my arm around her waist as we turn back, and she puts hers across my shoulders: in 4-inch heels, she’s taller. “Any new developments with the Manning fiasco?” I ask. “I heard Stewart’s been calling you some not-so-nice names.”

She growls. “That piece of shit. The deeper I sink into this mess, the more I wish he’d get hit by a comet. He’s TRYING to slander me. But Jake and Clarence had me, and everybody who knows my secrets, scrubbed across the web before I made it home that night. And all my paper records were clean the next day. Say what you will about Wiedman’s social graces, he is WELL worth his paycheck.”

“How’s Grace holding up?” I ask.

She makes a see-saw motion with her hand. “She likes her foster family,” she says. “Clarence vetted them, too, they’re nice. She’s scared, of course. Has lots of issues. I’m not allowed to talk to her, while the legal stuff is in progress, but I get regular reports from the social worker. She’s on my side.”

I want to ask if I’m in trouble with the law, too, but that’s a question I need to save for Sober Logan. Instead, I say, “Way to be a pal for Wallace, incidentally. Do you think this scheme you two cooked up will actually work?”

“Oh, it already has,” she says, unenthusiastic. “Jackie Cook’s chomping at the bit to taste whatever I’m having. I just don’t know if the girl is worth this effort. I mean she’s smart, and super hot, no
doubt. But her constant name-dropping makes my teeth itch. None of the famous people she supposedly knows will stay her friends for long, if this is the way she keeps secrets.”

“What’s Logan’s take?” I ask. Because I’m curious as to how he sees her, when he’s not pissed at me, and looking to scam. “I have yet to watch them interact.”

“He encourages her,” she says, with a grin. “To double down on the lies. It’s actually hilarious.” Her expression softens. “He won’t rip into her, of course, because Wallace is smitten. But he became deeply sarcastic, last week, after they both left the room.”

“She’s only here for a year,” I say. “Not long enough to do permanent damage. She’s got a kid back in New York, she’ll head home after she graduates.”

“She WHAT?” Lilly stops dead, forcing me to stop, too. “She left a KID behind, so she could lead my Wallace on, hit some LA nightclubs? OK, that just slid her down the Lilly Kane approval rating from ‘Meh, whatever’ to ‘Search and destroy’. She does NOT get to rip the heart out of the world’s sweetest guy with those BABY-ABANDONING TALONS!”

“Lils,” I say. “The kid is with her mom. And she must have gotten pregnant when she was like 15. Cut her some slack.”

“Would YOU abandon a child, after making the choice to keep it?” she demands, and it’s not like I can say yes. “Of course you wouldn’t! Because you have metaphorical BALLS, Veronica Mars! Children need someone in their corner, and any mother who won’t be that someone is no better than Celeste. I was lucky enough to have you and Logan and Donut, backing me up, and Grace has me. But Jackie’s mother produced Jackie, so forgive me if I doubt her pinch-hitting skills.”

She fumes, pacing. I watch fascinated, because Lilly Kane, Mother Hen, is not a concept I’ve considered. “Jackie’s not mean to Wallace,” I coax, once she starts to slow. “She actually digs him. And he REALLY likes her.”

Lilly rolls her eyes. “He likes ALL pretty girls,” she says. “Up until he laid eyes on Miss I’m Too Sexy, it was nothing but Jessica Jessica Jessica, since you came back from Fiji. And Jessica NEVER name drops. She doesn’t HAVE to.”

“Jessica’s cool,” I say, nostalgically. “I wish he would choose her, too. But Wallace gets to decide how he distributes his Pimp Juice, not us.”

“You did NOT just use those words!” she accuses, as we re-enter the auditorium.

“I’m afraid it’s a direct quote,” I tell her, making fake-sad face. “As is, ‘don’t hate the playa, hate the game’. Sorry to break it to you, but your prom date’s a Mac Daddy.”

She laughs, flings her arms around Wallace as we approach the table. Kisses his cheek and says, “Wallace, sweetie, you keep me young.”

“I do?” he asks, with lifted eyebrows. “Because 19 is old? What did you SAY to her, V?”

I shrug, popping the lid on the Red Bull, pressing it into Logan’s hand. He leers at me over the can, but obligingly drinks. “I told her you’re a heartbreaker and a dream-taker, of course. And said she’d better check herself before she wrecks herself. Because you, my friend, have got the MAD love.”

He narrows his eyes at me, and I flash my biggest, cheesiest grin. Dick drains his flask, belches, and says, “Whatever, Ronnie. Quote shit I don’t recognize all you want. At least you quit torturing your boyfriend long enough for me to get some face time with my special lady.”
He winks at Meg, draping an arm along the back of her chair, and she favors him with a sunny smile. “Hey, can I have some of whatever you’re drinking?” she asks, eyes lowered modestly as she runs a finger along his forearm. She glances up at him through her lashes, and his grin gets bigger.

“You can have anything I’ve got,” he says, handing the flask over. She sloshes it experimentally, assessing the contents, arches her eyebrows at me with a grin, and proceeds to drain it. Gives it back with another sweet smile, and a kiss on the cheek.

“Thanks, Dick,” she says. “I was SUPER thirsty.”

Logan laughs, toasting her with the Red Bull. “ALL the best blondes are sitting right by me.”

“Got room for a brunette?” an arch voice asks, and I turn to see Jackie standing behind Wallace, trailing the basketball player I guess is her date. She’s in purple, a pleated, Grecian spaghetti-strap style that makes her skin seem gilded; I can see why everyone’s BFF is smitten.

“Jackie!” Wallace scoots his chair back with an enormous smile. “If the brunette’s you? No need to even ask.” He stands to shake her friend’s hand, as the guy returns from pilfering chairs. “Trey, man, how’s it going? You two having fun?”

Trey shrugs, placing his seat and slumping into it. He’s tall and baby-faced, with a squared-off buzz cut and a shaved-in part; he looks good in his tux, but like he’d rather not be wearing it. “Proms aren’t my scene, man. I’d rather be kicking it at a private party, with a drink in my hand.”

“Amen,” Dick says, nodding sagely. He pats one side of his tuxedo jacket, then the other. Extracts a fifth of bourbon, grins, winks at Meg, offers it to Trey. “Don’t worry, man, they’re not gonna bust us. This is the table the chaperones don’t see.”

“We’re sitting RIGHT in their blind spot,” Logan explains, resting a hand on my thigh. “It’s like MAGIC.”

“I always DID admire a good parlor trick.” Jackie takes the flask away from Trey, toasts the group, enjoys a healthy swallow. “Anybody up for a change of venue?” she asks. “Maybe something a little less…twee? The owner of the new dance club on 43rd is a fan of dad’s. I can get us all in without ID’s.”

Lilly crosses her arms and leans forward, a Queen Bee gleam in her eye. “We’ve got live music, booze, clever conversation, and all the hottest boys right here, and our limo’s parked outside. Do we look like we NEED any favors?”

Logan glances at me, surprised, then at Wallace, more measuring. Turns to Lilly, his faint anticipating-mayhem grin making an appearance. He laces his hands together, sets them primly on the table.

“Lils. Angel,” he says. “Jackie’s only trying to use her numerous connections to enhance our evening. It’s not like she’s moving in on your MAN.” He shakes his head at her in mock chagrin. “You need to learn from Veronica’s example, and let go of all that JEALOUSY.”

“Why would Veronica feel jealous?” she shoots back, acid-sweet. “Or Meg, or me, or JACKIE, for that matter? ALL our dates are MODELS of boyfriendly virtue.”

Trey leans towards Wallace. “Does either of them mean anything that’s coming out of their mouths?”

Wallace shrugs, a frown forming between his brows. “I’m hoping, for their sake, they mean ALL of it.”
Trey re-appropriates Dick’s fifth, takes another sip. “Rich people,” he says, with a sigh. “I can’t WAIT to move out of Neptune.”

“You know where I want to go?” I ask, wistfully. Because I can tell this evening is headed rapidly downhill, and gathering steam. “Berkeley. Far enough away that I have to drive for a day, to visit the people I love; but not so far I can’t. I’d like a nice house on the beach, near some really good surfing. And I want to bring my DOG, and my boyfriend, and all my best friends with me.”

“Well, I’d love to go to Paris,” Jackie says, with a venomous glance at Lilly. “Or failing that, someplace where I’m surrounded by fashionable ADULTS. Wallace, Dick, thanks for the hospitality. If anybody has the urge to meet us at Lestat, later, the offer stands. I’ll put your names on the list with Curly, at the door.”

“I want to go to Lestat,” Dick says, like he could care less if he starts shit. “Meg, you got a curfew? You up for some unchaperoned dancing?”

“As of last week, I’m 18,” she tells him, with a diamond-hard smile. “The days when I had to be in bed by ten, saying my prayers, are LONG gone.”

“See? Some of us are grateful when hot chicks offer favors,” Dick tells Lilly, meeting her glare with a smirk. Trey tries to hand the fifth back, and he waves it away. “Keep it, man. I’ve got a whole case of party supplies in the trunk of the limo. Logan, Wally and I haul the fun around WITH us.”

“Is that how you wound up plowed?” I ask Logan, in an undervoice. “Cruising with the boys in the limo all evening, partaking in ‘fun’?”

“Cut me slack,” he says, in my ear. “I’m lonely. Mom’s in LA, Trina’s planted, Dick has a girlfriend, and Wallace is wholly focused on getting laid. Lilly’s engrossed in her new life, Veronica fits me in between cases, and you come and go like a leaf on the wind. This is one night out with friends, not an addiction; and it’s important to me you understand that. I promised you, remember? Said I’d make better choices? You and I, we’re a team, flipping the bird to fate.”

“Justice not vengeance;” I confirm, with a faint smile. “Trust, not jumping to the worst possible conclusion. And ten deep breaths, not punching people in the face.”

He smirks. “Maybe we need to hold off on that last one,” he says. “Let’s call the fighting a work in progress.”

“We have possibly five minutes,” I tell him, “before this evening degenerates into chaos. You want to leave these idiots to fend for themselves, and sneak in a dance?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” He stands, helps me out of my chair. Angry voices rise in pitch behind us, as we walk away.

“Can we just…sway, though?” He drapes his arms across my shoulders once we’re out on the floor, pressing his face to my hair. “The room is spinning, and the foxtrot lessons really haven’t taken hold.”

I laugh. “Alicia strikes again?”

“We have to take turns going WITH HER,” he confirms, shuddering. “Penance for the ditch day. She dances circles around us BOTH, Wallace’s bragging notwithstanding.”

I can’t control my snickers. Alicia is the BEST.
“Yeah, laugh it up,” he says, but I can feel him smiling against my scalp. “Veronica, I have to tell you. Someone else died.”

I pull away to look at him, and he regards me, solemn. “Some dude I don’t know, Michael Showalter. Took a bunch of pills. I have no idea if it’s related to the Peter thing, but he used to pitch for Woody’s Little League team. Lucky’s out of jail again, he’s been raving a lot about how the Sharks are cursed.”

“Shit,” I say. “Should we pay Vinnie to follow Beaver?”

He shakes his head. “You’re not going to like this. Vinnie’s making noises about running for Sheriff. I’m thinking the Fitzpatricks are sick of your Dad’s interference.”

“Ugh, you have GOT to be kidding me!” I groan. “The puppet candidate is supposed to be LAMB!”

“He’s back,” Logan says. “Your Barbie lady plan was a success. Oh, and somebody took a shot at us when we were doing it in the car, in the Dog Beach parking lot. If you notice a bunch of cuts along your right thigh, they’re from broken glass.”

“At least the PCH’ers didn’t catch us at the donut shop,” I say, philosophically. “We can continue to use THAT make-out location.”

“True.” He smiles, and kisses me between the eyes. “Veronica Mars, always looking on the bright side.”

He tries to spin me then, but stumbles to the side, momentum shifted by a shove from Dick. “Way to be a wingman, bro,” our third wheel says. “I forgive you ‘cause you’re all emo and horny right now, and not paying attention to anything but your dick. But you’re lucky I was there to smooth things over with Wally’s imaginary girlfriend; Lilly wanted to TAKE HER OUT.” He folds his arms, unfazed that he’s standing between a couple on a dance floor. “Someone whose name rhymes with Bonnie has been stirring the pot.”

I make a face. “Sorry about that. I told Lilly about the kid Jackie left behind in New York, and she got PISSED. She’s way maternal lately, and she’s focusing her protective instincts on Wallace.”

“Man, he’s got the worst chick mojo,” Dick marvels, shaking his head. “All the ladies want to bone Logan until they heal HIS pain, but Wallace they just try to CUDDLE. That dude NEEDS Jackie Cook, on a fundamental growing-the-fuck-up level. No more gossiping, Rons, unless you WANT him to be a virgin ‘til he’s 30.”

“I prefer to never think about Wallace’s sex life again,” I say, with a shudder. “He feels more like my brother than you do. So what’s the verdict? Are we headed to Lestat?”

“Depends,” he says. “Are you up to keeping Lilly out of Jackie’s face for the rest of the evening? Can you convince her to get back with the program?”

“Lils is not a problem,” Logan says, with a smirk. “Ronica and I had a tag-team system in place to handle her by age 14. I piss her off, and V helps her tell me to go to hell. Distracts her from wreaking havoc every time.”
“Be on your A game, then, man. Because she and Jackie were nose to nose, hissing at each other, for like half the time you’ve been dancing. I thought they were gonna have a girl fight.”

I thumbs-up. “Once more into the breach, sugar lumps?”

Logan rolls his eyes. “I need another Red Bull. And we are making out in the car for at LEAST half an hour, before I take you home.”

Well, that was FUN,” I say, when it’s 3:37 a.m., and Logan and I are alone in the limo at last. “Thank God this is our Senior Year, because I don’t know how many more prom-night disasters I can take.”

“One down, three to go,” he says philosophically, slumping so his knees touch the opposite bench. “I’m nominating you for Queen of the Winter Carnival, just so you know. A plastic crown will add fake authority, while you stage-manage sturm und drang.”

“I particularly enjoyed the insults,” I muse, ignoring this. “’Name-dropping trailer-park cast-off’ was my favorite. Or maybe ‘out-of-control celebutante trash’.”

“Strictly speaking, I’M the celebutante.” Logan runs a forefinger gently down my arm. “Jackie was a little off her game, by that point. She should never have chugged the Mai Tai.”

“I really need to lock down my mouth,” I tell him. “I used to have the BEST poker face. But lately I keep forgetting who knows what, and which reality’s got its claws in me.”

“Hint,” he says, leaning in close. “This is the reality where I adore you.”

“That doesn’t help.” I smile and close the distance, pressing my temple to his. “You adore me in ALL of them. I’m irresistible.”

“You are,” he agrees. “I’m humbled by your five feet of furious magnificence.”

“If we weren’t exhausted and hung over,” I say, “I’d lock the doors right now, and remind you of your fantasy.”

“Mmmm.” He settles back, a dreamy, squint-eyed smile on his face, drapes his arm around me. “I’d ask you to take off your dress and get on top of me. But I’d make sure you wore the shoes.”

I laugh, extending a foot to study my gold, spike-heeled sandals. “All I have on under this dress is a little black g-string,” I say, leaning my head against his shoulder. “Just so you know.”

He groans. “Then I’d last about five seconds. I’d have to make you come first; keep you believing I’m a gentleman. Hands, or mouth?”

“I have to pick?” I lift one of his giant paws, toy with his fingers. “What kind of cut-rate fantasy is this?”

He laughs, kisses my ear. “Both, then. I’d rip off your panties and stash them in my pocket, for a souvenir. I’d spread you out on the seat, do that thing with my tongue that makes you shiver all over. Then I’d pull you onto my lap, use my thumbs ‘til you’re soaking wet. I’d watch your beautiful face. And I’d drag the sex out as long as possible. Make Senior Memories. Make it last.”

“I wouldn’t be in the mood to go slow,” I say, gazing deeply into his eyes. The moment seems more
serious, suddenly, more fraught. Like we’re reciting vows. “This is where the riding you until you beg for mercy part would come into play.”

“You’re not merciful, Veronica,” he says, with a half-smile. “Begging wouldn’t do me any good.”

“No,” I agree. “I’m relentless. I would never, ever, ever quit, until I’d wrung you totally dry.”

He closes his eyes, blows out a breath; that image pretty much floors him. His lips curve into a rueful smile. “I’m so happy you showed up tonight,” he says, framing my face with his hands. “You put all my stupid fights with Veronica into perspective.”

“Just part of the luxury, full-service girlfriend package I offer,” I quote, and he cracks up, hugging me close.

“You never forget ANYTHING,’ he says. I counter, “Oh, like you DO.”

“Nothing that relates to you,” he agrees. “When I’m 106, chatting up the nurses at the home? My memories of you will be the last to go.”

“See that they are,” I admonish, and nestle into his chest. He rolls down the window, just a crack; and out past the highway noise, I can hear the reassuring rushing of waves.

XXXXX

“I wish we didn’t have to say goodnight,” he whines when we pull up at Jake and Lianne’s, all limpid puppy eyes in the half-dark. “I wish we could get a place together, the way you suggested once. We’re 18 now, it’s not like anyone could stop us. I mean, if you wanted to.”

“You KNOW I want to,” I say, touching his face. “You know I WILL. But it’s her that has to make the choice: your Veronica. SHE’S the one who needs to feel ready. And it sounds like you two were fighting tonight, not planning to kick commitment up a notch.”

“No more than usual,” he says, gazing out the window. “She’s afraid I’m cheating, I think, because I’ve been too scared to have sex: but I mean, I can’t tell her there’s gonna be a baby. She keeps making veiled comments about not being good in bed. And she hates me drinking, I guess because her mom used to booze it up when she was little. Only she never told me that, did she? That was you. SHE just goes off, saying we need to get our acts together, turn our lives around, rise up above our sordid pasts, yadda yadda yadda. It’s way less fun than chasing Weevil through amusement parks and banging in the closet at parties, I have to admit.”

“She’s barely 18,” I say, with some compassion. “When I was her, I was all repressed rage, coping with Duncan Kane’s erectile dysfunction. You know the first time I had an actual orgasm during sex? The summer after senior year. You and I took your boat to Catalina, and spent the whole day anchored off-shore, doing it in the berth.”

“Veronica,” he says, with irony, “I’m barely 18. And she’s had nothing BUT good sex, with a faithful boyfriend who loves her. That’s not even why she’s mad at me, anyway. It’s just the current reason she’s voicing.”

“So why IS she mad at you, then?” I ask. “The REAL reason.”

He gazes at me for a long moment, and I think he’ll actually answer. Add a second rail to the bridge of trust we built, at the School Is For Later party. But then he shrugs elaborately and says, with a smirk, “‘Cause I’m a loser, baby. Why else?”
“Ugh,” I say, shaking my head at him. “Go home, sober up. Tell Veronica you saw some Teen Mom
after-school special that scared the crap out of you, so she understands your motives. And see if you
can find out, very discreetly, who Beaver’s hanging around with, where he’s going. We need
evidence of his involvement in these ‘suicides’; and if Dad, Vinnie and I are all off the table,
investigation-wise, we’ll need to depend on you. Be subtle, though. Don’t let him find out you’re
asking. He’s smart, and he’s a dangerous guy.”

Logan nods, pulls me into a hug. “Come back soon.”

“The minute I fall asleep tomorrow,” I promise, into the side of his neck. I kiss his cheek, his mouth,
then just hold him until he calms and settles. I exit the car, and he leans out to wave through the
window as it drives away.

The house is dark and silent, runner sconces the only illumination when I let myself in. A half-grown
Loki pads up to greet me, pressing his head to my leg. I drop to my knees and hug him, too, fiercely
happy he’s still around.

He follows me into my room, curls up at the foot of my bed, and I settle into my desk chair with a
sigh. Alone, for the first time in what seems like forever. I’m not sure what to even do with a rare
free moment.

A thought occurs to me, and I grin. Pull a notebook and pen from the desk drawer, and construct my
comparative realities document.

It takes me more than two hours of crossing out and considering, before I have a clean, compact
cheat-sheet, containing everything I know. I have to shred several trial runs, then wash the shreds
down the sink, but finally I've got a fair copy. I conceal it in the air vent, with a mental nod to Lils;
then remind myself to tell Logan it’s there, so he can access it if he wants. After which I sit back
down, brain still buzzing, stare at the unicorn screensaver on my sleeping laptop, and wonder what to
do next.

On a whim, I type in my most-often-used high school password (xF@33#oHn*95), and it unlocks
with a beep. I grin, cracking my knuckles, and proceed to invade Other Veronica’s privacy.

She’s got no files on Beaver, and nothing on Manning that I can find: not even in the obscure sub-
directories where I hide important stuff. Her Weevil notes are also routine, and about six months old.
Which means Other Veronica’s not buds with him anymore, either.

I have a light bulb moment then, pull up AOL, and log into the kittenfancy account I told Carrie
about, God—how long ago? A week? And bingo. One email new, from vmars@aol.com, written
just before the start of school, on the last day of August. The title is ‘Question’.

I click it, read the sole sentence on the page, and my heart drops to my shoes. I rue, once again, the
fact that THIS Veronica listens, when Carrie Bishop tells ghost stories.

Because what it says is, “Are you Lilly?”
THREAD TWENTY THREE

I’m sitting at my desk at Jake and Lianne’s, reading email; half-grown Loki pants peacefully on the floor, and dawn lightens the sky outside. Then the world tilts sideways, upside down, inside out… and I’m standing in the living room, full-grown Loki on a leash, suffering an embrace from my mother.

“He’ll be company for you,” she says, through gratuitous tears, smiling in the needy way that both guilts me, and works my last nerve. “Since you’re leaving the dorm. He’ll have room to roam. You know how much he loves…” she chokes up again, and I manage to refrain from rolling my eyes.

Jake is standing behind her, a hand on her shoulder. She turns her face into his chest. His arms surround her, soothing, a look on his face I’ve only seen directed at Lilly; amused, affectionate, fond. Behind him, a mover bustles by, dollying a row of boxes out of my room. He calls to someone past the door, “This is the last of it, yeah?” Someone shouts back, “I THINK.”

Logan leans into my ear, and I startle, because I didn’t realize he was beside me. He whispers, “You want me to check the vent before we go? Make sure you don’t leave secrets behind?”

“The list!” I hiss back, striving for focus as Lianne begins to sob. “I made a chart of all the realities, and what differs between them; I stuck it in the vent over the bed. Lock the door before you unscrew, so the movers don’t see.”

“Oh, holy shit, Mrs. R!” he says, and pulls me into a hug. “Thank God! I was so worried about you!”

“I’m peachy,” I assure him, with a glance at Lianne and Jake. “It’s just, the slipstream’s yanking me from place to place now, without waiting ‘til I go to sleep. Is VERONICA OK? Did she faint?”

He shakes his head. “Just dizzy,” he says. “I gave her a fruit roll-up and a Sunkist, no harm done. The scare actually convinced her to take things easy; so despite my freak-out, I guess it goes in the win column?”

We’re interrupted by Lianne, who burrows between us to cling to me, saying, “Oh, my baby’s all grown!” This time, my eyeballs roll of their own volition.
Logan grins, jerks his thumb at my bedroom; I nod past Lianne’s shoulder, stroke her spine. He walks backwards, putting a hand over his heart. I blow him a kiss before he turns the corner.

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I walk through my door, ten agonizing minutes of mother-comforting later, Loki padding behind me; toss my purse on the chair, and stop short. Logan is sitting cross-legged in the middle of the bed, staring vacantly at nothing. And he’s gripping my spreadsheet.

“Hi,” I say, circling him, to sit on the edge of the mattress.

He shifts his gaze to the page, doesn’t answer. The expression on his face is one I haven’t seen in a long time. Not since he found me on the beach, maybe, in Original! Junior Year, after I turned him in to the cops. It’s his look of profound betrayal, eyes tear-glassed.

“So I made it all the way to second place, huh?” he asks, with a caustic half-laugh, swallowing to hold back emotion. “I’m ahead of the douchebag who helped Donut rape you, and the guy who couldn’t keep you out of jail. But I don’t quite measure up to the dude who got a ring on you BEFORE he knocked you up, and successfully kissed Keith’s ass. Do I get, like, a smaller trophy? Or just a ribbon? Hey, thanks for participating, not everyone can be a winner!”

“Logan,” I say, in my most pacifying voice, not sure how to handle this. Because I DID organize the lives from worst to best, left to right. Without sparing a thought for how that might impact this Logan’s emotions. “It’s just a list of facts,” I try. “Not a popularity contest. I told you: you’re the exact same person everywhere.”

“I have LIED for you!” he yells, throwing the paper down and springing up, and yeah, here comes the wet-eyed rage. “I have committed CRIMES to keep you safe! I have hung on through a YEAR of my Veronica treating me like shit, because I was waiting for you to come back, Mrs. R. To love me like no one else EVER has; to be with me forever, the way you SAID you would. And now I find out, I’m not even your first choice. You’ve got a me that trumps Piz! A me that jumps, when Keith says how high. And all this work, this BULLSHIT I’ve been doing, to help you with your shifting realities, is so you can find a way to end the dreams, and be with HIM. Leave me in the dust. Right? Fuck, Veronica! I mean, everybody ELSE always drifts away and lets me down, but not YOU. Never YOU. God, I don’t even know what the POINT is, if I don’t have the hope of US to hang on to, anymore.”

“I’ve got zero CONTROL here!” I yell back. “I’m not ALLOWED to choose, the way you’re insinuating! It’s a fucking roulette wheel, and I’m the ball, and there’s a Logan on every number. ALL of them love me the same way you do, because all of them ARE you! And what the hell do you mean, you’ve committed crimes?”

He does the humorless smirk, glancing away. He has his sleeves wrapped around his hands, which are curled into fists; he’s shifting from foot to foot like he might leap, unexpectedly. “I kept the gun,” he says.

“Gun? What gun?”

He rolls his eyes. “The gun that killed Abraham Lincoln. Jesus, keep up, Veronica. You’re smarter than this.”

“The gun with my prints on it,” I say, slowly. “The one used to shoot Felix, which then disappeared.”
“You called me,” he says. “Or she did, my Veronica. She phoned me from a gas station. I went to get her, she was all torn up, with a knot on her temple. Said she came to standing over the body of Felix Toombs, with that thing in her hand. So I took charge. Told Dick to say he heard her screaming on the phone. Hired the shark of a lawyer Aaron used. Captured Weevil, handed him over to the cops. I figured she shot the guy to save her own life, you know?

“But then YOU showed up at the Sheriff’s Station the next day, with no idea what I’d done. I realized you were the one who got kidnapped, not her, and that’s why her memories were wonky. You were the one who went to the bridge to save Trina. And I could BELIEVE you, when you said you were framed, because no matter how harsh the truth is, you always tell it.

“My Veronica, though…she doesn’t have all the facts, like I do. She’s still not sure whether she murdered someone. It makes her neurotic and guilt-ridden, desperate not to sin again. And she’s ambivalent as fuck about me, because I did the dirty work that saved her. Which just goes to show… no good deed goes unpunished.”

“Who was the real killer?” I ask. “Did you ever find out? I’m thinking Chardo or Thumper?”

He laughs. “Wow, we are learning and sharing ALL OVER the place today! I have no fucking clue whodunnit, Veronica, and you asking means you don’t either. It’s a comedy of errors.” He puts one shirt-wrapped fist to his mouth, chews on the fabric. “I wasn’t interested in dispensing justice; I just played defense. I cleaned the gun and wallpapered it with Weevil’s prints, while I had him handcuffed and unconscious. I was all set to frame him, if you got arrested. But the lawyer earned his paycheck, you and I ate ice cream on the beach. And I swore I’d find proof, before I made Weevil pay.”

He does a huffing sneer-laugh, telegraphing disbelief. “Navarro has no CLUE how lucky he is, that you showed up at the amusement park, instead of Veronica. She hates his guts for framing her, and she was ready to play hardball; but you CLEARED him, and set him loose on Neptune. And the only thing I had as leverage, that whole insane year, was an eviction notice for his grandmother I didn’t want to serve.”

“And did you?” I ask, softly. “Serve it? Where IS Weevil, now?”

He shakes his head. “No way. I’m not feeding you information so you can skip back into the past, and retcon me out of the slipstream. I don’t give a fuck right now if you want me or not. I’m REAL, and you don’t get to wave your magic wand and make me vanish, just because I’m not as perfect as you’d like.”

“Ugh. Can you just TABLE your abandonment issues for a minute? This isn’t all about YOU!”

“But it IS,” he says, spreading his arms wide. “It IS about me! We established that last week. At which time, I made my opinion crystal clear. You have a choice, even if it’s not straightforward, and I need you to choose me. And if you won’t…and if you decide you like the other guy’s grass better… well, then, I guess I have the right to do whatever the hell I want. Including not telling you a fucking thing.”

“You’re seriously asking how I FEEL?” I demand, as my temper snaps. “Really, truly? I want my OWN life back, the worst one on the chart! Because at least then, I’d know my circumstances are a result of my own choices. And not those of some mysterious Alt-Veronica I’ll never understand, and might not even like. Whose life I occasionally try on for size! I wish these dreams had never happened!”

“So do I,” he says, gently. “Everything was simpler, when I had no hope.”
He sets the spreadsheet on the bed, looks at it for a minute. Glances up from under his brow at me, smiles his half-smile. “It’s been a wild ride, Mrs. R,” he says. “The perfect wave. Good luck finding the reality that makes you happy.”

He kisses me on the forehead, and goes. I sink down onto the bed, shell-shocked and afraid.

I tip backwards across the mattress, palms up, gazing at the ceiling, wondering what the hell to do. Something pinches on my left hand, and I feel over the spot with my thumb. Metal band on my ring finger. Cold, a little too tight. Tears well.

A deep and wrenching dizziness strikes, and the ceiling goes hazy, then black. I close my eyes, hear Dick, talking. Water splashes against my hand; I dab it with my shirtsleeve. The slipstream threatens, hungry, and I let it swallow me.

THREAD TWENTY THREE INVERTS

I’m in the Casablancas Jeep, riding shotgun, and it’s almost sunset. The weather’s cool enough that I’m wearing a sweater; the wind stings, through the wet spot I’ve made on my sleeve. New Bomb Turks are playing on the stereo, just above the road noise, and Dick’s shaggy hair flaps around like a flag.

“So you and Meg…” I say, because it’s the last thing I remember learning about Improved Past Dick. “How’s that working out for you?”

He shrugs, unsurprised, which means I’ve managed a seamless transition. “It’s new,” he says. “So far, no complaints.”

“Can’t be THAT new.” I try to sound teasing, but my heart is pounding. My chest heaves with the effort I’m expending to stifle sobs, and how can he not TELL? “You were cuddly in Fiji. And I seem to recall you going on super-secret dates, as long ago as last summer.”

“That was a different girl.” He fiddles with the dial, lips pressed flat. “And no, I’m not telling you who, Rons, go be nosy with your other friends. I’m not seeing her anymore, anyway. Meg doesn’t have to worry I’m hound-dogging around.”

“Sounds like ‘someone else’ dumped you,” I guess, not without sympathy.

He frowns. “Look, it was complicated, topic closed. Things are easier with Meg. She’s super-hot, everybody likes her, and we have all the same friends. Also, she’s just crazy enough to be interesting. Like, I might throw a f…” he glances sideways at me, “pay ATTENTION to a boring girl, if she was gorgeous and stacked. But that’s not the type I’d DATE.”

“Dick. It doesn’t stop being a repulsive statement just because you cut out the dirty words.”

He snorts. “Whatever, Rons. Go harp on Logan, if you feel like criticizing someone for not being perfect. He’s so gone over you he’ll take it. But me, I’m OK with my animal nature.”

“You think I slag Logan too much?” I turn to gaze out the window. Pick at a loose flap of leather on the armrest.

He glances sideways. “You’re kidding, right? Did you just, like, see the light in my passenger seat? Because I am totally burning a candle in church. Or whatever the fuck religious people do, to thank Jesus.”

I shrug. “I can’t remember what happened when Felix Toombs died, and it’s stressing me out. I may
have done some… projecting.”

He pulls the car over to the shoulder. Levels an incredulous look at me. “So this wringer you’ve been putting both of you through. This was GUILT?”

I shrug, and he flings his head back against the seat with a groan. “Man, the two of you worry like most people breathe. You were unconscious, Ronnie! They drugged you HARDCORE!”

He digs through his cargo shorts for his phone, hits a speed dial. “Dude, do me a favor,” he says, when it’s answered. “Bring my laptop to Cho’s instead of my house? Yeah, I need it in like an hour, and I don’t have time to go home. Yeah, thanks man, way to be a bro.”

He hangs up, levels a glare at me. “You need to tell Logan WHY,” he says, kicking the engine back on, peeling out. “It’s not like he won’t forgive you. But he needs to hear it’s not all his fault.”

When we pull into the parking lot of Cho’s, the XTerra’s there waiting. Logan’s got both doors open, his feet up, crossed, on the dash; I’d think he was asleep, behind his shades, except he curses as we roll into view.

“Dude, this is UNCOOL,” he accuses, while Dick pulls to a stop, yanks on the parking brake. He leaps out the passenger door, in his nimble and effortless way, slaps Dick’s laptop against his chest. “There’s no room on my schedule for ranting and angst today, as it happens.”

“Ronnie wants to APOLOGIZE,” Dick says, letting this comment slide past. “And I gotta drain the python. Ten minutes ‘til mom and Keith get here, Rons. You should skip the part where you work up to making nice.”

He disappears into the restaurant, smirking at the expression on my face. I turn towards Logan, helpless. “Shouldn’t he be forced to wear the sparkly dress, and wave the magic wand, if he’s playing Fairy Godmother in our drama?”

“I thought we were taking a break,” Logan snaps, ignoring this sally. His arms are folded, sarcasm set to stun. “You’re sick of my immature bullshit, remember? You have no interest in watching me get killed? I mean, I can believe Dick would pull a patching-things-up stunt, because underneath the douche-bro attitude he’s a total mother hen. But I’m surprised you didn’t tuck and roll, when informed of his plan.”

“It’s ME,” I say, impatient. “TIME-TRAVELING me, and I have no idea what the hell is going on. Dick thinks I’m back here confessing that Veronica can’t remember the murder; I told him she gives you shit out of guilt. But you said as much to ME, when you were ripping me a new one half an hour ago. So I’m sure you’re already aware.”

He sighs. Tilts his head back and closes his eyes, as if in pain. He’s wearing the threadbare Killers shirt he saves for lounging; he looks bleary and mussed, like he just rolled out of bed. “Was I drunk?” he guesses. “Future me? And spilling my guts in the stupidest possible way? Because if so, I guess it’s time for a second ass-reaming, from a slightly more sophisticated vicious blonde.”

“You were UPSET,” I say. “And I won’t even get into why, because I’ll make damn sure it never happens. What the hell were you thinking, lying to me about the night Felix died, Logan? Hiding the gun? Convincing Dick to fib to the cops? Planning to frame Weevil, for a crime he didn’t commit? Have you been smoking CRACK?”

“I was protecting my girlfriend!” he says, through his teeth. “Because that’s how we DO!”
“You’re the most intelligent person I know, but you never THINK!” I yell, disgusted. “You were right about ONE thing. It WAS me who got kidnapped. And I’m the one who woke up in the alley, with a gun in my hand. But I don’t have any more memory of what went down than Veronica does. Either I was out from the chloroform the whole time, or I’ve got event-specific amnesia due to the head injury. Which, I still don’t know how THAT happened. I’m not convinced either one of us shot him; in my reality, it was Thumper. But at this point, I can’t rule us out. So hey, maybe she’s slowly turning into an asshole here because she IS the killer!” I shake my head at him, teeth clenched, because God! He’s so FRUSTRATING, when he dives headfirst into quicksand, playing hero. “Oh, and by the way? Carrie told Veronica I exist, and expounded on every single one of her nutty theories. Veronica now thinks you like me better, and is sporting an inferiority complex. She also believes I’m the ghost of LILLY.”

He stares at me for a minute, and then starts to laugh. Big, long belly laughs, making him gasp and wheeze. He slumps onto the pavement, buries his face in his hands. “You have been BUSY since fall prom,” he says, at last. “Or else, I’ve finally gone insane.”

“He dumped me,” I confide, sitting down too. “Future Logan. Because he got jealous of another future Logan, who he believed I liked better.”

This sets him off again. He presses his face into my shoulder, giggling hysterically. “Veronica dumped ME,” he manages, after a minute, “because she caught me investigating Beaver. The way you asked me to.”

I can’t help it. I snicker. We lean our foreheads together and laugh, even though everything is insanely complicated, and possibly we’re screwed. At least our pitch-black senses of humor remain intact.

“Why did he decide you liked another version better?” Logan asks, after a while. He tucks me into his side, kisses my temple.

“I made a chart,” I sigh. “Of all the realities, and what’s different about them, after prom. I hid it in the vent over my bed, at Jake and Lianne’s. I thought I was being so clever and organized. But he got mad, because his reality wasn’t the furthest to the right.”

Logan presses a smile from his lips. “I’ll retrieve it,” he says. “Before the end of the day, and burn it. Problem solved. He won’t freak out and dump you in the future, because he’ll already know what it says. And it won’t languish in the vent like a time bomb, until found by some random repairman.”

“I’ll pass a message to Veronica,” I offer. “Let her know who I am. I should have done it the first time I talked to Carrie, but I’m just…not a sharer.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t want Carrie involved anymore,” he says. “We need to keep her knowledge about the slipstream, about us, at a minimum. She’s loyal to Veronica, but she considers ME fair game.”

“Agreed,” I say; I wasn’t planning to involve Carrie, anyway. “Logan, I need the truth. Are you playing cat and mouse with Weevil? Are you blackmailing him?”

He shakes his head. “Veronica, your dad and Bettina just pulled into the lot, I can see them through the door. I’m fine dealing with Weevil, I understand him better than you do. But Beaver is a loose cannon. I’m pretty sure he tried to run down Lucky last week, and I found…”

“Dude, thank GOD,” Dick says, emerging from around the corner, voice hinting at long-suffering. “You are SO pathetic when Ronnie gets your balls in a vice, and cranks up the pressure. Come on,
pronto hustle, I gotta hand you over to your dad, Rons. Mom needs to be at the hospital in 20 minutes, to see the osteologist with Beav.”

“Man, broken legs SUCK,” Logan says, with emphasis. “I can’t believe he hurt himself that badly running into a parked CAR.”

“Are you HIGH?” Dick asks. “Because stay away from my mom if you are, she’s got like a sixth sense.”

Logan shrugs and mouths ‘too much?’ at me behind Dick’s back, and I shove him.

“Come on Logan,” I say, tucking my arm through his, tugging him in Dick’s wake. “You might as well learn to manage dad now. If he’s heard we’re fighting—and he probably has—you’ll need to grovel before you’re fed.”

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Bettina’s brisk efficiency hurts to watch.

She sweeps in like a mistral wind, kissing everyone, paying for pizza, handing a box to Dick to stash in his car. She keeps up a steady stream of chatter; “Veronica, sweetheart, I love the bangs…Logan, be a dear, help Richard put the roof on the jeep, he never remembers to attach it everywhere…Keith, did you call Cathy? Remember, we’d promised to meet for Euchre on Saturday?”. But her eyes are haunted in a way I recognize.

She knows something’s wrong in her life, but she doesn’t want to admit it. Which I could sympathize with, to a certain extent, if PEOPLE WEREN’T DYING.

Dad embraces us all, between bouts of chivalry, and it’s weird: he’s the same old dad, married to his job, but putting in the effort to be kind. He gives both Logan and Dick handshakes followed by hugs, laughs and jokes when Logan makes a crack. He’s not acting overly hearty, or fake, or uncomfortable, the way he did at Bobby’s birthday party. But he doesn’t seem well.

He’s thinner than I can ever remember seeing him, which makes sense if he’s been working out. What remains of his hair is showing a little grey, and, OK, he’s 46. I can see that (even though he was still all brown, my first time through this year). But he’s got bags under his eyes, he’s moving slow; and his mouth turns down at the corners when he’s not smiling, in a way that will eventually wrinkle. He looks sick and sad. It tears at my heart, because I’m not sure what’s wrong.

I watch him, and Logan watches me, worried because I seem upset. Dick watches Logan, making sure we’ve reconciled. Bettina watches Dick, fussing over her less-problematic son, telling him to cut his hair. And dad watches Bettina, his eyes morose. The whole interaction lasts maybe five minutes, before Dick levels a ‘don’t fuck this up again’ look at me, and escorts his mother away. But it’s a perfect circle of dysfunction. And when it’s done, Logan, Dad and I sit shell-shocked around our pizza, none of us eager to eat.

“Soooo,” I say, after a minute, picking pepperoni off a slice, popping it into my mouth. “Helluva week, huh?”

“You don’t know the half of it.” Dad tries a faint smile, doing his best hard-boiled. Logan relaxes a little, grinning at me, like maybe he’s worried, too.

“So dish,” I urge. “Give each shitty development a number from one to ten. Cassidy’s broken leg, Vinnie Van Lowe seeking your job, Stewart Manning vs the CPS, Lucky the Janitor’s hit –and-run? Your bum ticker? Because I recognize the Keith Mars Stoic-When-Life-Is-Awful face. And as a
wise man once told me? It WILL freeze that way.”

Logan shoots me an impressed raised-eyebrows look, and I smirk, because yes I DO keep track of current events.

“You forgot ‘the sarcasm of my beloved daughter, which cuts me to the bone’,” Dad retorts. “And, of course, incorporation, which is the only real ten on the list. It’s the fount from which the lesser evils flow.”

“How’s that idea still kicking around?” I wonder aloud. “Wasn’t it a Goodman initiative?”

“Guys like Woody and Manning are just figureheads,” Dad says. “They represent factions, tell the masses how to vote. Incorporation will make a lot of money for a few powerful guys; it hasn’t happened yet only because I keep arresting their candidates. Vinnie’s been tapped to replace me so they can eliminate that stumbling block. None of this is personal.”

Dad presses a fist to his sternum and makes a face, takes a sip of water. I watch with concern. “It’s personal if they’re fighting dirty,” I say.

“Which they are,” Logan contributes. “Alleging police misconduct in the Manning case, to minimize your involvement in the ‘kidnapping’.” He makes air quotes to emphasize his opinion, settling back with a smirk.

“They can’t prove misconduct,” Dad tells us. “Or kidnapping, for that matter. The Mannings keep a spare key hidden in a fake rock in the yard; it’s frequently accessed by friends of Lizzie who…visit, late at night. Meg claims she asked Lilly to use it, to check up on her sister, because Grace stayed home from the rally alone. Had Lilly and Veronica taken Grace anywhere but the police station…by way of Starbuck’s…Manning might have had a case. But as it stands, we’ve got permission to enter, a minor child left unsupervised and in peril, and prompt notification of authorities. There may not be a conviction in Stewart’s future, there’s no medical sign of abuse. But Lilly and Veronica don’t need to worry.”

Meg lies on the record once again, to protect her sister, I think, but don’t say. Her talent for acting verges on scary; but I have to admit, I’m impressed by her balls.

“The slander will hurt your reputation with voters, though,” I muse. “It could cost you the election, whether it’s true or not.”

“Veronica,” Dad says. “My main concern at the moment is not the election, or incorporation, or even my steadily improving health. I asked you to meet me tonight because I need to discuss something important with you.”

“OK,” I say. “Let’s hear it. And for the record, you can trust Logan not to gossip. He’s REALLY good at keeping secrets.”

Logan shoots me a jaundiced look, and I flash my ‘no, you’re not done paying’ smile.

Dad studies us both, sighs. “You know I began the paperwork about a year ago to adopt Susan Knight’s baby,” he says. Which is not at all what I was expecting, but I nod. “Well all this…questioning of my ethics in the press has had a negative effect on that process. I’m so sorry to disappoint you and your friends, sweetie. But it looks, at this point, as if the adoption’s not going to happen.”

I stare at him, nonplussed. “Dad, you’re the hero sheriff. And you’re engaged to a woman with a lot of money, who throws giant parties for charity. They’re rejecting you solely because of an
Dad sets his napkin down, studying me with what looks like shock. “Veronica, I don’t know what you’ve heard, but I am definitely NOT engaged. I’m not even currently DATING. I’m an older, single man with a history of heart problems, AND unfounded allegations swirling, who may soon be out of a job. I’m not an ideal candidate for fatherhood, I’m afraid.”

“But…Bettina.” I wave my hand in the direction of the door. “I thought…”

“Bettina is a dear friend, who’s going through a difficult time; and I’m supporting her, because it’s right. But I have grave concerns about Cassidy, both in relation to you, and to….other incidents. I can’t join a family that includes him, no matter how I might feel about his mother. It would be completely unfair to all of you…even Cassidy, should my concerns be unfounded. So I’m sorry if it scotches my chance of adopting Susan’s kid. But marrying Bettina is no longer an option.”

“Does this decision have anything to do with the Lucky Dohanic hit-and-run?” Logan asks shrewdly, glancing up from the napkin he’s folding. He’s been silently making paper airplanes.

“You know I’m not at liberty to discuss an ongoing investigation,” Dad chides, without heat. Which I guess is an answer in itself.

“Dad,” I say, and hesitate. Because this might be a linchpin moment in the slipstream, and I need to get my speech right. “I’m always happy to avoid Beaver, and I agree with your suspicions. But I’d like you to know three things, OK?”

He nods, and I continue. “One, you’re making the right decision. Bettina’s not evil or anything, but I’m pretty sure that, on some level, she’s aware her son’s doing wrong. And I think she brought him home from France because he was about to get in trouble. However two, I don’t want you to believe I’m against you dating, just because I have doubts about her. I’m fine with you marrying someone who loves you, and starting a second family. Maybe I used to be…possessive, but lately, I’ve grown up some.” I smile at him. “And three, I could care less if you’re Sheriff or not. You have my respect regardless.”

Dad produces a genuine smile this time, squeezes my hand. “You’re one in a million, kid,” he says, and he sounds like he means it. “And I’m proud to be your father. But don’t think this softens my stance on you moving in with your…boyfriend?” He glances at Logan, as if in confirmation. Yeah, sure enough; I may not live with Dad, here, but his grapevine remains intact. “You’re not THAT mature.”

“The roommate idea’s on hold, for the moment,” Logan says, giving me a look that’s both wry and self-deprecating. “Veronica knows I love her, but she’s got some reservations. Currently we’re just friends.”

“Fair enough,” Dad says. “It’s good that you respect her enough not to push. Senior year of high school’s not the best time to make long-term plans, even when your love feels rock-solid. Take it from a guy who knows.”

“Is this gonna be another out-of-nowhere Molotov Cocktail story?” Logan asks, grabbing a piece of pizza, biting down. “Because I LOVE those. And it’s been MONTHS since your last heartwarming lecture.”

Dad gives him a shoulder shove, but he’s grinning now. He picks up a slice, too. “Patience, Grasshopper,” he says, enigmatic. “When the student is ready, the teacher appears.”
We all crack up, and suddenly, I’m hungry.

Half an hour later, replete with cheese, Logan and I stand by the XTerra, waving goodbye to Dad. The taillights of his cop car flash acknowledgement, as he turns out of the lot, and speeds from sight.

I put my arm around Logan, cuddling close. “Do me a favor?”

“I’m at your beck and call,” he says, stroking his knuckles down my cheek. “You should know that by now.”

“Tell Alicia about the baby dad’s adopting, and make it poignant. Explain how critical it is to Susan that her kid go to a good family, how I swore to Carrie I’d find the right home. Also, mention how disappointed dad is, that it might not work out. Allude to tears.”

“Why Veronica Mars!” he gazes down at me, the corners of his mouth twitching. “Are we playing MATCHMAKER?”

I shrug, feigning nonchalance. “Dad could use a friend right now,” I say, airily. “Someone who’s creative, about finding ways to cope.”

“You KNOW SOMETHING,” he sing-songs, and I grin. He pokes me in the side, and I shake my head. “I LIKE it,” he decides, opening the passenger door for me. “Keith and Alicia, sitting in a tree. I’ll make it my mission. Even if this is all part of your long game, to steal Wallace from me.”

“Hey, he was MY BFF FIRST,” I accuse, buckling my seatbelt. “I’m willing to share, but I’m not resigning my claim. And don’t think I won’t fight Lilly for him, either. I noticed her muscling in, the other night at the dance.”

“Unless you’ve got Jackie Cook’s email address to hand over, you’re SOL,” he says, backing out of the spot. “Wallace is laser-focused, at present, and Jackie’s playing coy.”

“Oh, hey, that reminds me,” I say. “I need a computer with internet access for five minutes. What’s closest?”

“There’s a public library right around the corner,” he informs me. “That work?”

“YOU know the locations of local libraries?” I demand, feigning astonishment.

“I was forced to visit once for a photo op,” he deadpans. “Press roll-out for an Oscar-bait Hemingway movie. Dad grew a beard.”

“It bothers me that I can’t tell if you’re kidding,” I say, as he pulls into the lot. I kiss his nose. “Meet you by the recent releases display in ten. You can catch up on all the latest bodice rippers.”

“You know I’d rather be ripping yours!” he calls after me, as I move off towards the kiosks. I laugh, but the slipstream could take me any minute. So I don’t turn around.

I log in to kittenfancy, re-read the sole message that’s not from five years ago, consider my response. Take a deep breath, and type.

“No, I’m not Lilly,” I tell Other Veronica. “I’m YOU. And I’m not dead in the future, nor is she. So if you’re putting any credence in Carrie’s idiotic theories, you’re WAY off the mark. I’m here solely to fix mistakes that were made, mistakes that ended with people dead. And I’d appreciate it if you’d
start working IN your own best interests, instead of against them.

“For example: Beaver Casablancas is currently enjoying a murder spree. And you dumping Logan for helping investigate is not going to STOP THE KILLING. I’ve saved you TWICE, now, from being roofied and raped by that waste of flesh. You think maybe you could show some gratitude?”

I pause, striving for tact; it’s not exactly my strong suit (or hers, for that matter). “And don’t blame Logan for any of this mess. If you’re mad, blame ME. He loves you, and you SERIOUSLY don’t want to know what your life would be like, without him. I have seen the future, Veronica, and Loganless, it is BLEAK. Take a lesson from me, because I am older and wiser; you think you want normal, but no. Normal will crush your soul. What you need is adoration of your true nature, and he’s the man for the job. Please, for all our sakes. Quit treating the guy like a weakness you’ll outgrow.

Oh, and also, you didn’t kill Felix Toombs. I was there, and I’m sure, and I will make the person who did pay. Quit feeling guilty, it’s not your fault.”

I study the last sentence, breathing sharply through my nose. It’s a lie, but one she needs to hear. On the darkest night of my life, Logan convinced me I wasn’t a killer, and that got me through. I’m maybe not the happiest with Past Veronica, at the moment; but the knowledge that she’s eaten up by guilt makes me strangely protective. I know how guilt rots, from the inside. And I don’t want her to feel that way, anymore.

I hit send, erase my electronic trail, and gather up my bag. Logan is lounging against a shelf, avidly reading ‘The Awakening’, biting absently at his thumbnail. I walk up to him, duck under the book; curl my hands around his biceps, kiss the center of his chest. He folds in around me, kisses the top of my head. We stand there holding each other for a long, long time.

XXXXX

He’s silent as we drive away from the library, reflective. He smiles at me, entwines our fingers, but doesn’t want to speak. I wonder if the book triggered something in him, but can’t remember what it’s about. Orgasms, maybe? Affairs?

“Would you like to …park somewhere?” I ask, when we stop at a light. Because his mood is strange, but I still feel raw from the throw-down earlier. I’d just like to affirm that I love him, and he loves me, and all of this won’t somehow end in tears.

“I’d love to,” he says, voice gentle. He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “I can’t. Veronica and I…we’re broken up right now. And I wish that wasn’t true—I’m trying to fix it. Until I do, though, it feels…wrong to accept access to her body, just because you’re in it. Sex is exactly what the two of us need, and of course we love each other; but it’s not what SHE currently wants. Do you see?”

“Yes,” I say, and feel ashamed. “Of course, you’re right. I just…it’s been an all-over-the-place day, and I…”

“Hey, I know. Come here.” He pulls me into his arms, kisses the top of my head. He’s warm, and feels safe, and I’m so tired of all this BULLSHIT. I grit my teeth, fighting to hold back tears.

“Hey, no. No, baby, Ronica. Don’t cry!” He strokes the back of my head, his voice going desperate. “Really, I love you so much. And it’s my fault she’s mad, I was stupid, I got caught. I’ll fix it, I swear!”

“It’s NOT your fault,” I snap. “It’s MINE. EVERYTHING that goes wrong in the slipstream is
because I screwed up, made a bad choice. I shouldn’t have asked you to follow Beaver. He’s unhinged and dangerous. It’s just, you’re so GOOD at skullduggery, which I never really took advantage of before.”

“And far be it from Veronica Mars to leave an Ace up her sleeve.” There’s a smile in his voice. Behind us, someone lays on their horn, and he lets me go, starts driving again. “Look, I’ve been coping with psychos my whole life, Ronica. I can help you, and not break a sweat. You should let me, I’ll be fine. Since you’ve got a full plate, and you’re nearing your limit?”

“PLEASE don’t be reckless,” I say. “Please take care of yourself, and Veronica, too.”

“I do solemnly swear,” he intones, with mock gravity. “Come on, you’re worn out. Why don’t you curl up under my jacket, try to rest? I’ll take you home, tuck you in. Tell you a dirty bedtime story?”

I nod, kiss his cheek. Ruffle his messy, stupid, highlighted high-school hair. “Here’s lookin’ at you, kid,” I say.

“We’ll always have your 18th birthday,” he paraphrases, with a smirk.

I smack his arm, cuddle up under his worn brown hoodie. Press the corner to my nose, the spot he rubs against his lips. It smells like him. I sigh, tucking my cheek into the fabric, shielding myself from cold glass. I feel frayed and fragile, like I’m coming unglued. I feel weary to the bone. It’s like I’m drifting, up, out of my body, into the night. I feel…

…gone.
That's One 'Cause You Left Me

THREAD TWENTY FOUR

The fabric against my cheek is rougher. The cold surface on which I lean is tile, not glass. I’m in a nightgown, on a strange bathroom floor, towel wrapped around my hair. My stomach clenches and heaves with nausea, and my nose informs me I’ve already puked.

I cough, wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. Reach over to flush the stench away…which is not hard, because this room is the size of a stamp. The décor is stainless, white and beige; builder-standard, zero personal touches. Whoever lives here is not into making things homey.

I think about getting up, decide against it. I wonder where Logan is, and whether he’ll bring me tea.

There’s a knock on the door, and Dad’s voice filters through. “Veronica, honey? You all right in there? I can tie a brandy cask to Backup’s collar, send him on a rescue mission.”

“Pepto Bismol might be more effective,” I moan.

The door cracks, and his head peaks through. He eases past, barefoot in a t-shirt and sleep pants; closes the toilet lid, sits. Takes my hand. He’s greyer and balder than ever, but very fit, and the assessing look he gives me is #436; concerned father, out of his depth. “You remember when you were five, and you ate an entire box of ice cream?” he asks, lurking humor in his eyes. “I’m pretty sure you threw up less, that time.”

I make a face. “I don’t know why the morning sickness is so bad. This isn’t typical, right? It seems way worse than…” Peanut, I want to say, but of course, I can’t. My belly’s too small to be housing Peanut, and my Berkeley self remains nausea-free.

Dad shrugs. “I’ve had experience with exactly one pregnancy, twenty years ago. We could try peppermint tea. Logan says that helps, if you drink it first thing in the morning.”

“Is he here?” I ask, brightening. Because of course! I retconned our fight! Which means the Hearst Logan who recognizes me won’t be angry any more. And thank GOD; I REALLY need someone to rub my back, right now, and tell me I look great curvy.

Dad’s eyes crinkle in a faintly pitying smile; he shakes his head. “He stopped by this morning, early. But you were sleeping, and he didn’t want to wake you. Nine weeks will pass before you know it, though, sweetheart. And I’m sure as soon as he has a chance, he’ll call.”

I nod, wishing I could just interrogate, when confused. I’m starting to admire impostors and spies; living a lie is EXHAUSTING, and requires constant vigilance.

Dad’s unaware of my frustration, though. He’s gazing down at our clasped hands, clearly working up nerve. “I realize this isn’t an…ideal…situation for newlyweds, Veronica. I don’t blame you for being upset. But I agree with Logan; it’s important you not live alone, while you’re sick and dizzy so often. And I’m honored you chose to stay here.”

A creeping numbness overtakes me. I got married what, a day ago? And ALREADY I’m flying solo. Based on the way dad’s acting, something big went down; and once again, my shady-ass boyfriend…husband….has kept me in the dark.

Jesus, is there any version of Logan Echolls, anywhere, who doesn’t hide nasty surprises up his
sleeve? I KNEW it was a mistake, to screw him in that library, instead of making him confess!

“You and I haven’t been close, the way we used to be, these last few years,” Dad is saying, and I jerk my attention back to him. Because this is what I want, right? My father, making a genuine effort to connect? “I respected your wishes, when you asked to live with your mom, and things have been a little weird, since. But you should know…”

I fling my arms around his neck, which silences his stilted efforts. He hugs me, a real Keith Mars bear hug, and my anger at Logan fades. “I love you, dad,” I say. “Even though I’m…sort of grown up, that hasn’t changed.”

“I love you too, kid,” he says, giving me an awkward pat. “Now. How ‘bout some breakfast? I just learned recently to make a mean omelet.”

My stomach gives a paradoxical lurching snarl, and I wrinkle my nose. “Apparently it’s possible to be starving and nauseous at once. My body really IS a wonderland!”

“Number two on the list of things fathers hate to hear,” he says. “Bacon, peppers and cheese? It’s hard to go wrong with the classics.”

“I’ll try,” I say. “But I promise nothing.”

He nods, pats again, rises. “Dad?” I ask, before he gets to the door. “Did Logan maybe leave a note for a woman named Mrs. Robinson?”

“Mrs. ROBINSON?” Dad’s eyebrows lift. “Oh, right, I forgot, because you’re a few weeks older. Nope, no note, but there IS a message. Hold on.”

He walks out, and I hear metallic things clanking, in the next room. I’ve just levered myself onto the toilet when he returns, carrying a screwdriver.

“Here you go,” Dad says, extending it handle first. “Logan said if you mentioned that name, I should give you this. I didn’t understand, but he assured me you would.”

I look down at the Phillips-head, smile. “Yeah,” I say. “It’s a bad joke. Listen, I need a few minutes to clean up and dress, then I’ll be out to drink that tea.”

Dad kisses my temple. “I’ll start chopping. Oh, and Dick’s in town tomorrow. He called to see if he could stop by? I told him you have water aerobics, and he sounded disappointed.”

WATER AEROBICS? Seriously? Sometimes I doubt Shitty Hearst! Veronica and I are even the same person. “Yeah, I might skip that class. I mean, I owe it to Dick, as a friend. Thanks for letting me know.”

I rinse off in the shower after he leaves, brush my teeth, don the stretchy black dress I’ve laid out. Slip on the ring in the soap dish, a plain platinum band with a two-carat diamond. It’s just slightly tight, clearly bought in a rush; a ring of taking-responsibility, not adoration. There’s a lump in my throat as I study it, turning my hand to catch the light.

I exit, cautiously; the bathroom is en-suite. The guest room’s beige and white as well, and bears the stamp of Dad’s bad decorating. Dumb-joke fishing plaques adorn the walls, along with framed articles about Dad’s books, and a toddler photo of me. The leg lamp from ‘A Christmas Story’ lurks lurid in the corner, and a cheap brown comforter covers the queen-sized bed.

My phone is on the nightstand, with a bottle of water, and some pictures in frames. There’s me and
Lilly, arms over each others’ shoulders, her in a cap and gown. Me, age 2, sticking my tongue out at dad, wearing a red, white and blue bikini. Me with Logan in Fiji, our gazes locked and tender. I trace a finger over his smiling face, breathe through a wave of nausea. Take a sip of water, which thankfully stays down.

Then I climb onto the bed, unscrew the vent above it, and extract a letter, addressed in Logan’s loopy hand. I replace the cover carefully, and burrow beneath the blankets to read.

“Mrs. R.,” (it says)

“I guess, by now, the cat’s out of the bag. You’re abruptly married, I’m in Illinois, and ten to one you’re breathing fire. You’ve likely figured out my latest crime, since you’ve got a nose for sin. But in case you’re flailing, I’ll confess. I joined the Navy, when Veronica dumped me for Piz.

“I didn’t think it mattered, to us. You’d been gone so long, I figured you escaped the slipstream, and I was done begging for scraps. Besides, you know how much I want to fly jets; you read my prize-winning essay. I kept quiet so we wouldn’t spend the short time we had together, fighting, and maybe that was dumb. But spectacularly bad choices are my forte. And if you’re pissed off and disappointed right now, at least I’m out of taser range.

“If I’m right about where you are in our story, we just had the talk at Cho’s. So I suppose, from your point of view, I’ve ditched you two days in a row. But from mine, the library was our last goodbye. And this letter is, I don’t know. A shout into the void, maybe? A hope that somehow, you’ll find a way to return, love, forgive. If you do, consider this a promise: I will, too. I want us to be together, more than anything.

“You should know, I found the spreadsheet and destroyed it, like you asked.”

And read it first, I think, gaze flicking up to the vent. I’m sure you’ve got it memorized, snoop that you are.

“I read it,” he admits, and I laugh. “Come on, you knew I would. So I realize this is not the reality you like best, the one you wished for, at Fall Prom. But believe me when I say, I TRIED to get you there. The choices that scotched your perfect life were yours, not mine.

“I told Veronica the things you said I should—that I love her with or without the baby, etc. She claims she also loves me, but things are moving too fast; the pregnancy at 19, me pushing to settle down. Said she needs a few more years, to figure out who she wants to be. She agreed to marry me, mostly to please Keith, I think. And I asked so she’d be next of kin, when I’m ready to deploy. I said I wouldn’t contest a divorce, if she ever chose to file, and she called me an asshole. I hope that’s a positive sign?

“She’s furious I enlisted during a war, needless to say; FYI we’ve been fighting, a LOT. She’s scared, as well as angry, and, hmmm…let’s just say, she shares your temper. We had a big blowout eight hours ago, in fact, which was six hours after our wedding. I’m currently alone at 2:00 AM in a honeymoon suite, writing to a ghost, feeling like a pathetic waste of space.

“That’s why I joined up, though, Veronica. So I WON’T be a waste of space. I can purge the entitled slacker inside me, become someone you, and my Veronica, and Keith admire. Maybe I’ll even make friends who know how to parent; because, no clue how I’ll cope with THAT, when the time comes. All my role models were addicts, or criminally inclined.

“I wish I could watch you read this. I’ll bet you’re angry, but focused; with that spark in your eye that says you’ve been down deep, to places that hurt, and know just how hurting feels. I miss you so
much. Even if you don’t come back, I likely always will.

“Hearst let me finish the semester early, so I can check up on Victor before boot camp—fingers crossed he’s quit his shenanigans. And I convinced your dad to invite Ronica for a visit. I’m hoping he’ll encourage the closeness she craves, and make her feel—more at peace, I guess, with the way things are. She regrets choosing her friends, and her mom who wouldn’t restrict her social life, over him. I mean, that’s natural for a teenager, right? But she’s Veronica. She agonizes, always, over whether she’s chosen the best path.

“I’ll be home in a couple months, and my house should be done this summer. You may recognize it; but on the off-chance you’re sticking around, I won’t spoil the surprise. If Veronica wants to try with me then, living together or apart, I will.

“And you—well, I’ve known since Senior Year we might end right here. You wanting a different life than I’m able to provide, unable to guarantee when or if you’ll return. But whatever. You know I love you, so bygones. You’re my girl, if you want to be, and that’s forever.

“If you don’t, though, or for some reason, can’t… it doesn’t change how I feel. You were there for me, when no one else was, and you broadened my mind in ways I never dreamed possible. You are smart, and sexy, and amazing, and…yeah, I won’t wish you luck with some other guy. I hope your future is wonderful, but I’m not that selfless.

“Lils is picking me up at the airport, I’ll give her your love. Try not to punch anyone in the face while I’m gone. And remember to ice, if you can’t help yourself.

L.

“P.S. You can write me at the return address on the envelope. I mean, if you want. And I’ve heard care packages containing food are always, always welcome.”

I toss the letter down with a huff of laughter, through threatening tears. Sarcastic asshole. Some things never change.

He’s still helping me too, the shithead, though he clearly knows I’m furious. Going against his stated proclivities, to put truth on paper. Berkeley reality exists, apparently, because one Logan created it. And this Logan couldn’t, but not for lack of trying. Shitty Veronica must have dug in her heels for Hearst, and demanded he play along. So what convinced Berkeley Veronica to take the other road?

I wonder if my email to Past Veronica eased or increased tensions with Logan…if Felix Toombs is still the snag that threatens to unravel them. If the underwater reefs threatening to beach my ship are in the same place, in this universe, as they were yesterday.

I spread a hand over the curve of my stomach, the closest I can get to holding my guy; it churns with a hungry rumble. GOD, pregnancy is weird. I can’t believe I’ve gone from uncontrollable puking to ravenous and faint, in ten freaking minutes.

Dad’s setting his little round table, when I emerge into the living room (which is larger than, but depressingly similar to, the apartment we shared after mom left). He’s dressed in a schlubby brown suit, with a brown tie, proving that a fixed point in all worlds is his lack of personal style. He pulls out a chair for me, kisses my cheek. I notice he’s sprinkled extra cheese on the omelet, and laid six sugar cubes beside the tea. I don’t start crying, but it’s only because I’m hungry.

He sits across from me with a cup of industrial-strength Folger’s, polishes off the last slug. “I’m heading out,” he says. “My agent’s trying one more time to coax me into a book tour.” He shields his
mouth with one hand, as if telling secrets. “He won’t take no for an answer.”

“Clearly he’s not aware you loathe traveling.” I dump all the sugar into my tea, give it a stir. It tastes like candy canes, so that’s a plus. “Unless it involves film noir locations. Or jazz. Which I’m assuming this tour doesn’t?”

“Tragically, no.” He smiles as I coat the eggs in Tabasco, cut a big forkful, and chew. “Although I am negotiating to wear a trench-coat and fedora at signings.”

The corner of my mouth tips up; this reality’s basically screwed, but DAD. I’m hanging with DAD, just the two of us, for the first time in months. And apparently I'M the one who chose not to live with HIM, in high school. So I’ve got some bridge building to do. “Bust his chops, daddy-o,” I say, staccato, lowering my voice an octave. “Keep him behind the eight ball ‘til he comes through with the goods.”

“I’ll be on Easy Street before he can say ‘lead poisoning’,” Dad informs me, the lingering smile growing. “And for the record? You’re aces, kid.”

“I am,” I agree, shoveling in a complacent bite. “A real hardboiled dame.”

He gathers a briefcase from the breakfast bar; pauses at the door, as if struck by a thought. “By the way…a friend of mine might hang out here today, while some flooring is replaced. It shouldn’t interfere with your studying, and you’re not required to entertain.”

“Uh-huh,” I say. “And this has nothing to do with me barfing all morning, while missing my brand-new husband?”

“Just a random, crazy coincidence,” he agrees, breezily, and walks out. I smile and shake my head, bend to my food with a will.

XXXXX

I’m washing dishes when the doorbell rings, soothing away images of Logan mid-battle with soap and routine. I reach for a dishtowel to dry off, and the ringing is replaced by pounding.

“Coming!” I yell, jogging for the door, wiping my hands on my shirt. I swing it open to reveal Wallace’s little brother Darryl, and my little brother Bobby, locked in a wrestling match over a toy hammer.

“You don’t knock with a HAMMER, man,” Darryl insists, employing leverage. You’ll ruin the paint!”

He tries to twist the toy free, but it’s futile; Bobby has an iron grip. He’s doubled down with both hands, screaming, “MINE!” at a volume sure to annoy the neighbors. Alicia’s in the driveway, closing her hatchback and juggling grocery bags, so clearly I’m on referee duty.

“Darryl doesn’t want your hammer, Bobby,” I assure him, kneeling down to child level. “He’s TEN. Old enough to help his mom, and WAY too old to fight with toddlers.”

“Whatever,” Darryl grouses. He lets go abruptly, so Bobby falls on his butt, and lifts his hands, palms out, in a classic Logan gesture. He heads towards an approaching Alicia, calling over his shoulder, “And his name’s BRYSON!”

“Bryson,” I repeat, under my breath. I help the toddler, who’s now wailing, to stand, and dust off his heavy-duty dungarees. “Hey Bryson? You wanna come inside and hit a pillow with that hammer?
You can totally destroy it, if the urge strikes.”

He nods, sniffing, gazing at me with big, wet Mr. Rooks eyes. I wish, once again, that he looked more like Susan.

I set him up on the sofa with a sad brown decorative cushion, which he attacks, ferocious. Alicia walks through the open door, sets her sacks on the counter, and observes, “You know, he’ll tear that to pieces, right?”

“Enh,” I say, watching the carnage. “No great loss.”

“Sorry to arrive leading a parade.” She hands Darryl a yogurt tube and juice box. “School’s out for the summer, and basketball camp got cancelled. They found toxic mold in the YMCA gym.”

“Of course they did.” I watch as she removes a toy workbench from one bag. She carries it over to Bobby…Bryson…extracts the pillow, and leaves him smacking plastic nails into holes. “Neptune, California; the town where only the rich expect fun poison-free.”

Darryl slumps onto the couch, extracts a DS Lite from his pocket, and loses himself in Pokemon Mystery Dungeon. The yogurt tube hangs, half-consumed, from his lips.

Alicia returns to the kitchen, begins stashing snack food. “Holding up OK?” she asks, over her shoulder.

“I’d rather be on my Italian honeymoon,” I say, leaning against the breakfast bar. “Enjoying pastries and cappuccino, in a room with a view. But what can you do?”

“How’s the nausea?” She folds the empty bags neatly, lays them on the counter. “Keith said you had a rough morning.”

Backup wanders through a door on the left, attracted by kitchen activity. I kneel to pet him. “Abnormal,” I say. “My limited experience tells me it shouldn’t be this bad.”

She shrugs. “Depends on the baby. Girls are rumored to be easier, but I wouldn’t know. After the first trimester, though, your stomach should settle. Then it’s just swollen ankles, back pain, and the occasional hard kick, until it’s time for childbirth.”

“GOGGY!” Bryson yells, and abandons carpentry to fling himself on Backup. The dog bends his head backwards, licks the kid’s whole face, and Bryson erupts into shrieking giggles. Loki pokes his head around a doorway, observing; Bryson shouts, “OTHER GOGGY!” and takes off at a run.

“DOG,” Darryl corrects, in disgusted tones, not looking up from his game. “With a D. Man, when will he learn to talk like a normal person?”

“First grade,” Alicia says, ushering both child and dog out of the distant room, firmly closing the door. Loki approaches, presses tight to my side, and Backup licks him, too.

Alicia extracts a small tin from her purse, hands it over; puts an arm around Bryson, helps him pat Backup. “For when you feel sick,” she tells me. “Ginger lozenges work better than medicine, and they’re also delicious.”

I taste-test one, and mmmm, more Christmas. “So are you REALLY replacing floors?” I ask, around the candy. “Or was that a clever ruse, on Dad’s part, to provide me with moral support?”

She laughs. “No, I honestly am remodeling. I can finally afford it, with Wallace and his appetite out
of my house. I’m putting down laminate, because I have boys; but the kind they make now looks just like wood.” She halts Backup’s ongoing spit bath, with a hand around his muzzle, and adds, “Logan found it for me, when he was building your place. His mother’s not good for much, beyond looking pretty on camera, and charming rich men. But she taught her son how to shop.”

“So I’ll be living alone in a showplace? While he floats in a tin can, on enemy waters?” I ask, somewhat bitterly.

“Not for three years,” she says. “Or maybe four, I can’t remember how long Officer Candidate School lasts. He’ll be in the reserves until he finishes college, then he undergoes advanced training; your baby should be out of diapers, by the time he deploys. Did he not discuss this with you? He promised he would.”

“We fought,” I tell her. “Lots of insults, very little listening. I left him brooding alone in the honeymoon suite, and he skipped town before I woke up.”

She sighs, sits, and settles Bryson on her lap. Backup sprawls, panting, across both of them. “I don’t know you very well, Veronica,” she says, “but you’re clearly strong-minded, and prone to acting alone. I can respect that, I’m independent, too. In this instance, though, I can help; because I also got pregnant at 19. And my husband was a man with a dangerous job, who was often away from home.”

I raise my eyebrows, and she smiles. Clasps Bryson’s hand in hers, so he’ll stop poking Backup’s eye. “I loved him, my God I loved him, or I never would have married so young. He was handsome, and smooth, passionate about doing the right thing. He called me chere.” She shakes her head, banishing memories. “It didn’t last. He was an undercover cop, got in too deep. I left him, married a safer man, then that man died. Now here I am, raising boys alone.”

She strokes Bryson’s hair; he’s become sleepy, half buried beneath pungent pit-bull. He’s leaning forehead first into her shoulder, eyelids fluttering. “I didn’t plan this life, Veronica, but I want you to know, I don’t regret it. I love being a mother so much, until I volunteered for a third round.” She smiles. “I was a mess at first; I knew nothing about kids, and worked crazy hours, establishing my career. But I proved the people who said I couldn’t do both wrong. You will, too. You may even have an easier time; Logan is wealthy, committed, and very deeply in love.”

“And reckless,” I say, because yup, still pissed. “Also foolhardy. He kept this whole thing SECRET from me, Alicia, because he knew I’d be mad. I am honestly not all right with him risking his LIFE.”

“Military service is dangerous,” she agrees. “But it’s honorable and heroic, too. And let’s be frank here. He was in peril every day of his childhood, until Aaron passed away. If anyone can handle the demands of wartime, without losing his cool, Logan Echolls is that person. I think the Navy will be good for him, myself. It will provide structure, and clear-cut rules his family didn’t; it will teach him better ways to be a man.”

“And there are lots of people, here in Neptune, willing to help, when he can’t be around. If I were to give you one piece of advice, based on my own mistakes, it would be this; accept that help. Let others in. You’re not proving anything by going it alone.”

“I don’t work well with others,” I admit, very quietly, pressing my face against Loki’s head. I dig my fingers into the ruff around his neck. “Logan’s the only one who gets me. I wish he hadn’t left.”

I’m thinking of the slipstream, but Alicia misinterprets. She reaches across the small bodies between us, takes my hand; pulls me around the pile, into a hug. “You’ll figure it out,” she says, and I start to shake.
“Hush, now.” She strokes my hair, gently. Her hand is strong and capable, despite the delicate bones. “How about we check out your new house, ooh and aah at the extravagance? They’re landscaping by now, the interior’s finished.”

“I’ll bet he spent way too much money,” I say. “His wastefulness gives me HIVES.”

“You know, I tell my boys to take ten deep breaths, when they’re upset,” she soothes, rocking me. “I say, ‘Imagine, carefully, the result you want. Then choose the course most likely to make it real’. Whatever this house looks like, it’s the result of SO much effort and planning. And it’s Logan’s vision for the rest of your lives.”

I nod, pretty sure I know what the house looks like. I’m positive I’ll hate living there, without him.

THREAD TWENTY FOUR INVERTS

Alicia’s got her arms around me, stroking my hair; explaining ten deep breaths, which Logan made our mantra. Then the world spins, and I’m in Logan’s arms instead, in the back of the XTerra. He’s stroking my hair too, but for entirely different reasons.

Our clothes are in disarray, the areas of contact bare and sticky, and he’s kissing me; eyelids, cheekbones, temples, chin. “Are you OK?” he murmurs, both sweetly solicitous and somewhat smug. “Are you sore? It’s been a while, and you were very…enthusiastic.”

I shake my head, smiling because dork, and he continues the romance, soft brushes of lips that trail down my shoulder. He’s incredibly tender; no smirks, no sly innuendoes, no hints of perversions he’d love to try. It’s nice, after the weird distance of the last few days, but it also feels…off. Logan’s happiness is usually tempered by the knowledge that it won’t last.

He cups my face between his palms, and I realize what’s bothering me. He looks the way he did flirting with Hannah, or Parker; high on life, not cynical at all.

“I’d say this was a VERY successful first date,” he tells me, pressing his forehead to mine. He fixes me with his coaxing, laughing gaze, inviting me to agree. And I’m swamped by a wave of jealousy that feels like bile, rising.

Because when I was fifteen, and secretly infatuated, he was my rom-com hero; I dreamed of forehead kisses and spins, stage right into the sunset. I was Duncan’s virgin girlfriend, though, and later, Logan’s nemesis. I became the BAD girl in HIS teen film, the one who got what she had coming.

And now here I am, fucking Maleficent, crashing Other Veronica’s happy ending. I feel like KENDALL, peering smugly over Logan’s shoulder, that morning at the Neptune Grand. After the angst of the last few days, when I’ve tried so HARD to be understanding, my casting really, deeply HURTS.

“It must have been GLORIOUS,” I say, deeply sarcastic. “She went from blaming you for original sin to doing you in a parked car, in the space of what, a week? I know you’re smooth, but that’s a hell of a comeback, Echolls.”

He shifts my weight without letting go; his mouth curves, predatory, and his pupils dilate. “A month and a HALF,” he says, voice a caress, cock heating and rising in the space between us. “With no one to keep me company but Jack Daniels, and the hot doctor from Halo. Yet the MOMENT I patch things up with my girl, here you come, all snarky and spitting fire. The other woman. Jesus, your timing is IMPECCABLE.” He bends, pressing eager teeth to my throat, and I shove him back,
furious.

“Uh-uh,” I snap, disentangling. I right my clothes with angry yanks. “SHE may be all warmed up, but I’VE had a shitty day. And I’m not interested in Other Veronica’s sloppy seconds. You’re gonna have to try harder, if you want to get your kink on.”

He sits back, assessing silently, then huffs frustration; wraps the condom in a fast-food napkin, pulls up his jeans. “Right,” he says, raking hands through his hair. “Sorry I overstepped. You’ve always, previously, been willing, when you turned up in bed with me.”

“Not surprising.” I gaze out the window, tracing the hazy shape of Jake’s Spanish Colonial with one knuckle. “You’re pretty irresistible, when you switch on the charm.”

He braces a heel on the seat, wraps his arms around his knee. “The other woman crack,” he decides, gazing at his hands. “That’s what pissed you off.”

“It didn’t help,” I say. “I’m THE woman in your life, not the OTHER woman. Or at least I am, in the movie playing in MY head. Clearly, however, Other Veronica plays Madonna in YOUR complex.”

He flops his head back against the bench seat, staring at the ceiling. “I am really struggling, because I really love you, to not be a world-class dick right now. But that was a low blow, Veronica. I have NEVER treated you—or ANY woman-- like a whore.”

“No,” I say. “But you’ve never been shmoopy with me, the way you just were with HER, either. Not even when I WAS her, and NEEDED it.”

He pins me with his gaze, and uh-oh. Temper officially engaged. “Is that what you want? You’d like me to role-play Prince Charming, to get you in the mood? You’d prefer I PRETEND?”

“That was not fake, the way you were acting when I showed up!” I accuse, breath coming faster. “That was HAPPINESS!”

“She’s my GIRLFRIEND, Veronica! She just admitted she loves me, and took my sorry ass back! Of COURSE I’m happy! And I thought you WANTED me to reconcile with her, so you and I can be together. I mean, am I wrong?” He throws up his hands. “Fuck, of course I am! It’s the old Veronica Mars double standard at work. You get to invest as much as you like in every version of me. But I have to be a cynical douche to the actual girl I’m fucking, unless she happens to be possessed by YOU!” He flings the car door open and climbs out, gripping the roof with both hands. “Your fascination with Asshole Trust Fund Logan finally makes sense,” he says. “I’m thinking you two BELONG together.”

I step down, too, the better to yell at him as he marches away. “If you believe I’ll chase you, you are SERIOUSLY delusional!”

He lifts his hand and flips me off, not turning, and I release a growl of frustration into the night air. Grab my messenger bag off his front seat, leave the car door dangling open as I stomp towards the house. Maybe someone will do me a favor, and steal the yellow piece of shit. Then sink it in the Pacific, so it offends only fish.

I dig through the bag for my keys, but can’t find them. My futile pawing grows more desperate, and I fling it into a bush, with a shriek of rage. I lean on the bell, pressing my forehead to the wood; the sound echoes through the house, but no footsteps approach. I smack the frame once, hard, and then just stand there, trembling with emotion. I wish Piz would show up, so I’d have someone to kick.
“They’re doing a Pan Asian Tour,” Logan says, behind me. I turn, and he’s standing three feet away, hands still in pockets. His brown hoodie’s zipped against the evening chill; he’s pulling the looking-up-from-under-his-brow move that’s saved him more than once. “Jake and Lianne, to debut some new phone tech. They’re gone for three weeks. Nobody’s gonna answer.”

I slump back, staring at him, and he scuffs his shoe against the sidewalk. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I get lonely, and jealous, and confused too. This whole slipstream thing is…incredibly difficult to navigate.”

“I HATE living in someone else’s skin,” I tell him. “I can’t even call my body, or my lover, my own. I want the best of you, US; not another girl’s crumbs!”

“Crumbs are NOT what I’m offering,” he says. “I never once told ANYONE the truth about myself, until you came along. That’s the part of me you get that nobody else does. You know the person behind the wall.”

I nod, and he says, “I wish I WAS your Prince Charming, Veronica. I’d feel GREAT about myself, if I could claim pristine heroism. But back when you WERE my Veronica, dating Duncan, before all these realities split? I had zero interest in romance. I used to lie on your bed, amidst your many teddy bears, and fantasize about corrupting you. Your innocence was a ROADBLOCK, not something I craved; I liked the wild thing with teeth that lived under your skin.”

He takes a step closer, then another, gently gathers my hands in his. “My Veronica is skittish, and a LOT younger than you, emotionally. When I don’t contain my moves, it intimates her. I treat her with kid gloves because that’s what she needs, to feel safe and turned on; it’s her fantasy, not mine.” He presses my knuckles to his lips. “If you want hearts- and-flowers sex too, I’m fine with that. I’ll make it note-perfect, handle you like spun glass. The tenderness and love will be honest, but the part where I’m noble will be acting, Veronica. I’m not nice, or particularly good. And you and I, at this point in our relationship, are past lies.”

“You’re right,” I say. “We ARE past lies. And I’ve always had a closet mean streak, too, despite my aptitude for faking. But Logan, I WANTED to be nice. I tried REALLY hard to be the daughter my dad expected, once upon a time.”

“Veronica, you SHINE with goodness,” he says. “You’re just not an ingénue. But if you need it, tonight, we’ll play fairy-tale princess make-believe. And I’ll give you all KINDS of happy endings.”

He wiggles his eyebrows, to emphasize, and I laugh. “If I ever say I don’t love you, Logan?” I tell him. “Remind me about the lying thing, again.”

I lean up to kiss him, on tiptoe, and he pulls me close, his mouth hot and ardent. I fall back against the door, and he follows, notching himself against me, sliding me up the wood. True to his word, he’s exquisitely gentle, cherishing with lips and hands.

“We should go inside,” I say softly, when we break apart.

He kisses my temple. “Right, I forgot. You’re the nice girl. She’s the one who likes to scandalize the neighbors.”

“You know what we ought to do?” I ask, smiling as I nip his jaw. “Once we get into that big, empty house, all by ourselves?”

“Hmmm?” He nudges his nose behind my ear, as if he finds me especially fragrant, there. “Hold hands on the couch, watch a PG-rated movie?”
“I said act SWEET, not Duncanesque. So, no. First you should carry me to my room.” I spread my palm across his heart. “And set me on the bed, and do all the things you promised, until I swoon. Then we’ll segue into something really, REALLY raunchy, while all the stuffed animals watch. Because I believe in the spirit of compromise.”

He laughs, and this time his kiss is less gentle. “You are seriously the BEST girlfriend,” he says. “Let me help you find your keys.”

He picks me up with dramatic flair, once I get the door open; carries me through the house like Rhett Butler, climbing the steps to Tara. Tosses me on the bed, so I bounce, and theatrically locks the door. He spends an hour stripping me, stroking every inch of skin, until I’m limp and exquisitely sensitive, swollen with lust. He spouts compliments, and ridiculous flowery phrases, the entire time; we stop for two time-outs, because we can’t quit laughing.

Then he pulls me onto my knees and fucks me hard from behind, whispering an escalating string of inventive obscenities, pinching my clit with each stroke. It takes us approximately two minutes to fall apart. After which he cackles, demands I admit his fantasy was better, and drifts off, smirking. In repose, he looks wholly content.

XXXXX

I prop my cheek on my palm and watch him sleep, even though I’m tired. I’m hoping, if I focus, this moment won’t slip away.

Time dilates, as I stare, count the freckles on his face; it stretches and warps around me in the still dark night. The world seems wild, silent outside our circle of light…my brass bed and crimson comforter an oasis, inviting as wine. The slipstream waits to eat me, but I am focused, safe. I spread my hand over Logan’s heart, which, reassuring, thumps.

I smell smoke.

The scent creeps in, across the floorboards; it feels like imagination at first, a half-sleeping fantasy of campfires, in the deepest part of the forest. But it intensifies, and there’s noise, a groaning crackling. Ruddy light flickers through the space beneath the door.

Loki, sprawled across our feet along the foot of the bed, lifts his head and barks.

I shake Logan’s shoulder, and he comes awake quickly, squinting as his eyes adjust. “Problem?” he asks, voice raspy with sleep.

“Fire,” I whisper. “We need to go.”

He gets up; pads across the room in that boneless, silent way he has, which marks him as a predator despite his misdirections. He flattens a palm above the door and says, “Hot. We need to go out the window. Do you have a leash for the dog back here?”

“It’s kept in a mudroom cubby,” I say, tugging on my jeans. I dig my bra and shirt out from under the comforter. “I’ll improvise something from belts, you get the window open. Don’t let yourself be seen until you’ve scoped the area; this is probably arson, and the perp may still be around.”

He sidles up to the widow, twitches the curtain away. I dive into the big closet; locate a black studded belt and a gold one with hearts, buckle them together. Loop one end around Loki’s collar, while he shifts from paw to paw and whines.

“This side of the house is clear,” Logan says. He approaches, fully dressed; hands me my bag and
shoes, bends to lace his own. “Unless the guy’s a sniper, there’s no place for him to hide. I’ll go first, so I can help you two down, then we stay low through the garden gate. We can take cover behind the tool shed to get a view of the street, before we make for my car. You approve?”

I nod as I toe my boots on. He lifts the dog, puts him in my arms, kisses me on the nose. Slides the window open and eases through. I hand Loki out, struggling under his writhing, whining weight, then climb over the sill. Logan catches me around the waist and lifts me down. No one shoots at us, so that’s one crisis averted.

We duck and run across the manicured yard, past a round infinity pool with a view of the city. There’s smoke, and heat, a flickering orange glow tingeing the sky, but the flames aren’t visible from the side with the bedrooms. Which means the arsonist either isn’t familiar with the floor plan, or is trying to scare, rather than injure.

Logan reaches the fence, but when I try to unlatch the gate he blocks me, shaking his head. He drags me to the cabana wall, behind a tree, and curves around me, holding the dog’s muzzle shut. He whispers, “Somebody’s by the shed already. Look.”

Sure enough, our hiding place is taken; there’s movement in the shadows, a slight body dressed in black. I can make out a hand, pressed to the corrugated metal, the curve of a head as he peers around the corner.

“He’s trapped,” Logan murmurs, breath of sound. “By a dog-walker on the street, with his cell phone out. Guy’s probably reporting the fire.”

“Should we go back?” I ask. “Climb the fence behind the pool, circle around?”

He shakes his head. “I’m going to take him down. Give me your taser, and hold the dog.”

“Logan, there’s a FIRE happening!” I hiss. “This is no time for fisticuffs!”

“The guy burned your fucking house, Veronica!” he snaps. “I’ll immobilize him, tie him up with the belts, and we can leave him for the cops. It won’t take long, he’s not that big.”

He holds out his hand, and I slap the taser into it. “Be careful,” I say.

He smirks, kisses my forehead, and eases silently through the gate.

It’s over fast; Logan seizes the advantage with a low tackle, and punches once, which seems to stun. The guy’s still struggling, as I approach, but he’s not much bigger than me, and is easily restrained. Logan hands the taser back, grimacing, rips the guy’s ski mask off, and his head jerks slightly, startled.

The arsonist is Arturo, and he hasn’t had his Badass Gang Leader growth spurt, yet. He looks about twelve.

“What the hell?” Logan demands. “Weevil’s gang is so decimated they’re bringing in freshmen? Has your VOICE even changed, yet?”

“His name’s Arturo,” I say, moving to stand beside them. “He’s probably here to prove he’s worthy of membership.”

“Someone has to fix things!” Arturo says, yanking hard against Logan’s grip, accomplishing nothing. “The Fitzpatricks are taking a blowtorch to anybody who doesn’t sell enough, and that’s ALL of us. Weevil tried to stop them, but he couldn’t do shit. I’m the only guy LEFT willing to act
like a man!"

“How does burning down Veronica’s house help?” Logan asks. Arturo says nothing, and he adds, “Broken nose on the count of three, if you don’t answer.”

“I got paid a LOT to set this fire, and leave a clue behind,” he says, eyes on Logan’s fist. “Silver keychain, four-leaf clover, Liam Fitzpatrick’s name carved into it. Everyone knows Liam hates Veronica Mars, since she tried to get him arrested. Her dad thinks Liam tried to kill her, he goes straight to jail.”

“And framing Liam is worth a trip to juvie, for you?” I ask, examining his face for signs of lying. “Because that’s where you’re headed.”

“I’m supposed to testify that Liam was with me, if I get caught. That’s the deal. The money means my mom and sister pay rent, even if I do time. And there’s PCH’ers waiting to take care of Liam, and protect me, once we’re inside.”

Logan considers him, inscrutable. “If I let you go,” he says, “do you have an alibi?”

Arturo’s eyes narrow, calculating. “Man, I have the BEST alibi. I’m locked in a church right now. And if you let me go, I owe you one.”

“You owe VERONICA one,” Logan corrects. “If I pretend you weren’t here, nobody on your team tries to hurt her, ever again.”

The kid nods, and Logan climbs off. Arturo scrambles to his feet, and disappears, fleetly, into the dark.

“That’s the guy who leads the PCH’ers, when Weevil goes to jail next year,” I say, watching him run. “Setting him free was either really smart, or really stupid.”

“Two birds, one stone,” Logan opines, leading me towards the street by the hand. “It’s gravy that our arsonist has a future with clout. If Fitzpatrick gets convicted, and whacked in prison, he’s one less person trying to kill you. And I won’t cry in my beer over railroading a murderer.” He surveys the still-open door of the XTerra, sardonic, and hoists Loki inside. “Also? The fact that Weevil goes to jail before the year’s out makes me all warm and fuzzy inside.”

Sirens cut over his next words, and two cop cars and a fire truck squeal around the corner. The driver who emerges first is Sacks; he sighs relief when he spots us, comes jogging over.

“You two all right?” he shouts, above the noise of deploying firemen. “No injuries? Is anyone else inside?”

“We’re fine,” I call back, watching men unreel the hose. The neighbors on this side of the street wander onto their lawn, talk to one of the deputies. “It was just us and the dog. My mom and Jake are in China.”

“Any idea how this happened?” He turns to squint at the fire. The whole right wing is engulfed in flames; they’ll have to evacuate the neighborhood.

“We climbed out the window and ran,” Logan says, crossing his arms. “We didn’t stop to investigate.”

“How about you, Veronica?” Sacks asks, with a tilt of his head. “You have a theory on everything.”
“I think it’s arson,” I say. “But I’ve got no proof.”

Sacks frowns, scribbles on a pad. “You need medical assistance? There’s an ambulance coming.”

“I’d prefer sleep,” I tell him, wiping sweat from my temple. The fire's heat is intense. “Can we visit the station in the morning, give our statements then?”

He nods, tucking his notebook away. Logan gives a one-finger-to-the-brow mocking salute, and climbs into the car. I move to follow suit, but Sacks’ “Hey Veronica?” stops me.

“What’s up?” I ask, turning.

He smiles, first one side of his mouth, then the other, so his moustache does a caterpillar squirm across his lip. “Give your dad my best, next time you see him, OK? Tell him we hope he'll be back at work soon.”

“Will do,” I say, worried now, and open the passenger door. Sacks moves towards the deputies blocking off the street.

“Where to?” I ask Logan, buckling my seatbelt.

He looks at the ceiling, considering. “Our love nest? It’s the only place we’ll have privacy, and we’ve got clothes stashed there already.”

“Works for me,” I say, and he takes off, with one last head-shaking glance at the fire behind us.

“So what’s up with my dad?” I ask, going straight to my main fear, as he fiddles with the radio, settles on Snow Patrol. “Why is he not hard at work, while the campaign’s going on?”

Logan gives me a sympathetic look, takes my hand. “Your dad’s fine,” he says, “but he suffered a MILD second heart attack. The sheriff’s race is dirty, he’s running some tough investigations, and he’s pretty broken up about Bettina; Dick found out they were engaged, when he ended things, and now she’s planning to leave the country. I think stress just overwhelmed him. He won’t retire, because nobody wants Vinnie to be sheriff; but he needs to quit living for his job. He’s recovering quickly, though. Talking about taking up jogging.”

I nod, breathing out slowly. “OK, next question, what did Arturo mean? About Weevil trying, and failing, to fix things?”

Logan shrugs. “All I know is, Weevil had a confrontation with Thumper, and wound up getting shot. If he was trying to take his job back, he failed.”

“Wait, he’s not DEAD, is he? No, he can’t be, you were thrilled he might go to jail.”

“Nah, he’s not even hurt that badly. I mean, he’ll walk with a limp, but he’s mobile. He’s in school again; his strategic position is bad, though. Carmen took him back, after he got his name cleared, then re-dumped him, post-showdown. His former friends are shunning him. I never thought I’d say this, but I feel for the guy.”

“Shit,” I smack the dashboard with my palm. “I’ve got to help him! He threw in with us, we need to reciprocate.”

“I will NEVER understand your loyalty to that guy.” Logan spears me with a look, exasperated. “Sure, he’s influential in certain low-rent circles. But he had a chip on his shoulder when I met him at age 8, and these days, it’s more like a two-by-four.”
“Which I’m sure you’ve done nothing to encourage.” I settle back in my seat, cross my legs. “I don’t know much about this Weevil, or his relationship with your Veronica. But MY Weevil was loyal, when our agendas aligned. And he protected me from 09’er harassment, especially yours.”

“I’ll bet,” Logan says, sardonic. “Navarro REALLY likes to get between me and the girls I date.”

This statement makes my spidey sense tingle, but my phone starts ringing in the depths of my bag. I hold up a finger, while I extract it; it’s an unfamiliar number, from another country.

“Great,” I say, because this can only be my mother. “Hold that thought, while I talk Lianne down from her ledge.”

“Hey mom, what’s new?” I say into the phone, resigned. I rub my irritated eyes, which provokes a round of coughing. “Don’t worry, I’m fine. Nobody was hurt in the fire, but you may need to write off the house.”

“Sweetheart, I was TERRIFIED when I heard! Your stepfather and I were at a formal dinner in Singapore, and his assistant called him away…”

She froths and dithers, while I pay almost no attention. I’m gazing up at Logan as he drives. He’s got a black smear across his forehead, a cut along his clavicle; he’s keeping tabs on me with periodic peeks, which relax into smiles when our eyes meet.

“Mom, you don’t need to come home,” I say, catching the operative words. “I’m with Logan, and we’re headed to his mother’s getaway cottage. It’s in a high-security neighborhood, 100% peril-free.”

“Veronica, the Deputy told Jake this was ARSON!” her voice lowers on the last word, as if it’s obscene. “Someone tried to burn the house down with you IN IT!”

I sigh. “You KNOW we have the best sheriff’s department in California. And I’m weirdly certain they’ll catch the culprit. Besides, it’s not like Jake can’t dip into his billions, and replace everything next week.”

“That’s not the point, Veronica,” she says, as we approach the guard kiosk; I grit my teeth so I don’t say, ‘Then GET TO IT!’.

“Look, we gain nothing by speculating, during the investigation. Let’s just relax for a few days, let the arson squad do their job. In the meantime, I’m going to bed; I’ve been up all night, and I’m completely wiped. I love you, I’ll see you when your trip is over. Just… take a hot bath or something, and calm down.”

She starts babbling again and I hang up, because I can’t deal. Logan indicates that we’re parked with a sweep of his arm. “Home Sweet Home,” he says, and I slump forehead first into his chest.

We climb out of the car, arm in arm, holding each other up as we move towards the porch. Loki sticks close, still freaked by the fire, desperate for contact. I stroke his head as Logan inserts the key, whispering, “Everything will be all right.”

The door swings open, and Logan says from above me, “Still no answer?”

I look up, and it’s daylight; we’re passing into our sunny house from the Berkeley beach. I have my phone against my ear, he’s sea-bleached and tanned, and Mac’s voice invites me to leave a message, at the end of the line. I shake my head, and he rolls his eyes. Says, “Never go into business with someone who ducks your calls.”
A small form brushes past my hip, and I look down to see Bobby…Bryson…whatever the fuck his name is, rushing past, yelling, “TV! BARNEY! TV! BARNEY!”

“That TV doesn’t work yet,” Alicia calls, from behind me. When I turn towards her, the sky’s gone cool and cloudy, and the stretch of beach at her back is unfamiliar. She smiles at me, and adds, conversationally, “I’ll be SO glad when the Purple Dinosaur phase is over.”

To her left, Logan asks, “What’s wrong?”

I turn again, and it’s night. He’s standing in the living room of Original Howl’s, gripping my shoulders, face tight with concern. “You’re spinning in circles, acting like a drug victim,” he informs me. “What do you see?”

“All the realities are in this room, right now,” I say, and his fingers tighten as his eyes go wide. “Every single one of them, at once. This CANNOT be good.”

“All the who are what?” Darryl asks, to my right, and when I glance down, he’s watching me warily. “You’re not talking about Dr. Who, right? ’Cause I’m not allowed to watch that show anymore, on account of Weeping Angel nightmares.”

“Don’t blink,” I say, and Logan asks, “Why not?” The sunlight blinds me as I turn to him, take his hand. My head spins, a nausea-making swoop.

He squints, lean, muscle-y Ideal College Logan, then says, with horror, “Oh, fuck, it’s happening again! Veronica, stay with me!”

I grip his fingers tightly. Time pulls at me from behind, a giant vacuum; I’ll be ripped away, sucked backwards into chaos, the second I let go. My circle of vision shrinks, narrows, until it’s just his face, mouth moving fast. Then my hold slackens, and everything turns black.

I drift through the nothing, and it’s peaceful, serene. I sleep, at last, and don’t dream.
Now She Walks Through a Sunken Dream

Chapter Notes

Veronica wakes up. Trigger warning for drug use and non-specific discussion of large-scale violence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

THREAD TWENTY FIVE

I stir, in the sleek, soft darkness; there’s a palm against my forehead, checking for temperature. Mom, I think, because the hand is feminine, cool. I hear snatches of speech, nonsensical. “…334 Vista del Mar…young woman…son caught her arm…unresponsive…” It all seems so unimportant, though. So far away. I drowse back down, like a cat in a patch of sun. It’s been too long, since sleep brought rest.

THREAD TWENTY FIVE INVERTS

I roll, and his hand curves around my face. “Hey sugarpuss,” he says, thumb stroking my cheekbone. The light beyond my lids is painfully bright; he smells of smoke. “Please wake up.”

“Love you,” I murmur, my hand lifting, thumping back limply onto the bed. “So TIRED, though.”

He says something else, but I only hear his voice, a Charlie Brown murmur, low and sussurant. I bask in it, wrapping it around me like a favorite sweater. I drift on the dark, silent sea, towards emptiness. Towards peace.

THREAD TWENTY SIX

My lids flutter open, a million years later, and I gaze up through darkness at an unfamiliar ceiling fan.

It’s quiet in this big, strange bedroom, no trace of shifting, groaning life. Just the fan’s whir, a slight hitch in each rotation, and a whine behind the wall, water through pipes. I can make out the edges of two generic nightstands, past the white comforter that covers me; the grey bulk of a bureau, with a mirror atop. The door at the bed’s foot is open a crack, but the room beyond is dark as well.

I sit, reach back to gather my hair into its customary morning knot. But it’s too short to grasp; almost military-shorn, a pixie cut, with slightly longer bangs that sweep to the side. My belly is flat, my hands are bare, and I’m wearing a stiff Heineken t-shirt that smells like industrial soap.

I switch on the light to reveal a mostly-grey room, too bland to be a hotel—it looks like a furnished rental, up-market, but sterile and spare. The walls are blank spaces, packing boxes stacked, unopened, along them. The only thing on the nightstand is a half-empty glass of water.

I get up and go to the closet, and OK—it’s got two sets of clothes in it, mine and a guy’s. There’s a hamper in the corner; I pull out a man’s shirt, sniff, and yeah. Logan. My stomach relaxes.

I wander into the living room; it’s too big to be an apartment, so maybe a condo? There’s one bedroom, but the finish-out is luxurious, with grey leather furniture and a kitchen from a builder’s ad. I switch on the light, and two dog heads lift from opposite ends of the couch. Loki, and…Backup?
OK, what the fuck is going on?

There’s a note on the fridge, attached with a ‘Neptune Hills Pet Hospital’ magnet, Logan’s loopy yet strangely tidy scrawl taking up the whole page. “At Lane’s, come if you want, 5544 Starlight Trail’. Some big-ass house in the 09’er district, based on the address. I wonder where we live, in relation to it.

I go back to the bedroom, scope out my wardrobe. Select a pair of jeans and a satiny red blouse, a hooded grey sweater since I get cold at night. Motorcycle boots. Tiny gold earrings shaped like shells, I have to dig for a match through a hundred pairs. There are keys, and a studded, black-leather tote, on the hook by the door. I take them, head out into the breach.

It seems we’ve settled at Terra Vista; a high-end gated condo community near Kane Industries, where top-tier tech geeks live. I aim my keys at the lot, press the unlock button, and lights flash in a covered carport; my ride’s a black Porsche Carrera, sporting dealer plates and new car smell. It’s got a deluxe navigation system on the dash, so I enter the address, then use the backup camera to unpark. The coupe handles smooth as someone else’s dream, as I head uptown.

The party going on at ‘Lane’s’ is the kind I devoutly avoid; loud frat-favorite music and shrieking girls, dude both laughing and dry-heaving on the front lawn. I park the Porsche two blocks away for safekeeping and walk it, wondering if I’ll ever find Logan inside. There’s no phone in my bag, though, so a hands-on search is mandatory.

The crowd past the door is wall-to-wall, a gropey, scamming amoeba that stinks of strong perfume. It’s mostly Solo cups and bleached blonde, wasted people bouncing off each other like pinballs. I recognize one of Dick’s frat brothers, but no one else, which in itself is weird. Logan’s not the social butterfly he seems; despite his penchant for big-event-planning, he never ranges farther afield than friends of friends.

I find him slumped on the living-room couch, the center of a group he seems to be ignoring. He watches lazily as I approach, but doesn’t get up. His pupils are as big as dimes.

“Veronica Mars,” he says, voice a rasp that tells me bong hits happened. “In red satin. All dressed up with nowhere to go.”

“I wore it just for you,” I say, stopping by his feet. “You got a present for me in return?”

This fazes him: five or six expressions flit across his face, as his brain struggles to parse. He settles on cynical resignation, maybe tinged with pity. “No bodies left to sacrifice, Mrs. R,” he says with a sigh, his eyes drifting closed. “Everyone we cared about is dead.”

I stare at him—his focus has slipped—and contemplate kicking, yelling, throwing a drink in his face. But that won’t motivate Logan when he’s half past gone. He’s extra-stingy with data, if he feels uncooperative.

I prod his hip with my knee; when he opens his eyes, I hold out my hand. He takes it, the corner of his mouth curving in the smile that slays me. I pull him up and he comes bonelessly—coordinated, but unresisting. I lead him out, the throng parting to let us pass. He walks beside me down the street.

“I’m tripping balls,” he confides, lifting the hood of my sweater, draping it gently over my head. The breeze is cool, this near the water, bitter with traces of brine. “You’re trailing streamers behind you, like an angel.”

“Lovely,” I say, unlocking the car. “Keep in mind I’m the old-testament kind. Forbearance in the
face of jackassery is not my forte.”

“Mmm, do your worst.” He leers, half-hearted. “It’s hot when you come down on people like the wrath of God.” He looks down at his hands and pauses, arrested, like there’s something wrong; brings them gently together in a prayer position. “I thought, for a minute, I mixed too many drugs; and there you were, my reward, waiting at the end of the tunnel. To be honest, I’m not sure I would mind. But I can’t leave Veronica, when she needs me so much.”

“She needs you why? Is she pregnant?” I look down at my stomach. “I don’t FEEL pregnant, right now.”

He glances at me sideways, over the hood, wry grin that turns to sadness. “I had a vasectomy,” he says. “After. You seemed sure I’d knock someone up, this year, and neither of us could cope with that. And I can’t…I NEED sex, Veronica. SHE needs it. Sometimes it’s the only thing that helps at all. But the birth control…we keep forgetting.”

I nod, even though I’m starting to feel sick. “You’re grieving, right? You said people died.”

He opens the car door and leaves it that way, slumps into the passenger seat. “Also it’s summer,” he explains. “We said fuck it to school, we have more money than God, why NOT get wasted? What else is there to do?”

“Unpack?” I suggest. “Take the dogs you seem to have inherited to the park? You live in a bare apartment with your stuff in boxes, Logan, and you’re too messed up to contemplate a baby. How about we take a stab in the dark at what I want, here, and you tell me what the FUCK IS GOING ON?”

“The Nautilus sank,” he says simply, gazing up at the stars. “And if we hadn’t gotten into a knock-down, drag-out, and showed up after it left dock, we’d be dead, too.”

“Who was on board?” I demand, gorge rising. “Families? Friends?”

“Celeste lived,” he says, making a profoundly jaded face. “Ironic, since it was her boat. She refused to share space with Jake and Lianne. Darrell was at a sleepover with a friend. He’s with Alicia’s sister in Chicago now. Carrie Bishop was your friend, right? She had the stomach flu, and didn’t go.”

“You mean friends AND family,” I say slowly. “You really do mean EVERYONE.”

“It was a graduation party,” he says. “We saw the whole thing from the dock. We were waiting for a water taxi to show up and ferry us out; the boat caught fire, and listed sideways.” He sniffs away threatening tears. “The coast guard got there in time, but somebody had…opened fire on the passengers, before lighting it up. Blew a hole in the hull, to make sure it went down. They got Luke to a hospital, and he survived, although he’s pretty messed up. And the divers found Lilly, Susan and Bryson in the engine room, unharmed. They somehow escaped the gunfire, radioed for help. Leave it to Lils to singlehandedly save the day.”

“Who did it?” I demand, though I have my suspicions. “Did they catch the killer?”

He shakes his head, face still that dreamy, sad, vacant space that makes my heart clench. “Nobody knows,” he says. “But you have to fix this, Veronica. You have to get us on the boat. I’ll shoot the son of a bitch if I need to. I could pull a trigger. Because this…” he gestures around him. “Veronica can’t go on like this. Maybe I could, I’m used to life being shit. But she’s…slowly drifting away. She gets much more brittle, she’ll crack. A lot of days, she just lies in bed and stares at the wall.”
I stroke his hair back from his brow, and he closes his eyes. “I promise,” I say. “You and I will prevent this, somehow.”

“I love you,” he tells me. “Nothing has felt right, ever, since you went away.” He smiles. “At least we had our dance.”

“Veronica has to find the killer,” I say. “She needs a reason to keep going. And it’s your job to take care of her, while she hunts, so she doesn’t get herself hurt. If either one of you gives up, before you solve the mystery, I will fucking HAUNT you, Logan.”

He laughs. Traces the line of my brow with one finger. “I’d expect nothing less,” he says. “I’m gonna pass out, soon. Take me home?”

I settle him in the bedroom at the condo, with a big jug of water and the TV set to cartoons; then I unpack, because it feels like the best way to help. I load the dishwasher and scrub the bathroom. Arrange the knick knacks, hang Lynn’s art. Flatten the boxes, stack them by the door. After a while, Logan emerges and flops down on the couch. He watches silently, wedging his lanky self between the dogs.

I find a stuffed bear at the bottom of the last box. It’s wearing a trench coat that swings open, flasher-style, to reveal a t-shirt with a big red heart. “Come on,” I say, nudging him to make him focus. “Hold me while I fall asleep.”

He follows me into the bedroom and we cuddle up, wrapping ourselves in the comforter against the chill. The dogs pad through the open door and climb up too, sprawling along the bottom, one on either side. I spoon the bear, Logan spoons me, and I drift at last into uneasy sleep.

Chapter End Notes

So this cliffhanger marks the end of Part II (of 4). Part III will finish out Senior Year and the subsequent summer.

I'll be doing NaNoWriMo for November, and my goal is to get all of Part III written at that time. The wait for the next chapter should not be more than 2 weeks. :-}
He's Got His Camera and Some Deep-Seated Obsessions

Chapter Notes

Hey folks, sorry for the delay, I've been doing Na No Wri Mo to complete the third quarter of this story. I just hit 50k words at the end of last week, so I'm posting a chapter to celebrate. :-) I've got all the way up through Ch 31 written, and I'm trying to finish 35 by the end of the month. So the next ten or so should post fairly rapidly. This one's nice and long, hope you enjoy!

THREAD TWENTY SIX INVERTS

I’m sleeping, warm and comfortable; my face is pressed, secure, to Logan’s solid shoulder, while a mild breeze ruffles my hair. Voices surround me, rising and falling in rhythm, clinking, stomping crowd sounds that swirl harmlessly by. I feel profoundly rested in his arms. I hang suspended, in the calm, luxurious space between sleeping and waking, and listen while he speaks.

“…had a fifties beach movie marathon,” he’s saying, words vibrating through his chest. “I ordered Hawaiian food from that place on Escondido. The pineapple-chicken kabobs were surprisingly tolerable; she ate five. I might take her to Hanalei Bay, on our next vacation.”

“Veronica’s come to school exhausted every day, since you two holed up in your seaside cottage.” This is Jackie’s voice, light and tinkling. She sounds like a wineglass struck by a spoon; musical, prone to shattering. “Maybe you should save your…movie marathons for the weekend?”

“You overestimate my ability to say no to her,” Logan murmurs. He tucks in a loose corner of the jacket that covers me.

“Don’t let it get you down, cuddle bear,” I tell him, the words powder-soft. My lips slide against his shirt as I stretch. “NO ONE’S allowed to say no to me.”

I sit, open my eyes, and I’m in the Neptune High food court, sprawled across the bench at the center table. Jackie’s next to Wallace, whose total focus is his food; the sun is shining brightly over a world I just saw ruined. There’s no trace of that reality here… just the ordinary Neptune gold-plated rot. It’s another high school lunch, along the fault line between rich and poor.

I gaze at Wallace, grimly demolishing a mountain of fried rice; vow to keep him, no matter what, from winding up dead. I didn’t fix seventy zillion missteps in the slipstream, just so some maniac with an AK could turn my world back upside down.

But before I change the fabric of reality? I need to eat. My stomach is snarling like it wants to digest itself, and something at this table smells AMAZING.

Logan laughs; I guess I’m drooling. He presents me with a box of Chinese, flipping it under his palm as if performing magic. I smile, as I gaze down at the carton. “Pirate Points,” I say. “I’m SO GLAD I have PIRATE POINTS, here.”

“You’ve got more Pirate Points than ANYONE,” Jackie says, sarcastic. “You could start a black
market, if you cared about money.”

“That would be irresponsible,” Logan chides, with suspect primness. He hands me a napkin, and unwraps a spork, which he presents to me across his wrist, like he’s a five-star waiter. “As student council president, Veronica has an IMAGE to maintain.”

I glance up at him, appalled, and he laughs with his eyes. “Welcome back,” he murmurs in my ear. “Sorry you had to find out the hard way that you’re disgustingly respectable.”

“You couldn’t be more All-American if you were wrapped in the flag,” Jackie agrees, adding edge; she glances at Wallace, to see if this comment passes muster. He doesn’t look up from his plate, though—probably his coach is making him jog again. That always kicks his calorie consumption into the stratosphere.

Logan clutches my thigh, drawing breath to counter-attack, and I write NO on his wrist with one finger. “That’s me,” I agree, breezy. “Barbie WISHES she had my Dream House. And SPEAKING OF All-Americans…how’s it going with your dad, Jackie? Is your beach-front senior year living up to the fantasy?”

“I’m still not used to pastels, OP, and SUNSHINE,” she says, tossing down the fork she’s used to toy with her salad. She lounges back with studied glamour. “Wallace has been a good friend,” (here she nudges him, and he musters a faint smile, directed at a carton of fried bananas), “introducing me around, showing me the ropes. But it feels WEIRD that it’s November, and I’m not in a coat, wearing a hat with flaps to keep my ears from freezing.

“As for my dad, he’s…busy. Life of a celebrity, I guess? I thought we’d get to know each other, during my visit, but he’s never around. And when he DOES come home, he drink beers and watches Sports Center, and isn’t in the mood to bond. I’m enjoying his car collection, and his home spa; but the lack of father-daughter interaction is a drag.”

Logan draws a question mark on my leg, and I tilt up to his ear to whisper. “He’s a high-stakes gambler. Millions of dollars in debt, casino owner has him by the balls. No point in telling her, there’s nothing she can do.”

He draws an exclamation point on my leg, and murmurs back, “Another loser spawns in the Neptune gene pool. No wonder she makes up imaginary famous friends.”

A frown appears between Jackie’s brows; she must think we’re talking smack. She handles it, though, with typical panache. “You know, it never ceases to amaze me that you two WALLOW in PDA. Separately, you’re all sharp edges, but together? Mildly sickening.”

“Well, you’re perfectly capable of being sickening, too!” I say, in my Amber the cheerleader voice. “Feel free to tackle Wallace on the table, just like Lisa’s doing to Caz, if you’re eager to show us up!”

Jackie smiles, the arch, faintly pitying smirk that enraged me, the first time I went ten rounds with her. “I prefer to keep my sweet nothings private. No offense: I’m just not a kiss-and-tell girl.”

“Are we officially living together?” I ask Logan, donning the jacket spread over me, to cut the biting wind.

“Hmmm, debatable.” He goes to work rolling one sleeve. “You still haven’t fessed up to your parents, but everyone here knows. It’s not like you’re underage, though. Lianne can’t drag you back to the nest, unless you actually choose to go.”
“The cat’s out of the bag with us, then,” I say, rolling up my other sleeve. I pull his arm around my waist, and get to work on lunch. “We’ve clearly done the deed. Might as well enjoy our fall from grace.”

I glance at Wallace, expecting SOME comment, probably of the brain-bleach variety; and it finally registers that he’s ignoring us, while not eating DESSERT. “I’m surprised at you, Papa Bear,” I say, concerned. “Making OTHERS field jokes about our icky public cuddling?”

Wallace shrugs, morose, and Jackie interjects. “I think Wallace took a vow of silence. I asked him how many points he scored in this weekend’s game, and he just shook his head.”


“Don’t tell me,” I say. “You’re TV’s next brooding heartthrob?”

“I found out today my dad really wasn’t my dad,” Wallace says, crumpling his napkin and tossing it aside. “And my mom kept it secret. Excuse me if I’m not up to banter.”

Logan whistles, Jackie puts a protective hand on his forearm; I think fuck, I forgot that bombshell was coming.

“Hey, you’ve got the only good mother in town,” Logan says, shooting me a ‘You couldn’t warn me?’ look that makes me grit my teeth. Because come on, I’ve been a LITTLE BIT busy, lately. “She must have a REALLY good reason for withholding that. You need to let her explain.”

“NO reason is good enough,” Wallace counters, incensed. “She told me her ex was a complete loser. But this guy, my real dad? Turns out he’s NOT. He’s a COP, the kind with commendations. He wrote me LETTERS, man, because he wanted to have a relationship, and she sent them back, unopened. HUNDREDS of letters. There’s NO excuse for the lies she told; I have a RIGHT to know my father.”

“Dude,” Logan says. “She’s clearly trying to PROTECT you. I’d bet this cop’s not as great as he seems, because Alicia doesn’t do malice.”

“Look, I know you have a shitty family,” Wallace says, scathing. “And I know you idolize my mom, and her stupid casseroles, and her tendency to pretend she’s wise. But I can’t even LOOK at her right now. I’m thinking about going to Chicago with my dad for a while, until I cool down. Get to know the guy she HID from me. Make my OWN choices, for a change.”

Logan starts to speak, and Wallace holds up a pre-emptive hand. “Uh-uh,” he says. “Back off. You’re doing YOUR thing, shacked up with Veronica; you haven’t spoken to Lynn since September. If you can’t be on my side, like a best friend should, I don’t have the energy to deal.”

He shoves his lunch aside, making the last stray grains of rice bounce; gets up, and stalks off. The rest of us sit, stunned, watching his retreat.

“Nice going,” Jackie says finally, breaking the shocked silence. She favors Logan with a venomous glare. “You’re supposed to be this consummate manipulator, but that was HAM handed! Wallace is the ONLY person who’s been consistently kind to me, in this school full of rumor-starters and snobs. And you tough-love him into another state, because you can’t handle the truth? Ugh, you two are POSTER children for privileged obliviousness. You run roughshod over EVERYONE, just to prove you CAN.”

She rises and stalks off, after Wallace, presumably. Logan tries to follow, but I put a hand on his chest to restrain him. “No,” I say. “Let him process. Jackie will talk him off the edge. You’re right,
Alicia DOES have a reason; the cop got in too deep while undercover, and scared her badly. But Wallace needs to let go of his mad, before he’ll accept that.”

“Yeah, but where will he be decompressing?” Logan’s biting tone hides vulnerability. “Chicago? Is he leaving for good?”

“He’ll be back by New Year’s,” I say. “He’ll come to his senses. I doubt he’s as pissed at you as he was at me, either, so maybe he’ll even write.”

“Fuck.” Logan’s fist twines in the edge of the jacket I’m wearing; I realize, with a spurt of amusement, that I’m his security blanket. “He’s the one person I actually TALK to, other than you, Veronica. I can’t handle losing him as a friend.”

“You won’t lose him,” I say, deliberately softening my voice. I remember how sad he was when Duncan defected, and Duncan treated him like shit. So this must feel WAY worse. “Call Wallace later, leave a NON-SARCASTIC message, and apologize. He might not reply right away, but he’s a good guy. He’ll forgive.”

He nods; I kneel up to kiss his forehead, which makes him smile. He presses his cheek to the top of my head, enfolds me in his arms, and we sit that way for a while, until his breathing slows.

The mid-lunch bell rings, and Logan groans, head falling back. He gazes morosely at the grey November sky. “I REALLY don’t want to go to FBLA right now,” he says. “Can we ditch, park somewhere, and have LOTS of sex? And then cuddle?”

I take a deep breath. “Is Beaver in FBLA?”

“If I say yeah, we have to go, right?”

“Afraid so,” I say. “Raincheck? Since we’re past the scared-of-pregnancy phase of this relationship? Which, by the way, SUCKED, so I’m REALLY glad it’s over.”

“Veronica and I made a deal,” he confides, climbing off the bench. He extends a hand to help me up. “Double birth control, more non-coital, and nobody gets to be shy about asking for what they need. I’m guessing you know what she asks for most. And I must say, she’s a LOT more relaxed lately, as a result.”

“Imagine that,” I say, suppressing a laugh. “Vinnie’s nickname for you could not BE more apt.”

I kiss him, lingering, tasting his smile. He curls a hand around my ass, right there in the schoolyard, where everyone can see. And maybe it’s not fairy-tale princess romantic, the way I said I wanted; but it’s MY fantasy, the best version of Logan, staking his boyfriendly claim. I grin against his lips.

“You’re NOT helping with the having-to-stay-at-school part,” he murmurs, voice gone husky.

“Sorry,” I tell him, faux-repentant. I tuck my arm through his and turn him, walking towards the school. “Mysteries to solve, murderers to catch. Your libido can bide its time.”

“Ah, but I have a secret weapon, now,” he says, smirking down. “You LIVE with me. No matter how efficient and busy you get, you’ve got to sleep SOMETIME.”

“Yeah, in the school courtyard, apparently.” I squeeze his waist as he veers me through the door, down the locker-lined hallway. “But I’m glad at least ONE aspect of our lives is working out well.”

XXXXX
I inhale Chinese while Mr. Pope drones on, pleased I’m still near the top of the stock market race. Logan slumps in his seat, morose about Wallace. He’s carving ‘This Club is a Waste of Time’ into his desk, in ballpoint.

Beaver sits two chairs down, hands serenely folded; he seems unaware I’m clocking his every move. It’s been two months, at a guess, since he ran down Lucky…and God knows what he’s done, in the interim. He’s not wearing a cast, though, and he’s not in jail; so I’m sure he hasn’t been twiddling his thumbs.

I tear out a notebook page with determined jerks, fold it small. Keeping eyes on Beaver, I scribble, “Have any more Little Leaguers died, since Lucky?”. When Mr. Pope turns his back, I hand it to Logan.

He chews on his pen cap, writes rapidly. Tosses the note in my lap. “Very covert, super spy,” it says. “No. Plus I’ve had to investigate…creatively, because I promised V I’d stop. He’s spying on three guys who fit the profile. And he’s careful about covering his tracks.”

“Why was V so upset, when she caught you?” I write. “What does she know?”

He cocks his head, considering. “Some. She’s sure he drugged the drinks; thinks he’ll target me and Wallace, because we stopped him. She insists we all stay clear, until he screws up and gets arrested. But she sees the murder stuff as me, being vindictive. Trying to pin suicides on B, as payback.”

I sit back and consider. Senior Year Me would have investigated the hell out of a known evil-doer; all while over-protecting Logan, and taunting Beaver, in hopes he’d crack. I’d buy Other Veronica’s student-class-president, law-abiding schtick. But nobody who carries lockpicks, and hacks Weevil’s bank account, and investigates Liam Fitzpatrick, is innocent. I debate sharing with Logan the suspicion that he’s being played. But the last thing I need is the two of them, fighting again.

Mr. Pope is rhapsodizing about his sailboat, making Dick snicker off to Beaver’s left. Logan is slouched way down in his chair, the heel of one shoe balanced on the toe of the other, and he only has eyes for me. He’s watching me fulminate, with a slight smile, anticipatory; ready to execute, unhesitating, my every crazy plan. He’s got brains and badassery, a fervent desire to protect…and I was an idiot, last time, for not taking advantage. I won’t make the same mistake twice.

“Let’s follow him after school.” I write back, eventually. Logan rolls his eyes.

“Fine,” he prints, emphatically, with a raised brow for emphasis. “BUT I get a sit-down dinner, someplace Italian. And THEN we head home, and make up for lost time.”

“Fair enough,” I scribble. “V’s not the only one who needs to relax.”

He bursts out laughing when he reads this; crumples the note in his fist, so we won’t get caught. He winks at me, and my smile in response is smug.

Mr. Pope catches the look, but only says, “Miss Mars’ performance is no laughing matter.” He clicks the slide-projector remote, displaying my line, near the top. “She’s running a competitive second to the younger Mr. Casablancas, who seems to have inherited his father’s… business acumen.”

Dick snorts, and Logan shares a smirk with him. Beaver seems annoyed, and turns to focus that feeling on me.

“Too bad, Veronica,” he says, with a faux-regretful snap of his fingers. “You’ll have to work harder, if you want to get a step ahead.”
I glare at him, and he sneers, a faint, contemptuous curve of his upper lip. He knows I’m on to him, and he’s DARING me to continue; Like he’s Moriarty, I’m Holmes, and he’s confident he’s SMARTER. Son of a BITCH!

“NEVER underestimate the tenacity of a Mars,” I say, with my brightest, falsest smile. “We’re like pit bulls with toys, when it comes to competition. We don’t stop until the opposition’s in SHREDS.”

He arches his brows, my smile veers towards a snarl, and Mr. Pope says, “Looks like the prize will be HOTLY contested! Perhaps the rest of the class should step up, and change the game?”

Logan touches my knee; I glance over, and he just barely shakes his head. His fingers trail up my leg, to the fist clenched on my thigh. He takes my hand, kisses the back. I face forward, listen to the last of Mr. Pope’s lecture. And grind my teeth until my jaw aches.

Logan waits outside my last class, history book tucked under one arm. He’s slouched against the wall, ankles crossed, twirling a quarter absently across his knuckles. When he sees me he flips it into the air, catches and pockets it, and draws me into one-armed embrace.

“So what’s next?” he asks, steering me towards the exit. “Shenanigans? Skulduggery?”

“I want to pin Beaver to Styrofoam like a CAPTURED BEETLE, and watch him SQUIRM,” I say, glad I can finally vent. “And make sure he serves FIVE LIFE SENTENCES in SOLITARY CONFINEMENT. That fucker DARED me IN CLASS to catch him! He TAUNTED me!”

“Well, now he’s done it,” Logan says, comfortably. “If you weren’t already motivated by innocent people dying, there’s no way you’d let someone DARE you and win.”

“Damn straight,” I say, as he salutes Dick, swerves us past a gaggle of guffawing jocks. “We’re on that guy like FLYPAPER, until he incriminates himself or cracks. And then I’ll DESTROY him, while I LAUGH!”

Logan beeps open the XTerra, gestures me inside. I give him a look. “You’re kidding, right? We can’t tail criminals effectively in this Day-Glo nightmare!”

“This is what we drove to school,” he says, with a shrug. “It’s not like your James Dean convertible is any less splashy.”

“Fuck,” I say. “If these are our options, we’ll have to bug his car. OK let’s try to follow, but hang back as far as possible. And we SERIOUSLY need to invest in low-key transportation. Range Rovers are nice, and you can drive them on sand.”

Logan points, and I spot Beaver in the distance, buckling into his black Volvo sedan. He cruises sedately away, obeying all traffic rules; my teeth-clenching headache returns.

“I’ve been following him off and on for months,” Logan says, veering around Caitlyn Ford and her crony Mia, whose Vespas block the exit. “He hasn’t caught me yet. Besides, it’s Friday, after school. So his first stop will be the car wash on Loma Vista. He’ll sit there for an hour, while his station wagon’s detailed, reading Agatha Christie; then he’ll head over to his dad’s house. Try to horn in on Dick’s party plans. He does most of his spying on weekdays, and takes weekends off, like the trust fund baby he’ll eventually be.”

I raise my brows, impressed with this summary. “Nice work, Marlowe! Every time I show up here, you’ve gotten more hardboiled.”
“Will you weep for my attitude on cold winter evenings?” he asks, smirking.

I pat his face. “Sweet cheeks, I already do.”

Sure enough, we circle around a shoe warehouse, park behind a tree, and there’s Beaver; sprawled in a chair at a luxury car wash, reading a slender book. Or rather, pretending to read. He’s keeping an eagle eye on his sedan, while the Neptune underclass scrubs.

Logan produces a pack of Gummi worms, quirks a brow at me as he tears it open. I take half, which makes his other eyebrow rise.

“OK, let’s recap, so you don’t get bored,” I say, chewing. “Beaver’s victims, thus far, include: Peter Ferraire, ten-story fall; Michael Showalter, prescription drug OD; and Lucky Dohanic, non-fatal hit-and-run. Did Beaver break his leg when he hit Lucky, I wonder? Or when he plowed into a parked car, to disguise the fender damage? Because driving around town with a fractured tibia, just to provide a cover story, takes some serious chutzpah.”

Logan shrugs, to show he doesn’t know, and I frown. “OK, whatever, that’s irrelevant. What does matter is, despite the cast, which took him out of commission for six weeks? He still managed to spy on three prospective victims.”

“All of them former Sharks,” Logan confirms. “He used someone else’s login to research them in computer lab, guy named Marcos Oliveras… ALSO a former Shark. I sat across the aisle and watched him do it, he was very matter-of-fact. I can’t BELIEVE I used to feel sorry for the dude.”

“What happened to Lucky?” I ask. “Was he badly hurt?”

Logan see-saws one hand. “Cracked ribs, cuts and bruises. It was a glancing hit on a residential street; Lucky rolled into the ditch, and the driver sped away. Seems to me it was a crime of passion, because the opportunity arose… not something meticulously planned. Lucky was ranting a lot about the cursed-Sharks angle. My guess is, the attention he drew pissed Beaver off.”

“And how’s our victim faring, in the aftermath?”

“Hmmmm, interesting question. ‘Increasingly unhinged’ is the way I would put it. He’s currently unemployed, because Neptune High doesn’t re-hire convicted felons. He’s gotten even more into that weird church Meg went to, raving about choosing sides for the Apocalypse. Honestly, the guy’s always been nuts, especially since Iraq, but lately he’s also become violent. He’s not buying Beaver’s disingenuousness about the hit-and-run, either, and he’s furious the cops won’t arrest.”

Logan leans back into the corner, props a foot on the seat; sucks a Gummi worm between his lips, Lady-and-the-Tramp-style. “Also, I figured out Beaver’s schedule by tailing Lucky,” he adds, around the mouthful. “If we follow the guy long enough, Lucky’s sure to make an appearance.”

A passing red truck screeches to a halt in the road, as he speaks, and doubles around. It pulls into the lot, and Logan game-show-host gestures as his point is proved. He sits up straight to observe their showdown, tossing the packet backwards.

Lucky leaps from his truck, yanks Beaver up by the shirt, and yells in his face, spittle flying. He does indeed look unhinged; he’s barefoot and shirtless, dressed in ratty sweatpants, and a catcher’s mask covers his head. I roll down the window, trying to hear, but they’re too far away to make out words.

Beaver seems unfazed. He wraps his hand around both of Lucky’s, says something smug, and the attack abruptly deflates. Lucky grips the mask in both hands and wails, like the Rapture’s just left without him.
An employee comes running, separates them, and puts his hands on Lucky’s shoulders, talking slowly while Lucky sobs. Dohanic’s having some kind of breakdown, body contorted with grief; he slumps in Car Wash Man’s grip, as his fit abates. Eventually he nods, in defeat, and shambles back to his truck. He climbs in and drives away, weaving a little as he picks up speed. I shake my head, because THAT’S an accident waiting to happen.

Beaver straightens his shirt, sends a look of loathing after Lucky’s retreating form; picks his book up and dusts it on his jeans. The employee talks to him, too, clearly placating, and Beaver waves the guy away. His keys are brought, his car presented for inspection. He gets in and drives off, with an enragéd squeal of wheels.

“Mush,” I say, as Logan cranks the engine. “Don’t lose him.”

He nods, cutting a perfect u-turn, and my phone rings.

“Dad,” I answer, while Logan burns rubber to catch up.

“Darling daughter,” he replies. “Who is certainly not guilty, at this moment, of anything that might require bail.”

I mime throat-cutting at Logan, and he abandons pursuit. “I admit nothing,” I say, into the phone. “Also, how do you KNOW this stuff?”

“I have eyes everywhere,” Dad informs me. “However, much as I’d like to discuss responsible decision making, in relation to suspected criminals? I actually called for a reason. Can you swing by the apartment, before embarking on evening plans? I’ve got news that won’t wait.”

“Drive to Dad’s,” I mouth at Logan, and he hooks a right. “On our way,” I say. “Is this news bad?”

“Semi,” Dad says. “And your boyfriend can’t wait in the car. This concerns him as well.”

“Roger that,” I say, and hang up. “We’re busted,” I tell Logan. “Time to present ourselves for a stern reprimand, without passing go.”

“He specifically asked for me, didn’t he?” Logan wants to know. “I felt that chill up my spine.”

“Sorry boo-boo,” I say, tucking my phone back into my purse. “Today we BOTH have to take it like a man.”

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Dad’s still living in a mid-grade apartment complex called, oh so cleverly, Villas del Mar; same place we exited at a run, the night Trina took her nose dive. It’s your typical, mile-from-the-beach two-story, with a cleaner pool than the Sunset Cliffs, and white-collar childless renters.

When he opens to our knock, I’m glad of my poker face, because he looks FRAIL; like he’s the kind of sick that kills you, held at bay by sheer determination. My strength of character is down to Dad, but I HATE seeing his on display.

I glance at Logan, appalled, and he takes my hand, a silent show of support. “You rang?” he asks, with his most obnoxious smile. Typical Logan Echolls smarm-chivalry, drawing fire via jerkitude.

“I did,” Dad says, swinging the door wide. “Come on in.”

He shuffles into the living room, leaning heavily on a cane, and we follow; I grip Logan’s hand, tight
enough to bruise. “Sorry for the mess. I have a housekeeper twice a week, while I’m in rehab. But her son caught a cold today, so she stayed home.”

The clutter’s minimal, but I know how Dad gets about keeping the place ‘nice’. I watch him make his laborious way to the fridge, and my heart is BREAKING here.

Dad grabs our favorite sodas without asking, hands them over; gestures to the couch with a compact wave. We sit, and he lowers himself carefully into his armchair. He gives a wry smile, and says, maybe to my expression, “It’s not as bad as it looks. I’m following doctor’s orders, and improving every day.”

“You’d better be,” I say. Logan’s thumb strokes my knuckles, reassuring.

“I’ll be fine,” Dad reassures. “Not as soon as I’d like, but then again, the Mars clan isn’t known for its patience. Listen, kids, I have some bad news, and there’s no point stalling or sugar-coating. Someone saw my leave-of-absence as opportunity, and stole the Echolls pool house tapes from the evidence room.”

“What?” Logan flies to his feet, outraged. “How did this HAPPEN?”

“Investigate Leo D’Amato,” I put in, giving Logan a look I hope conveys NO LAMP BREAKING. “He has a handicapped sister who’s being bullied at school. He doesn’t have the money to send her someplace safe.”

Dad studies me, penetrating, and says, “I’ll tell Jerry Sacks. He’s serving as interim Sheriff, while I recuperate.”

“You gave me your word this would NEVER happen,” Logan interrupts, voice low and clipped, like he’s trying not to lose it. “I trusted you, Keith, and that’s NOT my forte.”

Dad holds up a hand. “Before you get too worked up, Logan, you should know; the stolen tapes are blank. They were somehow…improperly stored in the evidence room, next to a large speaker. We learned this detail from a media contact, who works for the outlet that purchased them. The buyer was incensed, needless to say.”

Logan stares at him for a moment. Takes a deep breath, sits back down. “Well, I’d be lying if I said I was sorry,” he tells Dad, curling a hand around my thigh. “But I’m sure this wasn’t your fault.”

Dad sighs, meeting Logan’s eyes directly. “Of course not. I have to agree, though; in a way, it’s a blessing. Trina’s confession was heart-wrenching. I’m glad her secrets, and those of others, are safe.”

“Is this the headline yet, on TMZ?” Logan asks. “Because it’s sensitive information to trust to civilians.”

Dad laughs. “I’m trusting you to house my DAUGHTER…temporarily, at least, despite STRONG reservations. Everything else is easy.” He folds his hands on his lap, studies them. Looks up, squarely meeting Logan’s gaze. “But yeah, this incident will hit the 24-hour news cycle in a major way. Police misconduct was alleged, but not proven, in the Manning case; and here’s a second instance, occurring on my watch. I’ve been elected thus far because the public perceives me as ethical. So this…is a blow.

“The tapes won’t be splashed across the media, which is good. But there WILL be an investigation into how they got erased. There may even be criminal proceedings. And regardless of the outcome, I’m almost certain to lose the popular vote. Vinnie looks like a shoo-in, running against me. Which would be bad, because, as we all know, his loyalties are…uncertain.
“So I’ve decided to step down, claiming health as an excuse, and Jerry will run in my place. He’s the most intelligent and principled of my deputies, and he’s well-liked. He might not be able to beat an operator like Vinnie in a dirty fight, and he’s not as seasoned as I’d prefer. But he’s the best choice available and willing, at this time.”

“There’s NO choice as good as you,” I say, fiercely, which wins a half-smile from Dad.

“Obviously I agree,” he says. “But I’m no help to anyone dead. I just wish…I could have made my exit under better circumstances. Or at least RESPECTABLE ones, with a competent successor lined up. As it is… I’m uneasy about what the future holds, for this town. I’m not convinced the good guys will retain the upper hand.”

“Everybody who fights bad men eventually loses,” Logan says; offhand, like this view is just fact. “We grow old and die, or we just get tired. What matters is how well we acquit ourselves, while someone’s swinging for our faces. As far as I’m concerned, you’re the guy who’s saved, or tried to save, pretty much everyone I love. I’m sorry, truly, that you have to suffer for my dad’s crimes. But thank you for knowing you would, and doing the right thing, anyhow.”

Dad shakes his head at Logan, both exasperated and charmed. Which is the standard reaction to his brooding emo philosophies. “I want you kids to understand something else,” Dad says. “Regardless of the outcome of this election? The cases you care about are dead in the water. Local law enforcement is…hesitant to go up against organized crime. And neither candidate CAN do much about Cassidy Casablancas, without a LOT more evidence. I know this rubs against the grain, especially for you, Veronica; but you may have to resign yourselves to justice not being served.”

“In other words, we’re on our own,” I say.

“No,” Dad corrects. “You have my love and support, and a number of very loyal friends. But you may NOT have a cop car at your beck and call anymore. So scale back the freelance detective work accordingly, and be proactively self-protective.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I say, widening my eyes to the maximum. I attempt a little lash-batting, which makes Dad sigh.

“Sure you don’t,” Dad says. “And Logan? Get a more inconspicuous vehicle, if you plan to keep following people.”

Logan fights back a smile. “What IS it with the Mars clan and my car? I LIKE yellow!”

“The popular paint colors are grey, white, green and gold,” Dad says. “Learn to like one of those.”

I hug my father; he smells of medicine and disinfectant, which brings tears to my eyes. “I hope you know how grateful to you I am. For EVERYTHING.”

“Cookies are a good way to show that,” Dad informs me. “In case you were wondering.”

“All the cookies you can eat,” I assure him. “Tomorrow morning, guaranteed.”

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Logan skips the restaurant and drives straight home. He’s silent the whole way, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, bouncing in his seat like a full-bladdered toddler. As soon as we park, he explodes from the car; and when I ask what’s wrong, words explode from HIM (accompanied by emphatic hand gestures, since he’s completely freaked).
“What, other than the fact that everybody who wants to kill us just got an engraved INVITATION? Well, the soon-to-be Sheriff’s in deep with the Fitzpatricks, and knows more about what we’re up to than I’d like. And any power players gunning for you can now use your dad’s alleged crime as leverage. But mostly? At this point, the only thing standing between you and Veronica, and those crazy sons of bitches with guns, is ME. I SERIOUSLY need to up my game!”

He paces furiously, gripping his hair with both hands, and I’m reminded of Lucky, wailing in the lot of the detail shop. I wonder what Beaver said; why it deflated him so totally.

“But at least my dad’s criminal perversions won’t be splashed all over the Internet, in high-res living color,” Logan says, spreading his arms wide as his angst fit spirals down. I take the keys from him, unlock the door, and he follows me disconsolately in. “So I guess that’s one win, on a field of losses. Jesus, I need a drink.”

He flops backwards on the couch, head falling slack over the edge; he stares pensively at the ceiling, and I take pity. “You know what?” I ask, heading to the bar cabinet by the living room entrance. I extract a bottle of Jack. “Let’s play a game. I’m not pregnant, the last few days have been EXCESSIVELY shitty, and I won’t turn into Lianne if I get my drink on one time.”

I collect two shot glasses and carry them over, plunk them top-up on the table. It seems Lilly’s fetish has spread to our residence; one reads ‘I Wish I Was In Tijuana’, and the other ‘Try Sex On the Beach—and Have a Drink, Too!’.

“You’re hot when you bustle around like a very small hurricane,” Logan notes, a reluctant half-grin quirking his lips. “Plotting mayhem, taking charge.”

“You bet I am,” I say. “Drink if your best friend once left you, to run off with his sketchy dad. And you didn’t want to be mad at him, but you WERE.”

I toss my shot back, and Logan follows suit, smacking his lips as the whiskey goes down. Sympathy rolls through me as he visibly relaxes; he carries so much tension, hidden, behind his languid, snarky mask.

“Drink if you found Veronica spinning in circles, while all the slipstreams attacked, scary as shit,” he says, keeping his eyes on his glass. “Resulting, in my case, in a week of insomnia, afraid she’d never return.”

We swallow our shots, and I lean sideways to kiss him. “I never get hurt, when that stuff happens,” I tell him, my lips brushing his. “I just go someplace else. It’s freaky, for sure, but there’s no need to worry.”

“I love you,” he says. “I’m going to worry, and you can’t stop me.”

“How about we channel this stress into a situation we can control, then?” I ask. “We may not be able to end our various cat-and-mouse-with-villains games, at a snap of the fingers. But we can prevent the latest awful reality from taking hold, with hopefully minimal effort.”

“Another one?” he asks fatalistically, eyeing the bottle like he’s not sure it’s sufficient. “Fine, lay it on me. It’s not like you’re spoiling a golden moment.”

I take his hand. “If ANYONE tries to throw a graduation party on Celeste Kane’s yacht? We need to discourage it, in the STRONGEST possible terms. And if we can’t put a stop to it, we need to make sure the minimum number of people attend, by fair means or foul. If we don’t, it’ll be bad, Logan. A lot of people we love will die.”
“Wonderful,” he says, and pours himself another drink. “I’m starting to see why you made a chart. This sounds like the kind of surprise Lilly would dream up, and spring on us the day of graduation. If I tell her not to, she’ll just call me an antisocial freak who pretends to be extroverted, and redouble her efforts.”

“Drink if you’re super glad Lilly’s not dead... but find her an adorably unstoppable loose cannon,” I say. We clink our glasses together, and toast her with a laugh.

“Lilly’s UP to something, by the way,” he says, speech slowing to a deliberate drawl as the liquor takes hold. “She’s sneaking around, acting evasive, and she’s got that high-octane-thrill-seeking twinkle in her eye. She doesn’t have a visible boyfriend, either, so it’s not about cheating. I haven’t got a handle on her secret, yet; but I’m pretty sure it’s bigger than a yacht party.”

“FABULOUS,” I say. “Is she still in trouble with the law?”

“No, that’s over, thank God, she’s free and clear. The Mannings lost custody of the kids.” He spins his glass between his fingertips, amber liquid catching the light. “Meg’s 18, so she’ll stay here and finish high school. The other two go to live with an aunt, I forget where. Nobody’s in jail, though. And Stewart seems to have gotten MORE religious in the aftermath, maybe because his Mayoral run imploded. He’s Neptune’s very own televangelist, these days. CONSTANTLY making speeches, which of course turn up on the news, because the media LOVES a train wreck.”

“What are the speeches about?” I ask.

“Cleaning up the city,” he says. “The same hypocritical bullshit, from a secret drug dealer; he’s like a closeted guy, getting his homophobe on. His church is MASSIVELY crazypants, but for some reason it’s growing. And that crowd APPROVES his disciplinary tactics, as the unspoken message goes. Dear old dad would have fit right in.”

“Drink if you wish Stewart Manning would get hit by a meteor, and vanish forever, like the dinosaurs,” I say.

He takes a sip. “Drink if you’re fucking sick of people in Neptune mistreating their kids, and getting AWAY with it. And you’re thinking somebody needs to stop it. Even if that somebody is you...me.”

I turn to focus on him, which is harder than it should be. “You sound like Lilly at prom,” I say. “Hey, you should team up with her on this venture, keep her out of trouble. I mean, if you can find the time, in between school, and investigating, and living with me, and death threats. You know, I never noticed this, last time through my life... but you are QUITE the efficient multitasker, Echolls.”

“Drink if you’ve found someone who believes in you,” he says. “And not as a dire warning slash self-fulfilling prophecy. Drink again, if you never thought you would.” He gestures at me with his glass, swallows, his eyes fixing warmly on mine. I feel both flustered and hot.

(You were there for me when nobody else was, Logan’s letter said. You broadened my mind in ways I never believed possible. You’re my girl if you want to be, and that’s forever.)

“Like I’d waste time on a guy who wasn’t amazing,” I scoff, lifting my pinky to take a careless sip. “I happen to have EXTREMELY high standards.”

“Drink if obsessive perfectionism is a TOTAL turn on,” he says, and I laugh and kiss him. Because how can I NOT?

His mouth is warm and whiskey-sweet; I sink into his solid, musk-scented embrace. I’m not a big believer in happily-ever-afters and forevers...Neptune ate my innocence, pretty young. But there’s
something about HIM that makes it seem weirdly possible. Who else could see me this clearly, and still want me so much?

“It occurs to me,” I say, when he releases my lips to nip languidly at my throat, “that sex would be an EXCELLENT way to work off your angst.”

“Mmmm, great minds think alike.” He scrapes his teeth along the saddle of my shoulder, sucks, and I shiver. His hand slides across my belly. “I believe I also promised you an introduction to my latest relaxation techniques.” He catches the tab of my zipper, draws it slowly down. Smirks at me as he dips a finger inside. “Never let it be said I don’t keep my word.”

I sigh, and dedicate myself happily to the lesson. He makes sure, before we finish, that I’m very relaxed, indeed.

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Hours later, Logan’s asleep on the couch, a chenille throw covering roughly half his nudity. I’m in the armchair adjacent, dressed in his t-shirt, sipping a cup of tea; I’ve logged into kittenfancy, and found an email, waiting.

“So I’m over my moment of superstitious weakness, and I’m sure one of three things has happened,” Other Veronica tells me, in her no-subject-line, bullet-pointed reply. “A) I’m possessed by a ghost from the future, who doesn’t know she’s dead, as per Carrie Bishop’s theory. In which case I’m about to go straight off the rails; jettison my scholastic efforts, become obsessed with adrenaline and sex, and risk my life on quixotic quests, because I’ve got a year to live.

“Alternatively, B) I may have gone insane, and developed split personalities of wildly varying natures. Which at least has the benefit of actually HAPPENING… rarely…in real life.

“Or C) and maybe you can see why I’m leaning towards this option: this is an elaborate prank, staged by someone I shouldn’t trust. I have a pretty good idea who that person might be, and by ‘that person’ I mean you. All I need is proof you’re the one dosing me, and I’ll be coming down harder on you than GRAVITY. So get ready. You won’t like the payback, I’ll make SURE it stings.”

I sigh. I find it somewhat hilarious that jaded unbeliever Logan Echolls accepted my insane story without a qualm; yet I MYSELF am having a total obstinate shit fit. It’s highly inconvenient, however. And annoying as HELL. Surely high school me is capable of ONE substantiated leap of faith?

“Look, I’m YOU,” I write back, clicking my nails on the keys perhaps harder than necessary. “A you who’s quit caring what the plastic people think, and focused on the stuff that matters. As I SAID. You seem determined to be a stubborn asshole, though, and I don’t have time for games. So how about I just prove it? I’ll tell you three things I KNOW I’ve never told a soul. Things that happened BEFORE our realities split apart.

“One, you’ve had a crush on Logan since 7th grade, when he eviscerated Enbom in class, for claiming you cheated on a Spanish test. Two, in eighth grade you bought a tub of Mammo Max, and rubbed it religiously on your boobs for a month. You stained every one of your bras, but all it won you was a rash. And three, when you were four, you stole a pair of lions, from the Noah’s Ark playset in your daycare. You couldn’t stand the thought of them alone at night, crying in the dark. You felt so guilty about it, though, that you hid them in a box in your closet, and never looked at them again. They stayed alone in the dark FOREVER.

“So there’s your proof. And I’m not kidding with this, Veronica, I swear to God. If you unleash
havoc on any one of your friends, let alone Logan, because of whatever paranoid fantasy you’re brewing? I will make you pay. They’re not the ones screwing with your life, you are (or rather I am). I didn’t ask to live high school over again, and believe me, I’d rather not…last time, I barely survived. But I don’t know how to go home. So for the time being, you and I are stuck coexisting; and you’re going to need to stop fighting me, if you want to stay alive.

“Now here’s what I need YOU to tell ME. Weevil said you knew the kidnapping, or something like it, was coming; because you were asking questions, after he warned you to stop. And Arturo said I tried to get Liam Fitzpatrick arrested, only I’m thinking that was you. So what dumb questions were you asking, Lucy Ricardo? And who did you piss off? You’ve got some splaining to do.”

I stare at the message for a moment, hit send. Then I gaze at my reflection in the sliding glass doors; wonder what I’ll do, if Other Veronica pulls the metaphorical trigger.

THREAD TWENTY SEVEN

I’m gazing at myself in the mirror, braiding my hair, and whoa. In Hearst Reality, in a one-piece swimsuit? I look like those mournful starving children from Red Cross ads. My belly is gently swollen, but the rest of me’s scary-thin, and my eyes are so dark-circled I seem Goth. There’s a pamphlet for a fancy gym on my dresser, folded open to display the class schedule. Water Aerobics is circled. I think damn it, BRIDGE TOO FAR, and angrily strip.

I rummage through the drawers for cutoffs, Logan’s threadbare White Stripes shirt; knot my hair atop my head. I head to the kitchen, procure BBQ chips and a Sunkist, a Tupperware of cubed melon for vitamins. The doctors keep saying Veronica needs calories and rest…and thanks to what I just saw, I’m forcing her to oblige. When I shut the fridge door, I notice a note from Dad.

“Veronica,” (it reads) “You’re not allowed to go to exercise class. You knocked Darryl over fainting, yesterday, and Alicia has to call the paramedics. Don’t even think about it. And bear in mind, if you DO think about it? I have disabled your car, hidden your wallet, and instructed your friends not to help.”

I laugh, murmur, “Great minds,” and settle into the living room for some trash TV. Probably I ought to be studying for finals, but fuck it. Other Veronica needs to do her own review, so the data’s stashed in the correct memory.

The doorbell rings halfway through the chip bag; I amble over, open it to Dick. He’s dressed in swim trunks, flip flops, and a muscle shirt that reads, “You Want It, I Got It”, so clearly he’s enjoying a relaxed morning too.

“Good,” he says, brushing past me to enter. “I caught you before your stupid-ass aerobics thing.”

“Yeah, I’m not going,” I say, flopping back onto the couch. “Because it’s stupid-ass. Have a seat, I’m watching Real Housewives of Orange County. You want chips? Beer?”

“Oh yeah, beer,” he says, with evident relief. “Maybe more than one.”

I fetch a bottle of Bud, with a quirked eyebrow. He uncaps and chugs it, in one long swallow. He belches, wipes his mouth with his forearm, shutting his eyes in bliss; I say, “Really flashing back to high school right now, Dick.”

“You know how sometimes guys do stuff, Ronnie?” he asks, instead of batting back a zinger. Sets the bottle carelessly on the counter, like there’s a maid coming. “Stuff girls think is gross, so we don’t tell you? But we still do it, in secret. And everyone pretends it’s not happening, so we can all
continue to date?"

“Um,” I say. “Are we talking peeing in the shower, here? Or perving on lesbians, like they might actually be interested? Or do you mean less obnoxious, more harmful stuff, such as cheating? Please only answer if it’s not gross things YOU’VE done. Because I’d prefer to never know.”

“OK, I promised Logan I’d look out for you while he was gone; but I didn’t think it would be this tough, or maybe I wouldn’t have. I should have known better, since it’s you. Guys watch porn, is my point, Ronnie. I was watching porn, and I found something that’ll piss you off. But you have to see.”

He reaches into the pocket of his swim trunks—Jesus, even guys’ SWIMSUIT have pockets, whereas womens’ JEANS have fakes—and extracts a DVD, in a plain white sleeve. “I’m gonna wait in the back yard,” he informs me, handing it over. “You need to experience this solo. And when you come find me, both hands in the air, and no taser, please. This is, like, a mercy mission.”

He strides off, and I gaze after him in bemusement. Power up the DVD player, pop in the disk. I settle back on the couch with my chip bag, wondering if Logan’s swimsuit model decided to monetize their ‘relationship’. Consider how best to torment her, for extra payback.

Then the video starts, and a cold wash of fear slides over me. Because it’s a Hearst dorm room, one I recognize as Wallace’s, and Piz and I are standing in it. Kissing.

The me on screen retreats, with a shy smile, and says, “Just so you know. I was with somebody for a long time, and I’m not quite ready to be with anybody else. Like, full intimacy. But we could maybe…fool around?”

Piz gets a giant goofy grin going, and nods eagerly, stammering, “No, I mean yes, of COURSE. I COMPLETELY understand. I would never pressure you, I mean, I’m not that kind of guy. Well, I AM the kind of guy that would want to fool around with you, but only if YOU wanted to. Because I’m a sensitive 21st century male, you know, and I don’t…”

“Piz,” not-me says. “You’re killing the moment.” She smirks at him, shoves him on the bed, and climbs atop. I press the back of my hand to my mouth, as my stomach heaves.

I watch the whole thing through waves of rage, his pathetic eagerness, her (my?) dainty but competent blow job. The date stamp at the bottom means this happened HOURS before I dumped Piz in the cafeteria. So she wasn’t lying about the baby being Logan’s; but she wasn’t up front, about her activities during the split. Of course, I assume Logan and Candace weren’t playing bingo, but still. If he’s the more forthcoming party in this relationship, when it comes to extra-curriculars, Hearst Veronica has a PROBLEM.

The thing that burns is participant B in this amateur porn fiasco. Because the camera is focused directly on his bed. It’s HIS fucking camera. It’s HIM making me (her) into an Internet star. It’s Aaron Echolls all over again, and the only thing I can think is, if Logan sees this, Piz will DIE. And while I wouldn’t MIND that per se, in my current mental state? I’m guessing the Navy WOULD.

So it’s on me to make Piz’s existence a living nightmare. And I’m perfectly suited to the task.

I extract the DVD, march to Veronica’s room, slap it onto the center of the desk; write on the cover, in ballpoint, “You are a DUMBASS with terrible taste.” Then I check my watch, gather my taser. Because it’s 4:00, time for Piz’s radio show. So I know exactly where to find him.

Dick’s in the backyard, on the swing, and he watches apprehensively as I march towards him. “I want you to know I turned it off, when clothes started disappearing. I sort of saw your boobs, but I
swear I didn’t look, much. But just to double-check… that thing wasn’t made on purpose, right?”

“Nope,” I say, and my voice sounds feral. “Total surprise. And not the ice-cream-birthday-cake kind.”

“Can we fix it?” he asks.

“We’ll probably never get it off the web,” I say. “Thanks to good old Jake and his streaming video. But I promise you, I’m gonna make the bastard who filmed it PAY.”

“WE’RE gonna make him pay,” Dick corrects, hopping off the swing, following towards the back door. “Pinky swear, Logan, remember?”

“You have to stand back and observe,” I tell him. “I may need you to spring for bail.”

“Ronnie, you’re pissed off and pregnant. Logan would kick my ass so hard if I stood back, it’s not even worth the effort. We get tapped, all you’ve got to do is call Wiedman. Whatever you’re planning, I’m sure Lilly’s done worse, and he always saves HER ass.”

We exit the house and I climb into my convertible, parked in the drive; Dick leaps the side, settles into the passenger seat. “I want to be Thelma,” he informs me, as I gun the engine. “And I want Brad Pitt to be played by Scarlett Johanssen.”

I roll my eyes, and head off towards Hearst at non-legal speed.

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I can see Piz in the booth when I smack the cafeteria door open; blathering on about nothing with a self-important grin, while the whole student populace ignores him. People glance up from their food as we pass, abandon conversations to stare. Maybe they’ve witnessed my worldwide porn debut,… maybe they’ve noticed I forgot to don shoes. Either way, they’ll DEFINITELY notice what I do next, because the front of the studio is glass. And I honestly COULD NOT CARE LESS.

I enter the booth and sneak up from behind, the way Logan taught me. Rip off Piz’s headphones while he yammers about Dante’s Inferno, and press the taser to his neck. “If you think THAT sounds bad,” I tell him, menacing, “wait ‘til you see what I’VE got in store for you.”

Dick sits in front of him on the control panel, cracking his knuckles, and Piz starts fear-panting; probably he’s never been threatened in his whole cushy life. “You’re gonna take the video down, Piz,” I tell him, voice low. “You will destroy every copy. You’ll tell everyone you SENT IT TO to destroy THEIR copies, and you are going to spend THE REST OF YOUR LIFE atoning. Or I will make SURE you’re humiliated ten times as much as I just was. And you had BETTER not doubt me.”

“What video?” he squeaks. “What are you TALKING about?”

“Wrong answer,” I say, and tase him. He slumps over, spasming on the floor, and I kick him while he’s down. “Piece of shit,” I growl. “Exploitive, mumbly, passive-aggressive, needy, idiotic WASTE OF FLESH! I can’t BELIEVE I let you touch me!”

“I can’t believe it either,” Dick says, watching Piz squirm and groan. “This dude loses fights with GIRLS. But he’s not gonna answer your questions if you keep electrocuting him, Rons.”

“It makes me FEEL BETTER,” I say, and kick Piz again. Dick nods, like this makes total sense.
Piz groans, tries to sit up, and Dick lifts him by the armpits, shoves him against the wall. “Veronica here?” he asks conversationally, gesturing at me with his head. “Might as well be my sister. She is married to the scariest motherfucker you will ever meet. And hot tip, she’s meaner than BOTH OF US. So taping the only time you’re ever gonna get laid, and sticking it on the web like you’re a big man? Was a CRAZY stupid move. Now hold still, while my fist has major repeating problems with your face.”

“It wasn’t me!” Piz insists. “I didn’t post any videos, I swear! I wouldn’t, I’m a feminist! I mean, not that there’s anything WRONG with making a video, if everybody involved thinks it’s a fun idea, but…”

Dick punches him, twice, and he shuts up.

“The camera was focused on your BED, Piz,” I say. “Give me one reason why I should believe you.”

“I didn’t do this! I swear! If someone’s putting videos on the internet, I was violated too! Look, I’ll help you! I mean, that was a nice, sexy, intimate moment and I…”

“Let go, Dick,” I interrupt, and Dick does. Piz sways on his feet, catching himself against the wall, and I gesture at the chair. “Sit.”

He sits. I point a finger at his face. “First, I don’t want or need your help. I have people who love me, willing to do…pretty much ANYTHING I ask. Second, I don’t believe you, and here’s why; if that camera was intended for espionage, it would have been placed to cover more of the room. The light fixture in the ceiling, say. So third, even if YOU didn’t make the tape, someone who has it in for you, or me, did. And that someone can easily access me, when I’m with you; which means Wallace needs to move. However it falls out, I got violated, and you’re to blame. You FIX this, or your next visits will be from the cops. And the dean.”

I beckon to Dick, and he follows me out of the booth. Behind us, Piz buries his face in his hands. We stride through the cafeteria, where everyone is watching and whispering, and a few random jackasses applaud. We move out into the hall.

“Come on,” I say, hooking a right. “We need to extract that camera from behind his mirror, before someone else does. And before we get arrested.”

“Do you think Radio Wuss can really help?” Dick asks, pressing the elevator button that opens on the street. “He always struck me as kind of pathetic.”

“He is,” I say. “But he’s motivated to do SOMETHING now. If he feels guilty or scared, that plays in our favor, because he might delete what he’s got. Try to hush it all up. If he’s smug, he might want revenge; in which case he’s bound to do something stupid slash arrest-worthy. And if he’s NOT responsible, he’ll get in touch with the guy he thinks IS. At which point the bug I planted in his jeans pocket will come in handy. I count all those outcomes as a win.”

“At least I got to rough him up,” Dick says, pushing the door to the quad open with his back. “It’s been a while since my last old-fashioned throw-down. I’m screwed if we get popped, though. My mom’s in Italy again, and my dad’s assets are still frozen.”

“I’ll make sure Wiedman takes care of you,” I say, patting him on the shoulder. “You’re practically my brother, right? Might as well have access to the family fixer.”

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Wallace ignores our first knocks, shouting, “Studying! Go away!”. He responds to repeated poundings with silence; then eventually curses, and stomps towards the door.

“What?” he demands, swinging it open. He’s wearing an old Pirates jersey and sweatpants, and has one earbud dangling. His finger’s tucked in his Mechanical Engineering text to save the place, and he’s in full Finals Freakout mode. His face softens some when he sees me, but he says, “V, I’ve got no time for intrigue right now. You need help with that cafeteria account theft thing, it’s gonna have to wait ‘til the weekend.”

“Go back to studying,” I tell him, happy to see his cranky, alive, not-in-Chicago face. Not just because I (platonically) love him; but because his presence here means Boat Reality is only one possible future. One which all my HEARST loved ones seem to have escaped.

Wait, did I PREVENT a Titanic-esque disaster with a drunken comment to Logan, wherein I told him to stop the party? Or is Horrible Boat Tragedy another Prison Reality? Will it keep popping up like that fucking clown in Poltergeist, until I fix some critical pivot issue?

Things to ponder. Later, though. When I’m not on a timetable, coping with crisis.

“I just need access to your room for five minutes. You won’t even know I’m here,” I tell Wallace, focusing.

“Doubtful,” he says, but lets us in.

He gazes at his work longingly as I march past him towards the mirror, but curiosity wins out; he trails behind. “Lift that off,” I instruct Dick, and Wallace helps. Together they detach the mirror from its bolt, set it down… and yep, the camera’s still there. It’s too high to reach, so I climb onto the dresser.

“What the hell is that?” Wallace asks, as I disconnect the wires.

“Dude, if you haven’t heard, don’t go online. Or check your email. And if you DO attempt those things, do NOT call Logan, and tell him what you found. We’re handling this, is all you need to know.”

“Piz made a dirty movie of the two of us, when he and I were dating,” I say. Because I learned my lesson Senior Year, about shutting Wallace out. “It’s all over the internet. And I’d prefer Logan not be goaded into murder and court martial, when he gets back from basic training. Wait, do the reserves even GET court martialed? The minute I find some free time, I have GOT to research the Navy.”

“Piz did WHAT?” Wallace asks, eyes widening. “Piz TAPEd you? Doing ROMANTIC things?”

I study the little camera in my hand while Dick tries to answer; it’s a marvel of engineering, spy tech at its finest. Clean, compact and expensive. And the brand name on the side is in Cyrillic…which means this whole situation just got a lot more complicated.

“Yup,” I say, extracting my phone from the pocket of my shorts. I snap a picture of the text. “Piz, or somebody using Piz to hurt me. And whoever it was? Will shortly be VERY sorry.”
I’m staring at a hidden camera, harboring hate in my heart. Then the world shifts sideways, twists under, and I’m manning the Slushee booth at Winter Carnival. Staring at pep-squad-pie-selling Madison Sinclair, who elicits the same emotion.

She’s simpering, natch, long hair held back with a coy pink ribbon; she smiles her reptile smile as she hawks her wares, which include baked goods and cleavage. Her affectations, as always, make my teeth itch. Lilly’s seductive because she enjoys seducing…but Madison FAKES naughtiness, while actually being repressed. I don’t know if she’s got low self-esteem, or truly believes putting out will raise her status. But it’s tough not to beg her to have some self-respect.

It occurs to me, as I watch her pout and flounce, that I’ve never known WHY I’m Madison’s focus. Our relationship is her competing with me, and me not caring, and it’s been that way since grade school. She tried to turn my friends against me with gossip, in junior high. She made passes at hapless Duncan. She mocked my hair and clothes, then turned up in the same styles, cut just a bit shorter and tighter. Sure, I tore her a new one, once, for blowing out my candles, but come ON. CAKE was involved. Surely THAT’S not the reason she’s unhealthily obsessed.

In this reality, I never fell from grace. I’m Logan’s long-term girlfriend, and Lilly Kane’s BFF, and Madison’s second-tier. Where I come from, she capped a lifetime of petty attacks by destroying my great love; but I can’t recall ever SPEAKING to her, here. I wonder, suddenly, how Other Veronica views her. Does Madison even register on her radar? Does this Madison care if I EXIST?

“You know, heat vision’s more a comic book thing,” Weevil says, from my right. I turn to find him watching me, hip cocked, hands in jacket pockets. His head’s tilted, so he looks up from under his lashes, and I have no clue what he’s thinking. “You can’t ACTUALLY burn people alive with your stare.”

I shrug, face forwards. “I’ll just have to do like Barney says, and use my imagination,” I tell him. “Want to help me brainstorm? When it comes to vengeful one-upsmanship, you’re practically a pro.”

“I’ll save my ideas for your boyfriend. He’s overdue to piss me off.” Weevil loops around the booth, leans on the counter beside me. “Look, we need to talk. Things have changed some, since our amusement park meeting of minds.”

“No shit,” I say. “For one thing, I’m homeless. For another, you’re limping, and I heard you ride the bus.”

He makes his ‘you got me!’ face, and I have to repress a smile. Despite the drama separating us, he still feels like my FRIEND Weevil, the boy who guards my back; tattooed Napoleon, tough-guy Mother Hen. Shepherding less-clever loved ones through the minefield of poverty, fighting people he secretly likes.

I can tell by his bluster-free approach that he wants something, and won’t leave without it. He’s also outing our secret alliance, which has to be deliberate. But his reasoning escapes me. Is he cashing in his chips because he’s just that desperate? Am I the only potential friend he’s still got left to lose?

“The FBLA Booth will survive without you, for half an hour,” he says, impatient with my musings. “You and I got things to discuss.”
“Seems to me we ought to invite Logan,” I say, because why is he trying to rush me? “The two of you have a whole Astaire-Rogers thing with fisticuffs going, this year, and I feel weird cutting in.”

“His dance card’s full,” Weevil says, with a trace of amusement. “He’s practiced his Twinkle Toes routine enough this week, anyway.”

Hmm. Sounds like Logan’s been doing battle. I wonder if ‘take the fight to the enemy’ is what he meant, when he said ‘I need to up my game’. And great, now I’m worried he’ll get hurt. “This had BETTER not be some long con, Weevil,” I warn. “I’m not kidding. If I end up in trouble because I chatted with you today, the two of us will have ISSUES.”

“I don’t screw people over for kicks, V,” he says. “I just want to talk. As for whether you should trust me? That’s all you. Trust me or don’t. Your call.”

Fuck, he’s playing on my STUPID CURIOSITY again! Weevil really DOES know how to manipulate me, which MASSIVELY pisses me off.

“Track field,” I decide. “In full view of the festivities, but out of hearing range.” He nods, and I add, “I’ll need a replacement, to man the booth. Meet you there in five?”

He gives a two-finger wave, ambles off, and I extract my phone from my pocket. “Where are you?” I demand of Logan, when he answers with, “GOD, carnivals are fun!”

“Same place I was five minutes ago,” he says, at his most sardonic. “I know I’m irresistible, but you have GOT to stop clinging.”

“You don’t even WANT to know where you were MY five minutes ago, sugar lumps. Or where I was, for that matter. Both significantly less fun than HIGH SCHOOL, let alone Winterfest.”

“Well, that’s just perfect,” he says, and I imagine hand gestures to match his precise diction. “My own personal Vivian Rutledge shows, and I’m stuck taking tickets at the bouncy house. I love you, Veronica, but I can’t fucking leave. I’m working this booth in lieu of detention. Clemmons is lurking by the sno-cone stand, to ensure I don’t bolt.”

“Well, I just got approached by your childhood nemesis,” I say. “He wants a private chat on the track field, I’m meeting him in five minutes. Can you send someone to man the Slushee stand, while I’m off gathering dirt?”

“Hang on,” he says, and there’s a muffled confab at his end. “Jackie will spot you. She’s just hanging around laughing at me, while she waits her turn in the dunk tank. But no way should you leave with Weevil, after what happened last time.”

“We’ll be on school premises, in full view of the fairground,” I say. “You can station someone to watch, if it soothes your nerves. I’ll find you when I’m done, so I can laugh at your plight, too.”

He huffs with frustration, but doesn’t argue. “Keep your taser handy,” he says, instead. “And stay at the near end of the field, so Luke can run to help you.”

“Aw, you’re the best, pookie,” I tell him, fighting a smile. “You may seem like a bad boy to Clemmons, but I know the terrible schmoopy truth.”

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I find Weevil under a tree near the exit gate, a faded grey Jansport at his side. He’s got his legs crossed at the ankles, his arms folded on his chest; he’s leaned back with his eyes shut, soaking up
“Nice backpack,” I say, sitting cross-legged next to him. “It’s such a YOU accessory.”

“Got my work clothes in here,” he tells me, not moving. “I’m doing a shift at the garage, later.”

“Oh-huh,” I say. “You’re upstanding, and gainfully employed. You hang with the Student Council president, at school mixers. And probably rescue tree-kittens, while flashing a white-toothed grin.”

“I knew you had a soft spot for me.” He opens his eyes, face in shadow. “But this fawning is a little extreme.”

“At least I’ve solved the mystery of our renewed public friendship,” I say. “But you know what? I’m letting your petty theft slide. I stand firm on my no-cruises-with-classmates policy, now more than ever. I mean, I’m a LITTLE curious how you sneaked the cash box past Clemmons, since you’ve got no accomplice. But whatever. Mazel Tov. Enjoy the car you’ll buy, with your ill-gotten gains.”

“I haven’t heard about any cash box,” he says, with the faintest of smiles. “I’m just touching base on areas of mutual interest. Now that we got nothing left to lose, being seen together.”

“You must be using the royal we,” I say. I pretend to consider. “Although isn’t the king in this scenario dead? I heard the PCH’ers aren’t calling, writing, or even liking your Facebook posts, these days!”

“I’m down for the round, not the count,” he says, and frowns. “It’s tough to cut guys like me out of leadership roles, long term.”

“Cause you’re scrappy?” I ask. “Funny, I’ve noticed the same thing about Logan. Are you SURE you two weren’t separated at birth?”

“Yeah, he’s the prince, I’m the pauper,” Weevil retorts, with an emphatic tilt of his chin. “He gets to cross the line with no consequences, I’m the one who takes the fall.”

“Are you saying you’re Aaron Echolls’ secret love child?” I cover my mouth with my hand, faking incredulity. “Cast adrift from Castle Tacky, to wander the lonely streets? That would make a SURPRISING amount of sense.”

He laughs. “If I was, I’d be one of many. But nah. My dad’s rich, though.” Weevil settles back, watching birds fly in formation across the pale-blue, cirrus-streaked sky. “Or at least, he knows someone willing to throw money at his problems.”

He shoots a sideways glance my way, and I cross my arms, fascinated. Weevil and I weren’t sharing-is-caring friends, in my reality; most folks don’t feel safe, letting me see them vulnerable. I’m not sure what’s shifted here, that he’s willing to tell tales. But who cares? Secrets are my drug of choice. “No clue who the deadbeat dad IS?”

“My mom never gave us a name. But she worked for a family in the 80’s, had a daughter about her age. The two of them were friends, went to a lot of parties; it was probably some yuppy in that crowd. Some guy slick enough to tempt a nice Catholic girl, offer her a taste of the good life. She was beautiful, my mother, attracted lots of attention. Much like me, I inherited her eyes.”

He gestures at his face, and I have to admit; the eyes are gorgeous. “Quit fishing for compliments,” I say. “You know I want the dirt.”

He smirks. “My grandma doesn’t know what went down, exactly. My mom left the father space on
the birth certificate blank, got a great big check in return. Then she disappeared. Sometimes she sends a postcard, but she’s never come home.”

“I could find her,” I say, since it seems that’s what he wants. “And him. Pressure them into paying a settlement, to compensate for lost child support? It would mean financial security for your Grandma, maybe money to go legit, for you. That’s what this fishing expedition is about, right? The shot to your leg was a wake-up call. You’re sick of a life of crime.”

“Gang leader’s not a long-term career plan,” he says, with irony. “I won’t leave my guys in a bad place; but once they’re safe, I’m done. Plus my Grandma’s not doing so hot. She deserves retirement and rest, after all she’s been through. I doubt my folks will part with their money nicely, though. And I don’t want the woman who raised me in danger.”

“Yeah, we’ll have to take a sophisticated approach,” I say. “All right, I’m willing to help, but I want quid pro quo. What do you have to offer, in return?”

“Information,” he says, succinct. “You remember my cousin Rico? The one I tried to meet at Magic Mountain?”

“Long hair, bad taste in music?” I ask. “Not fond of confrontation?”

He rolls his eyes. “I finally got him to talk. He says the FBI’s been hanging around Neptune lately, interviewing people, surveilling. Looks like they seized their moment, when Liam got convicted of arson last week. They mopped up some junior Fitzpatricks, the ones terrified of a power vacuum, convinced a couple to turn state’s evidence. Liam and Cormac are gonna end up lifers, there’s a ton of new charges pending. The Fitpatrick gang’s officially dead.”

“How do you know the details of the sting?” I ask. “Are YOU an informant?”

He shakes his head. “I got sources,” he says. “But that’s good news, right? One less group of people with our names on their shit list.”

“I assume Thumper’s still at large? And in charge of the PCH’ers?” I ask. He nods. “Then we’re not out of the woods. Also, whoever paid Arturo to torch my house, and make it look like Liam, could prove a problem. The guy doesn’t seem to be ACTIVELY gunning for us. But he could care less if we end up collateral damage.”

“OK, back up.” Weevil makes the ‘time out’ gesture. “Liam DIDN’T burn your house? Because if one of my boys framed him, and sent him to jail, that’s some cosmic justice.”

“It was a kid named Arturo,” I confirm. “We caught him by the shed. His plot seemed in our best interests, since Liam was pulling Thumper’s strings, so we let him go. I can’t tell you how glad I am his cockamamie plan worked.”

Weevil laughs. “And you call ME ruthless? Yeah, it worked all right; Fitzpatrick got five years. And if I had to guess WHO paid Arturo to do it, I’d say your friend Manning. I bet he carries a grudge. He’s got a fortune in bad drugs lying around, which Liam refused to unload.”

“Of COURSE,” I murmur, as it all comes together. “Arturo’s alibi, if the cops came calling, was that he was shut up in church! One of those teen chastity lock-ins at Stewart’s crazy cult, no doubt. Wow. Manning’s got BALLS, breaking the law on such a massive level, while pursuing a political career. How could he think his double life would stand? I mean he’s nuts, but is he also an IDIOT?”

Weevil shrugs. “Lots of powerful guys believe they’re untouchable. Maybe he wants money for something anti-government? Guns for the rapture, or whatever. Crazy people plus Jesus equals ten
times the crazy, in my experience.”

“So Manning SHOULD be an easy take-down,” I say. “Because he’d be ruined by public exposure. But what then? Who replaces him? I mean, someone’s gonna fill the organized crime vacuum in this town, and the Mexican Cartels are next-level violence.”

“Well, the GOOD choice was those guys who set up a growing operation, in a federally protected park,” he says. “They’re who everyone used to buy from, Fitzpatricks, PCH’ers, Freedom Roaders, up until just recently. Couple of old hippies with a lab, obsessed with the perfect high. Something happened to their op, though: fields burned, equipment trashed. Both chemists, dead. Probably Manning did that, then took their place.

“Out of who’s left? The Freedom Riders are White Supremacist bikers, so I’m not in favor. Myself, I like the Russians.” Weevil picks up a rock, examines then tosses it. “Unlike the cartels, they could care less about me and mine. They won’t try to kill us, or make my guys deal; they bring relatives over, put THEM on the street. The family’s already in Neptune. We take down Manning, and they’re poised to fill his slot.”

I think about the Cyrillic on Piz’s camera, and feel uneasy with this choice. But what are my alternatives? The people actively trying to end me must go. And it’s not like I’ll let Piz near me, on my next trip through college.

“What about Thumper?” I ask, choosing discretion. “And any turncoats who still support him?”

“Don’t worry about them,” Weevil says. “I got a score to settle with Thumper, for putting a bullet in my leg. Once things settle down, I can handle the PCH’ers.”

“OK,” I say. “I’ll focus on proof that puts Manning away. You work on getting your gang off our backs. And I’ll solve the Mystery of the Missing Dad. Quid pro quo, like I said.”

“You can draw that line, if it makes you feel safer,” he says, looking up at me sideways. “But just for the record? Favors ain’t ever what we’ve been about.”

“What ARE we about, then?” I ask. “In your view? Because even back when I was sure we were friends, I never understood.”

“That first night we met,” he says, reflective. “When I was out looking for the guy who stole Grandma’s purse? And you were camped by the Camelot, watching your mom kiss Jake Kane? I looked at you, all big-eyed, acting tough, and saw me, when I was a kid. When my mom took off, and I had no one left, except one overworked Abuela, raising all the family rejects. I figured I’d be the friend you had in your corner. Only you were a good girl, who didn’t want to be beholden, so I made it about deals.

“But V? It was never about deals, even before Carmen. It was about how two days later, I found the purse in my locker, with her paycheck still inside, and a name and address on a piece of paper. It was about you treating me the same way you treat the rich kids. And not because you thought I was some hot, dangerous fetish object or whatever. Because you’re decent, and honorable, and that’s just you. You chew me out exactly like you chew out Echolls, for a lot of the same reasons, and it always makes me laugh. Not one other person I’ve met has held us to the same standard. You expect both of us to be good, which is crazy; but sometimes, it makes us want to try.”

“Why didn’t you SAVE me, then?” I demand. Because this is the crux of the issue, for me; everything else, I’ll forgive. “When the kidnapping was happening, if you’re so loyal? Why did you
just SIT there, and WATCH?”

“Because while one guy was grabbing you, the other had a gun pointed at me, through the window. And there was a woman and a little girl in the room. I was afraid we’d all get shot.”

“But you didn’t SAY that, at Magic Mountain.”

“Oh, yeah, ‘cause Echolls would have believed me, if I had. I don’t waste time shooting my mouth off, when talking won’t help.”

I consider. His story, like all his stories, is plausible. And it sounds like MY Weevil, so I want it to be true. I guess in the end, though, his true feelings don’t matter. Right now, we need each other regardless.

Besides, I’m Veronica Mars. When someone asks for help, I’m not gonna say no. Finding justice for victims is what I do.

“OK,” I say. “You’ve got provisional trust. Because I liked you, before this shit went down, and I hope you’re still that guy. I’ll give you a fair shake, and the benefit of the doubt; you prove you deserve it, by having my back.”

“Deal,” Weevil says. “You got bad taste in men, V, but your heart's in the right place. Call me if you need me. I’ll be around.”

He hefts the Jansport and walks off. I shake my head, as I watch him go, and hope I’m not a sucker.

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Carrie waylays me as I’m striding back towards the carnival; her green silk blouse and gold peasant scarf show her Pirate pride. Her face is flushed with cold, and the excitement of high-value gossip. Her grin is conspiratorial.

“Ooh,” she says, peering around for clues as to my recent activities. “Where have YOU been? You missed all the excitement! The cash box for the booths went missing, and they’re SEARCHING everyone!”

“It was Miss Hauser, with the candlestick, in the study,” I say, pulling out my beeping phone. It’s Logan, checking up via text, and I tell him I’m on my way. “She’s skimming money…to pay a shrink who specializes in bitterness, maybe? If you want to play hero, go tell Clemmons we saw her on a chair in the art room, messing with the ceiling tiles. The money’s in an envelope, over the big table. There should be footprints that match her shoes, in the glitter on the floor; be careful not to disturb them.”

She laughs. “Being friends with a future FBI agent is SO much fun!” she says. “Still on for manicures tomorrow?”

“My nails can’t wait,” I say. “I have to cut and run now, though, Logan’s getting antsy.”

“Tell him I’ve got the number for that jewelry designer,” she says. “The guy will do Lynn’s gift for cost, if she names him when people ask. I’ll text you, later?”

“Thanks, Carrie,” I say, bemused. She smiles, waves at Ashley Banks, and heads off gleefully to save the day. I guess whatever set her and Logan at odds hasn’t happened yet.

I find Logan buying cotton candy from The Gingerbread Haus, and try to sneak up; but he smells me
or something, and hands a pink wad over his shoulder. “You’ll eat it all anyway,” he says, giving the cashier a $20. “I may as well relinquish it now.”

“That’s why you’re my steady guy,” I say, and kiss his shoulder with my mouth full.

He turns, and I gasp at his swollen cheekbone, his truly impressive black eye. He suffers me to touch it, wincing, but just shrugs when I ask him what happened. “The usual,” he says, gathering me in for a kiss; his enthusiasm is unaffected by injury. “Guy knew karate, got in one good punch. I’m fine, I swear. No stitches.”

“I’m NOT a fan of this,” I say, pressing the gentlest of kisses to his lid. “I like you pretty. And safe.”

“You and me both.” He grabs a blue Slushee off the counter, takes a healthy sip. “So how’d it go with Weevil?”

I synopsize the discussion, and he drinks as he listens, periodically shaking his head.

“Stewart Manning is a piece of work,” he decides, when I’m done. “Would it be bad to say I’m looking forward to his downfall?”

“Haven’t we established, on MULTIPLE occasions, that we’re both bad, and we LIKE it?” I ask.

“I’ll be your black-hatted cowboy,” he says. “You can be my card-dealing showgirl. With a pearl-handled revolver in your garter, and a dangerous glint in your eye.”

“Speaking of black hats,” I muse, tapping my chin. “I think you mentioned detention? What are you in for, this time?”

“Veronica,” he chides, draping a companionable arm around me. “It’s ALWAYS my mouth or my fists. How long have you known me?”

“So it’s something else?” I ask.

He sighs. “Mr. Daniels has held a grudge, ever since I put his car on the flagpole. He can’t prove I was involved, but he watches me like a HAWK.”

“That was YOU?” I demand. “No way! At this stage of your life, you can’t tell power tools APART!”

He puts a finger dramatically over his lips, for silence, then spins me a couple times, just because it makes him happy. We end up in front of a duck-hunting gallery. “Hey, you want to clap while I shoot things?” he asks, tracing my eyebrow with one knuckle. “Make me feel like a man?”

“You WILL be answering my detention question,” I say. “Because you know how I feel about secrets. But yes. I have a special fondness for your displays of virility.”

He fake-sneers, unloads a careless wad of tickets on the cashier, and debuts an eerie level of shot accuracy I had no idea he possessed. It’s sexy as HELL.

“And, of course, I win,” Logan says, surveying the carnage, blowing imaginary smoke off the end of the gun. “It’s exhausting, sometimes, being this awesome.”

“You get a prize,” the burly kid behind the counter says. He looks like Justin Smith’s Muppet friend, from the AV Club; but puberty’s struck him too hard to be sure. “Which one you want?”

“Got any bears?” I ask. “With slogan t-shirts?”
“I have this,” he offers. Holds up a beige bear in a trench coat, with a t-shirt underneath, sporting a big red heart. It’s the same one I fell asleep hugging, in Boat Reality.

I take the toy from his hand, and gaze down, bemused. “It’s crazy what’s fate,” I murmur, and look up into Logan’s eyes. “You won me a bear, with your ring-toss abilities.”

“Shotgun,” he corrects, with a slow grin. “What’s the big-eyed adulation about? You going soft on me, Mars?”

“I went soft on you YEARS ago,” I say. And then the slipstream tugs me away.

THREAD TWENTY EIGHT

I settle on the deck of the Berkeley house, gazing out over the bay, and yeah— it's a PRIMO view. I’ve got a highlighted History text open on my chest, my feet crossed on the rail; and in my hands is the bear Logan just won, at the carnival. I trace the heart with one finger, smile, and close my eyes. The spring sun feels wonderful on my skin.

“You know, I came out to offer cuddling services,” Logan says, from my right. “In lieu of—or in addition to—the stuffed animal. But now I just want to stand here and stare at you, all beautiful and happy and barefoot in the sunshine.”

“Stare away,” I say, not moving. “Just FYI, a foot massage would also be welcome.”

He laughs. A chair scrapes across the deck, and then his big hands curve around my feet; he lifts them gently from the rail, deposits them on his lap. I sigh with pleasure, as he goes to work on one arch.

“Despite your protests,” he says, “you’ve taken to bed rest and pampering with surprising readiness. When it’s back to reality and finals next week, you’re in for a rude awakening.”

“I am willing to bet,” I say, “that if I provide enough incentive, you will keep right on pampering me. For YEARS, if necessary.”

“As long as you love me,” he says, “I’ll do my best to deserve it.”

“Enh. I love you even when you DON’T deserve it,” I say.

“So I can get trashed, and act like a dick, and watch that whole high-stakes poker tournament?” His voice is sardonic, but he doesn’t quit rubbing. “Because I crossed those things off my day planner, but I can go and add them back.”

“Mmmm,” I say. “Every choice has consequences. Choose wisely.”

He kisses me, warm press of lips, and I say, “Speaking OF people who get a pass, even when they don’t deserve it. Is Mac still ducking my calls?”

“Yup,” he says. “But in her defense, you ARE hounding her.”

“I wouldn’t be me if I didn’t,” I say. “And I’m about to escalate to the up-close-and-personal approach. She should see for herself that I’m sleek and pampered as Sadie Casablancas’s Persians. FULLY capable of reading files in bed.”

“You ARE sleek,” he concedes, caressing my shin. “But I want no part of this enterprise. And you’re not allowed to run all over town, hunting her.”
“I’ll bet you know where she hangs out,” I coax. “You know everything about everyone, despite pretending you don’t care. You could take me there; and watch VERY closely, while we chat. I promise, I’ll make it worth your while.”

“I love how devious and manipulative you get, for practically no reason,” he says. “All right, Mac drinks power smoothies for lunch, I’ve been to her favorite shop. But I drive, you spend the whole time sitting, and when we come back, mandatory nap.”

“I’ll even try a smoothie with VEGETABLES in it,” I say. “THAT is how committed I am to following the rules.”

He rolls his eyes, skeptical, but goes inside for his keys.

Mac’s Jamba Juice is on the Santa Cruz Beach boardwalk, just below the roller coaster. Mac is, as promised, at an outdoor table, dressed in a pencil skirt and heels. She’s typing furiously away on her laptop, ignoring a drink both gross and mauve. Logan points an admonitory finger at me, before heading inside to order; I plop down in Mac’s second chair, and prepare to make my kill.

“Hey girlfriend!” I say, flashing my zero-ulterior-motives smile. “Fancy running into you!”

“I’d ask what you want, Veronica,” she says, drily. “But you only want one thing, lately. And the answer is still no.”

“Come ON,” I say, trying not to whine. “I’ve been good! I’ve been SO good, even LOGAN thinks so, and I’m going NUTS wondering what’s in those files. If you won’t let me read them, can you at least give me a summary?”

“You’ve got Logan wrapped twice around your finger, and tied up in a bow,” she says, arching a brow. “At the end of two weeks you get the files back, and not a day before.”

“Look, we’re business partners, right?” I ask. “So aren’t you legally and morally OBLIGATED to share both profits and responsibilities?”

She powers her laptop down, closes it with a snap. She looks irritated, which for Mac is strong emotion. “First of all, there ARE no profits, yet. Second, I’m not obligated to do anything. I teamed up with you on this venture because Dick convinced me it was smart; and I still have a soft spot for that guy, which he really doesn’t deserve. But I don’t have to do or give ANYTHING, other than hours of labor.”

“You WANT to, though,” I coax, nudging her with an elbow. “Come on, Mackenzie. You’re the kind of friend who ALWAYS helps, when there’s a mystery afoot.”

“No, actually I’m not.” Mac folds her arms, the foot of her crossed leg bouncing. “And I’m tired of being taken for granted. You’ve tried every bitchy and adorable tactic in your playbook this week, and all of them have failed. In fact, you’re making me regret this business arrangement, because I can’t stand wrangling TODDLERS. You were a smug-in-your-bubble snob in high school, which clearly hasn’t changed; and as one of the have-nots you spent four years ignoring. I’m fully aware you don’t care. Grow up, follow doctor’s orders, and leave me ALONE on my downtime. I WORK with you. We’re not friends.”

She gathers her things in two efficient moves and stalks off, high heels clacking. I stare after her, trying to process what’s happened.

Logan emerges a minute later with smoothies, sits beside me in the vacated chair. “Winning friends and influencing people again?” he asks.
“She just called me an insufferable snob,” I say. “So much for the Justice League.”

He sighs. Nudges my smoothie closer. I pick it up, sip, grimace, and set it morosely down. “Well, I knew you two weren’t close. But prior to this, she’s always been CIVIL. Maybe it’s time to find a new partner?”

“I didn’t realize she felt this way,” I say, faintly. “I mean I haven’t paid much attention to her, lately, until she was put in charge of those files. But I never thought…was that naive?”

“Ronica,” he says. “I am the wrong person to ask. There are maybe ten people in the world I give a shit about, and the rest I basically ignore.” He takes my hand in his, slides my ring back and forth. “Come on, let’s go for a ride. Roll the windows down, feel the wind in our hair? We can hold hands and snark at each other, pretend we’re having an adventure. I’ll even let you choose the music.”

I smile. “OK,” I say. “But I’m warning you now, it won’t be retro.”

He piggy-backs me to the car, a smoothie in each hand; lifts me bodily into my seat, his hand beneath my ass. “Where to?” he asks, pulling out of the lot. “Highway, tree-lined road, beachfront? What scenery soothes frustrated ambition, as well as wounded feelings?”

I gaze at him, overflowing with gratitude; I guess my heart is in my eyes, because he smiles, and boops my nose. “Come on, Ronica, this is business as usual,” he says. “We piss people off on a regular basis. At least Mac’s only frustrated, not murderous.”

“I love you SO MUCH,” I say. “It frightens me that I could have killed this relationship, out of fear, or pride. I’m scared that something bad will happen, and we’ll END.”

“I’m here for the long haul,” he says, gently. “And if something bad happens, we’ll handle it together. Our lives have not been uneventful, but we’ve never been beaten yet.”

“You know what?” I say, biting my lip, gathering courage. “I’ve been wearing a surprise all day, which you have yet to discover. Red satin underwear, Logan. Chosen just for you.”

His eyebrows lift, and his fingers curl around the steering wheel, flex. “Are you serious?” he asks, with the direct, intense Logan look that thrills me.

I nod, and he scans the horizon; makes a quick right, searching the road.

“What are you doing?” I ask, frowning. “Aren’t you going to answer?”

“I’m looking for a place to park,” he says, eyes on the street. “So I can unwrap my present. You may not realize it; but you in red underwear, riding me in a parked car, is at the TOP of my list of fantasies. I can’t think of a gift more perfect.”

“How much is it worth to you?” I ask, not sure I even sound flirtatious; my throat is swollen with panic. “Me, wearing red satin? What do I get in return, for being sexy and amazing?”

He pulls onto a dirt road, conceals us in a stand of trees. His gaze is fierce and passionate, focused and serious. “You know I’ll give you anything, Ronica, regardless of what you’re wearing. I love you whether you deserve it or not, just like you do me. And I love you for EXACTLY the person you are.”

He leans across the armrest and kisses me; a hungry kiss, as if he feels the same longing I do. But it’s an illusion, a misunderstanding…he CAN’T. I kiss him back, and simultaneously start crying. Which sucks, but I’m out of control. Nothing makes sense, it’s all falling apart, and the Logan I want most
doesn’t KNOW me.

“Hey!” he says, alarmed, withdrawing. “Hey, no, PLEASE don’t cry! Ronica, baby, come on, you’re all right. We don’t have to fool around, if you’re not in the mood!” He puts his arms around me, kissing my scalp. “God, it GUTS me when you get like this. Don’t be so upset!”

I nod. He rocks me, and I cry harder. Because I’m SURE this Logan went to Fiji: he HAS to know who I am, or everything I believe about the slipstream is WRONG. But if he recognizes me, and he’s not saying…why would he HURT me this way?

“All right, there’s only one solution,” he decides, when my sobs wind down to sniffles. “Executive decision, I’m taking you to Amy’s. You need a banana split, with whipped cream and cherries. Then we’ll go home, watch any movie you want, and Loki can get on the bed.”

I shrug; he kisses my cheek with agonizing tenderness, starts the car. He sneaks concerned looks at me as he pulls out, makes haste for the ice cream shop. I slump in my seat, gaze past the windshield, and listen to my heart shatter.

I clutch the smoothie so tight, it oozes up through the straw, spilling over my hands in a stream of noxious green. I close my eyes, lean back into the slipstream; I let it drag me away.
I’ve got ketchup all over my hands, my burger is a sodden mess, and Lilly is cleaning me with a wad of napkins, like I’m a clumsy toddler. “Honestly, Veronica,” she says, de-ketchuping my watch. “I can’t take you ANYWHERE.”

“The cap was loose,” I say, because it’s floating in the lake on my plate. Logan reaches over from my left, plucks it out, reattaches it, and sucks his fingers clean with a wiggle of his brows.

I smile at him, battling back tears, and he frowns as he registers how upset I am. He tucks an arm around me, pulls me close; Lilly follows, still wiping my hand. “Come on, Ronica,” he says, jiggling me, “it’s not that bad. You said yourself, Wallace will be back when he cools down. I trust your judgment.”

I gaze up at his long, mobile, sympathetic face, forlorn and confused. The upside-down v between his brows appears, as he gazes back. He cocks his head in question, and I mouth, “The slipstream SUCKS.” He pulls me against his chest, and curves his big hand around my skull.

Lilly finishes cleanup, tosses the napkin down; I yank her into the hug, too. She wraps her arms around us both, and says, “I’ve been emailing Wallace High School Musical song lyrics all week long, but he won’t respond. Not even to ‘Get Your Head in the Game’, and that’s about BASKETBALL!”

“I invited him to go with me and Dad, to see the Lakers,” Dick says, from the opposite side of the table. He leans back, arms crossed. “Which is something a person with balls would actually like. Same result; and Logan was being a stay-at-home douche again, because he’s practically married, so I had to take my brother. It was lame.”

“Has anybody checked with Jackie?” I ask, from my comforting cushion of flesh. “Or Jessica? Wallace might be willing to talk feelings, with a pretty girl he likes.”

“Jackie’s heard nothing,” Logan says, drawing a hand down my arm, twining his fingers through mine. “But Jessica’s a possibility. I’ll text her right now, I’ve got her number.” He contorts himself to reach his phone, then bends to it, giant thumbs flying.

“Since we’re on the topic of pretty girls…where’s Meg, these days?” Lilly flops against the bench and takes me with her, one arm around my shoulders. She spears Dick with her ‘don’t annoy the Queen Bee’ look. “A couple weeks ago, you two were making out on every available surface; but lately, I haven’t seen her ANYWHERE.”

“She’s in hiding,” Logan says, sardonic. He ketchups one of my fries, feeds it to me. “She believes she’s too young to wed.”

“Did you offer?” I ask Dick, with raised brows, and he snorts.

“Like I would deny next year’s college ladies a taste of this hotness?” He sweeps a hand down his front, in display. “Nah, Meg’s just holed up in her apartment, all freaked out because that janitor guy is stalking her. He’s been harassing my brother, too. They should start a club.”

Logan shoves fries into his own mouth, and says, “Dude, I thought that was a JOKE, until I saw it for myself. I didn’t know Lucky was INTERESTED in dating. I’ve only ever seen him get high and
play video games, to cope with his mental illness. Oh, and occasionally, snap.”

“Meg’s dad promised Lucky he could marry her,” Dick explains, reaching for his soda and swilling half. “They go to the same weird church, or whatever. She’s, like, told him to his face she’s riding the Casablancas pony, but he keeps trying to get her to move in, anyway. So he can protect her when the cleansing fire comes, or I don’t know what the fuck. She’s trying to get a restraining order, but that shit’s harder than you’d think.”

“She wouldn’t feel safer hanging out with you?” Lilly asks. “That seems weird.”

Dick shrugs. “Who knows with that chick? She has like two moods; nice, sweet and cheerful, and the one where she frowns and acts sarcastic, but still looks pretty. I mean, she likes to party and get busy and stuff. But unless we’re drinking at a club, she rarely wants to hang.”

Wait, MEG MANNING likes to ‘party and get busy’? With DICK? Wow, I guess it really is true, what they say about preacher’s kids.

“Hot tip, Dick,” Lilly says. “When a certain type of girl tells you to have fun without her, because everything is FINE? Everything is not fine. She wants you to keep asking until she’s ready to talk.”

“I already KNOW why she’s pissed,” Dick says. “Lucky’s bothering her, and she HATES her dad. The thing is, I kinda don’t CARE. I mean, I care like I want her to be safe, and not get hurt. But I don’t care, like I’d rather date a chick who enjoys actual fun. One who digs video games, and surfs, and says ‘AWESOME!’ when I say ‘ROAD TRIP!’ Meg’s just making up for lost time, getting her wild on.”

I suppress a smile; DICK CASABLANCAS is upset, because a woman’s using him for his body. But I somehow manage to ask only, “Got someone specific in mind?”

Dick shrugs, a ‘yes, but I won’t admit it’ gesture. I cast my mind back to the conversation in his jeep, the day he played matchmaker at Cho’s. “A girl the rest of us don’t like, maybe? Are you Romeo, pine for Juliet?”

“Quit with the psychoanalysis, Dr. Freud,” Dick says, throwing a chip at me. “Everybody knows I don’t have deep thoughts. Meg’s super hot; but as soon as this Lucky thing is over, it’s Lone Ranger time for the Dickster.”

Lilly rolls her eyes. “Wow. Well, as much as I enjoy listening to Dick navel-gaze about the lack of meaning in his life, I have things to do. Can you guys drop me at Java the Hut, before you head home?”

“Oooh,” I say, like the intrigue is delicious. “Secret and NAUGHTY things?”

“Veronica Mars, you have NO idea.” Lilly grins back. “Someday maybe I’ll tell you. But today is not the day.” She favors Logan with an amused glance. “Don’t worry TOO much, though. It’s only a salacious secret, not a criminal one.”

“See you say that,” Logan grouses, “but it comforts me exactly none. I HAVE met you, Lils.”

“Oh, Logan.” She rolls her expressive eyes. “You are such a middle-aged DAD, sometimes. How Veronica keeps from strangling you, when you get overprotective, I will NEVER understand.”

“I don’t have your luck,” I explain, with a slight smile. “If all of you weren’t overprotective, I’d be dead by now.”
“If you weren’t constantly in assholes’ faces, threatening them with life in jail, that might help,” Dick says, tossing a twenty on the table. “But what do I know? I’m just the dumb comic relief.”

“Ha ha. Serious suggestions only, Dick,” I say. “And on that note, let’s get a move on. Lilly has a scandalous engagement, and I’ve got some reckless confronting to do.”

We walk outside, and wave goodbye to Dick, who hops in his jeep and skedaddles. Lilly pauses to answer a phone call, complete with suggestive, lilting voice and hair twirling. Logan turns his back to the lot theatrically, beeps his car open beneath one arm. The lights flash on a new green Range Rover, and I stop short. He grins. “See? Not yellow,” he says.

I walk up to it, touch, and yeah. It’s our Ideal Reality car. I cast my mind back over Hearst Reality, and realize I’ve never SEEN Logan’s car, there. I look up at him, assessing….at this Logan, who DEFINITELY knows me….and I start to feel less agonized, more suspicious. Something is UP with Ideal Logan, and his refusal to say the code words. I can SMELL it. What, I’m not sure; but it’s probably going to end with me KICKING HIS ASS.

“Oh-oh,” Logan says, studying me. He calls across the lot, “Lils, avert your eyes! I’m about to get either punched, or laid!”

“You have nothing to fear,” I assure him. “As long as you don’t LIE to me, at any point in the future. Which you would never do, right? You would NEVER lie, about anything REALLY IMPORTANT?”

Lilly approaches, folding her phone shut and laughing; Logan lounges back against the car, crossing his arms. “Never,” he says, caressing, yet somehow provoking as hell. “You’d get pissed off, and declare war. And you know I HATE it when that happens.”

I glare at him, nostrils flaring, and Lilly whispers in my ear, “Veronica, your kink is showing. He’s messing with you. He hasn’t done anything wrong.”

I glance over at her, startled by how close she’s gotten. “YET,” I say, with one last warning look at Logan. I climb into the SUV.

XXXXX

I wave goodbye to Lilly, wiping a smear of pink lip gloss from my cheek, and immediately turn to Logan. He’s evaluating the contents of his CD case with great concentration. “Is your dash clock right? It’s 4:30? If so, we need to visit Neptune High for half an hour. I’ve got a mystery that needs solving.”

He salutes, extracts a CD, and slots it into the player. “Reliable transportation, at your service,” he says. “As I believe I promised you, one long-ago night.”

“So the girl Dick described, back in the restaurant,” I say. “That was Mac Mackenzie, right? Did he actually DATE her at one point, or is this an unacknowledged crush?”

He shrugs, adjusts the volume of the Killers, and kicks the car into gear. “They hooked up last summer, for a while. But he dumped her hard to serve and protect Meg, the night of the ‘School Is For Later’ party. I don’t know if he COULD get back on that train, even if he wants to.”

“Oh my GOD! She was there with HIM?” I ask, feeling shitty.

“Not WITH him, per se.” His eyebrows rise, like he doesn’t see the problem. “She showed up on her own. But I heard she was none too pleased, when he ditched her to hang with another girl. I never
bothered to learn the details, because frankly, I didn’t care. You were slinking around the suite in a green bikini, and fucking me in every bedroom.”

I dismiss the 47 times we had sex at that party, with a wave of my hand. “You KNEW Dick was seeing someone, and you still hooked him up with Meg?”

“It was a matter of life and death!” Logan slows for a yellow light, hooks a right. “Besides, he’d been crushing on Meg hardcore for a year, and he barely ever talked about Mac. I thought he was just killing time with her, to be honest. Dick has an unfortunate tendency to fool around with girls not in his social circle, while only dating girls who are.”

“Don’t you only date girls in YOUR social circle?” I ask.

“I only SLEEP with girls I consider girlfriend material,” he says, acid. “I’m weird that way. In my opinion, Mackenzie fits the category; I’ve met her maybe twice, but I like her. Apparently Dick doesn’t agree, though. He said himself he prefers the bachelor lifestyle.”

“Ugh, untangling the ways Dick is different here hurts my brain,” I say. “I almost lost it when he hinted he was holding out for love. And a year from now, he’s still around, defending me…while claiming he’s practically my brother!”

“Dick has issues, but he’s loyal to the core.” Logan pulls into the Neptune High lot. His phone beeps as he engages the parking brake, and he extracts it to read a text. “Jessica’s in touch with Wallace,” he confirms, voice husky. “Good call. She says, and I quote; ‘Wallace is fine, cool with all of you, not in a snit. But he isn’t interested in changing his mind. I’m talking him down from being mad at his mom. Don’t expect him home soon, though.’.”

He sits back and sighs. “Man, I like Jessica. Jackie’s not as bad as I used to think, but she’s complicated in ways Wallace is too whole to see. To him, she’s the hot, snarky fantasy; he’s mesmerized by her packaging. But if she ever gives in and bones him? The disconnect between the image in his head, and the actual damaged person, will ruin things. Wallace needs someone straightforward, honest, and calm. Someone who doesn’t play games. I hope this only-talking-to-Jessica thing is a sign he’s FINALLY got his head out of his ass.”

“We don’t get to hand-pick Wallace’s girlfriends,” I say. “I know you and Lilly protect the innocent lambs in your circle. But just remember, you two chose DUNCAN for me, and he ended up being a murderer. Please thank Jessica for the text, though.”

“Oh it,” he says. He looks a little vulnerable as he types into his phone. “And for the record? We only picked Duncan because we thought he wouldn’t debauch you.”

I pat his cheek, which makes him smile, and say, “I’m not sure how long I’ll be. I need to lurk in the computer lab, until my prey appears.”

“I’ll run errands,” he tells me. “We’re out of dog food, Pepsi, and dental floss. Just text me when you’re ready, I’ll pick you up here. Got your taser? Your phone charged, and on?”


“I like BEING domestic with you.” He traces my nose with a fingertip, taps the end. “Strange as it sounds, this short period of living together is the most normal my life’s ever felt.”

“Pinky promise: we figure out a way to make the good and safe parts last.” I extend my hand for the ritual, and his eyes soften as he completes it. I hop out of the car. He waves at me cheerfully as he drives off.
The halls of Neptune High are deserted; it’s just teachers catching up on paperwork, a janitor making his rounds. I head straight for the computer lab, find it empty. But some notebooks and a Discman are strewn over a workstation, so clearly Mac’s planning to return.

I choose a desk not visible from the door, with a view of the complete room, and sit. Then, because my Prying Eyez login doesn’t exist here, I spend my time checking kittenfancy.

Other V’s calmed down from the threats and accusations of the previous message; but she’s still not what I’d call friendly. Honestly, I can’t blame her. If she were taking over my body, and banging my boyfriend, while creating dangerous situations I imperfectly understood? I’d probably hate her, too.

(OK, she IS doing two of those things, though that’s technically her right. And I must admit, I DO resent her. I’m not a good sharer, in any sense of the word. I get the feeling we have that in common.)

“Right,” (the response to my email reads). “I’ve never told a soul about two of those things. So I’ll admit you might be me. Which is troubling, because I DON’T want to end up like Duncan.

“Explain what you’re trying to accomplish. All I see is you leading Logan astray, in every way you can manage. Beaver Casablanca is an asshole who tried to drug me, but he didn’t murder anyone, or Dad would have put him in jail. And I doubt, at this point, that Felix Toombs’ killer will be found. There are too many people who wanted him dead; and frankly, nobody in power cares.

“You seem to think you’re a detective, or James Bond, or something. I’m a high school student. I trade favors as a hobby, and find lost dogs. Once I followed a man who sold bad drugs to Trina, and saw a huge deal go down. Dad and I went to the FBI, because they’re trained in solving crimes. And BIZARRELY, that tactic worked; the Fitzpatrick gang’s in jail.

“I wish you’d quit involving Logan in your crazy games, he’s been through enough. You may not care if he lives or dies, but I DO. If you think you can stop him from daredeviltry, by wrapping him in cotton wool, you’re lying to yourself. He can’t be controlled. I’ve learned to respect that about him, even though it drives me nuts. He has strength of character, and a mile-wide heroic streak.

“I know, based on things others have said, that you remember the stuff I do; but you impose your beliefs and opinions on top. Do you understand that Liam Fitzpatrick was FRAMED? Do you get that Thumper Orozco, and Stewart Manning, are still running loose, and they’re dangerous to you? I don’t know if you’re aware of my pact with Weevil, or the extent of the villainy afoot in this town. You need to be informed, and proactive: it’s not only Logan who’s vulnerable. I’ll protect you any
way I can, but I’m not always around.

“And as far as crime solving, if it isn’t your forte, leave it to me. All I ask of you is that you avoid being reckless. You’re clearly in the throes of self-righteous normalcy, right now, but I KNOW you, Veronica. I AM you. And your heedlessness puts Logan’s to shame.”

XXXXX

Mac returns while I’m typing this sentence, in all her blue-streaked, baby-faced, high-school-hacker glory. I hit send, log out, and erase my electronic trail, so no one can snoop, later on. Then I approach her desk, with what I hope is panache.

“Cindy Mackenzie!” I say, flopping into the chair beside her. “I’ve been looking for you! What are the odds?”

“Veronica Mars,” she replies, tearing open a bag of Skittles. “This must be an example of your amazing detective skills. Who could possibly have foreseen I’d spend my free time in the computer lab?”

“Hiring out your hacker talents to the highest bidder?” I ask. “Are you available to work for me?”

“Available? Yes,” Mac says, eyeing me over the candy package. “Willing? No. Your Justice League shenanigans are dangerous and eat hours, and I’m honestly only in this to make quick cash. Plus, you’re a smug, oblivious asshole, and when we interact, my teeth itch.”

Well, that was blunt. I sit back in my chair, surprised, and try another tack. “I owe you an apology for hooking up Dick and Meg Manning, at that party in September,” I say. “I was unaware the two of you were dating.”

“We WEREN’T dating,” she says, cool, contemptuous, and mild. “Dick doesn’t choose girls his buds don’t like, he’s a simple creature who lives by the bro code. And I don’t pick guys who won’t put me first. We WERE friends, though, which I kind of miss. Not only because he’s funny, and smarter than he looks; but because I learned all SORTS of things, hanging out at the Casablancas enclave.”

I lift my brows. This phrasing smacks of threat. “Such as?”

“Aw, Veronica, no need to tell YOU. You LIVE for gossip, and you know EVERYTHING. I’m sure Carrie Bishop will fill in the blanks, in return for your semi-gracious patronage. Perks of being Queen of the 09’ers, since Lilly Kane graduated, right? You’ve got hordes of peons eager to do your bidding. And it’s not like you suffer from cognitive dissonance, which would blind you to obvious clues.”

“Wow,” I say. “You are aware that failure to report a crime, because you want to make a classmate look bad, is behavior law enforcement frowns on?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t let VIOLENT crimes slide,” she says. “I’m not totally mercenary. But none of my ethical choices take your opinion into account. And I’m certainly not going to feed you data so you can snoop, and screw up my strategy. Now, please. Take your noblesse oblige and your righteous outrage elsewhere. I have to finish coding, before I pick up my brother from soccer.”

“I want you to remember that I came in peace, and apologized,” I say, gritting my teeth as anger floods me. “YOU’RE the one who went on the offensive. I told you I was fine with you dating Dick, and I offered to team up to solve problems. If you choose to be an obstructionist asshole, go for it, I’ll work around you. But if it turns out you’re involved with folks doing bad stuff, you should
know, I WILL make you pay. You won’t see it coming, it will sting like a bitch, and no amount of computer skills will save you. And the worst part will be, you could have sidestepped the pain, if you’d had the sense to join the winning team.”

“Duly noted,” she says, smile curling the corner of her mouth. “Now move, please, you’re blocking my light.”

I text Logan as I stalk from the computer lab; he’s idling near the door when I emerge. “How’d the lurking go?” he asks, as I climb into the car.

“Mac Mackenzie HATES me,” I say. “How did I not know that? And she’s hoarding dirt about Kendall, Beaver, Big Dick, or all three. She just threw down the gauntlet, and declared she’s working AGAINST us, because apparently, I’m a giant snob. I’m not a snob, Logan! I’m a scrappy underdog! And until she STOLE YOU FROM ME AND GOT PREGNANT, she was my BEST FRIEND!”

“You’re the most popular girl at this school, loved and feared by all. You don’t NEED Mac Mackenzie. I have never slept with her, and I never will; on the contrary, if she treats you badly, I’ll END her. And if she’s hiding information we need, we have ways of making her talk.”

“That statement brings up many conflicting emotions,” I say, shaking my head. “I need ice cream to process. I didn’t get any in the last reality, despite EXTREME provocation, and sometimes ice cream is MANDATORY. Smoothies containing vegetables do NOT COUNT.”

“Obviously,” he says, and fake-shudders. “We’ll hit Amy’s on the way home.”

He takes me, and I get my cone, three scoops of dark chocolate drenched in cream and hot fudge. I’m six bites in, crunching as fast as possible, when the slipstream screws me over AGAIN.

THREAD TWENTY NINE

My mouth WAS full of chocolate, but now it’s full of fucking SALAD. I’m sitting in the Hearst food court with Wallace, while he rambles about Uganda. I stare at my meal, all green and non-sugary, and wonder if THIS is the travesty that will break me.

“I can’t WAIT until finals are over,” Wallace says, shoveling fettucine like he’s being timed. “I’ve studied so much, my brain is JELLO.”

“Do you have any friends who speak Russian?” I ask, apropos of nothing. Because I’m clear on my Hearst priority, so why mess around? “And interact with people that aren’t strictly…law-abiding?”

He gives me a sympathetic look. “Yeah,” he says. “I’ve been thinking about this, and I might know a guy. But you can’t ask HOW I know him, because I’m not prepared to say.”

“Oooh, intrigue! Ignoring juicy secrets is not my forte, Papa Bear.”

He makes a face. “This is not so much a SECRET, as just really embarrassing. I screwed up, nearly had to change my major, and I’d prefer it doesn’t get around. I’m thinking you can sympathize?”

He sighs, because I realize who he means. “The guy is Max, right? The ‘entrepreneur’ who sells ‘study guides’?” he sets his fork down, surprised, and I say, “What? I know mechanical engineering was tough for you. And Max has a reputation. What happened, you got caught cheating?”

“OK, Veronica, I love you and all, but sometimes the amount of stuff you know about people is
creepy. Yeah, I got caught cheating; and the only reason I’m even IN engineering still is, my teacher gave me a chance to work my ass off for a B.

“But all that nonsense is beside the point. I’m pretty sure Max has the skills you need. He answered his phone once, while I was visiting, in what sounded like Russian. And he has business contacts in EVERY Hearst social circle.”

“Perfect,” I say. “Finish your eight desserts, and you can introduce me. In the meantime, I’m buying some ice cream.”

Max answers his door right after we knock; guess it pays to be readily available, during finals season. He lifts his eyebrows, when he sees who’s visiting, and I sigh. “You recognize me,” I say, resigned.

“Sorry,” he tells me, and sounds like he means it. “In my business, it's wise to stay current on campus gossip. I take it, based on the scene in the cafeteria yesterday, that you’re not happy with your newfound fame?”

Was the radio-station conversation BROADCASTED? I wonder, then give it up as irrelevant. I mean. There were witnesses to the assault, who surely spread the word. And it’s not like I could be MORE humiliated, if people knew I kicked Piz’s ass. “Can we not discuss this in the hall?”

Max waves us in, and I ask, “So I hear you speak Russian? Or some similar language?”

“My family emigrated from Minsk in 1990,” he says. “My last name is Dobrolyubov.” He wiggles his eyebrows; we stare at him blankly, and he adds, “Right. Russian joke. What can I do for you?”

I extract my phone from my messenger bag, display the picture I snapped in Wallace and Piz’s room. “Can you tell me what this says?”

He examines the photo, whistles. “This camera filmed your video, I’m guessing? Yeah, it’s the logo for a Russian tech company called Myedved. They’ve been around since the Cold War; used to make spy devices, for the KGB. After Gorbachev resigned, Russia developed large scale Mafia problems, and their merch ended up on the black market. I’d guess this was purchased back home, under the table; which in turn suggests to me that you need to leave, because I don’t want to mess with the people who bought it. You’ve seen Eastern Promises, right?”

“What this camera suggests to ME is, I’ve ALREADY offended the owner. I hear you’ve got mad computer skills. Can you help me connect the dots between the Russian mob, and our fine scholastic institution? So I have a face and name, on which to rain my righteous fury?”

“You’ll have to buy a study guide,” Max says, firmly. “And I’m officially not involved in this situation, moving forward. But the name you’re looking for is Gorya Sorokin. He was in one of my philosophy classes, and he’s got some identifying tattoos.”

“How much do the guides cost?” I ask, extracting my wallet.

“Three thousand,” he says, flatly. “I recognize you from the tabloids, Veronica Mars. For you, that’s pocket change.”

I examine my reserves and say, “I can give you a check, or $537 in cash.”

“Cash,” he says, taking the money I extend. He pulls a study guide from a drawer, slaps it against my palm. “Thanks for stopping by, have a nice life. I’m sorry for your troubles. Never come back.”
“An entrepreneur AND a gentleman,” I say. “We appreciate the assistance. I assume you’re as invested as I am, in pretending we were never here?”

He opens the door and gestures us out, in lieu of response. We walk off down the hall. Wallace looks back at Max’s shut door, shakes his head; looks at me, shakes his head again. Blind loyalty in the face of bewilderment has always been Wallace’s best quality.

“So we’ve got a place to start searching,” I say. “Or I do, since you have finals. The big question is, how does Piz tie in? Why would a nice boy from Oregon tangle with the Russian mob? I mean, is he buying study drugs? Hookers? Was he entrapped, because Sorokin’s after ME?”

Wallace doesn’t answer. When I glance at him, he looks troubled. “What?” I ask. “You don’t believe your wholesome roommate could be involved in terrible things?”

“Nah,” he scoffs. “I’ve lived in Neptune too long to be surprised. I don’t know, it’s just… that name Max gave us. It sounds familiar, I’m not sure why. Hey V, is Dick still in town? Or did he head back to Hawaii?”

I shrug. He pulls his cell out, and dials. “Yo, man. Call me when you get this.”

“Boys,” I say, smirking, as he re-pockets the phone. “Always leaving long, emotional messages. Logan really IS an aberration.”

Wallace gives me a squint-eyed look of amusement. “I’ll get back to you when I figure it out,” he says. “Sorry you’ve got to cope with this, V.”

“I’ve fought off a murder charge,” I say, attempting breeziness. “A sex tape containing zero actual coitus is small potatoes.”

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t just discuss content,” he says. “And go back to my hotel room, and textbooks, and fake blissful ignorance. You need me for anything, or you want me to just beat Piz up again, you give me a ring, say the word.”

I’m touched. “I’m gonna miss you, when you take off across the globe, do-gooding,” I murmur, giving him a hug. “Thanks for your help.”

“What did you say, once? What are friends for?” He grins at me, offers his fist to bump. I do, we both make them explode, and he walks off with a smile.

Wallace my BFF. One of the best people in my life, regardless of reality. There’s no way I’m letting him die on that stupid boat, or anywhere else. I’ll take his bullet myself, first.

XXXXX

I don’t have any idea where my car is, so I head to the library, use a public computer to research Sorokin. It’s not ideal; but I select an out-of-the-way machine, in a secluded corner, and keep my back to the wall.

It takes me an hour to track Gory, via widely available data, back to his Uncle Lev…Neptune businessman, mob ties legally unproven. Gory was born here, but his father lives in Moscow, and seems to be swimming in money. So Gory’s not a playboy; he must be in line for a position that requires accent-free English, and an MBA. Successor to the throne, maybe? The American face of the family business?

If I had Mac or Max at my disposal, I could hack the Hearst system… get his class schedule, his
address, maybe his GPA. But I’ve screwed the pooch with Mac, possibly irretrievably. And Max is
unfortunately well-informed about the dangers he faces.

I wonder briefly if the hooker Max loves is floating around, here. Would saving her earn me a favor?
I dismiss the idea—too much effort and danger, uncertain reward. I’m better off seeking help
elsewhere.

Mac was my roommate in this reality, prior to my move-in with Logan…but surely that’s shifted,
thanks to recent events? Even if she’s in the same dorm room, living the same life, she’d slam the
door in my face. I failed to consider the damage dodging Mac Senior Year would DO, to my life,
and to my team. I assumed she’d hang around, no matter how I treated her. I’m not a hands-on
friend, under the BEST circumstances; but this debacle proves I at least have to TRY.

Other V’s living the dream of my 14-year-old self, in Improved Past; she’s super-popular and alpha,
Queen of Neptune High. But her status has won ME nothing. My relationship with Logan is fraught,
and his absence feels like an amputated limb; my best friend now hates me; Wallace is leaving,
AGAIN; and there’s a sex tape of me with STOSH PIZNARSKI, which people on the internet have
SEEN.

I’m no better off, in Hearst Reality, than I was in my own, where many more Bad Things happened.
The Berkeley life I’ve yearned towards, since I started slipstreaming, may actually be a sham; and if I
don’t stop that stupid boat party, before the yacht leaves dock? The death of everyone I love lurks
waiting in the wings.

I want to take my frustration out on someone; do something that feels EFFECTIVE. I Google, ‘Who
is the Sheriff of Neptune, California?’ and the answer comes back, Vincent Van Lowe.

Of course he is. This fucking town.

Well, I decide, slapping together my possessions. Vinnie may be a worm, but he has advantages, as
an accomplice. I know where to find him; he can be bribed, with enough money (which I have); and
he can locate the data I need, legally or otherwise. Also, he’s not my father, who’s now my sole
other feasible partner. Because I’m damned if I’ll tell Dad I blew some stranger, and ended up naked
on the web.

Logan’s not the only one who would kill Piz, if that information reached his hands.

XXXXX

I try my ATM code, since I gave all my cash to Max, but it doesn’t work. So I withdraw more
money at the campus bank counter, call a cab, and take it to the police station.

I’m waiting in Vinnie’s car when he exits, promptly on the dot of 5:31. He’s in full, pressed uniform,
clean-shaven, and his hair’s cut short; it curls on his brow in a way I’m sure he thinks is noble.

He checks when he sees me, makes the tsk-tsk gesture, and tries a paternal frown. He gets in
anyway, and favors me with his bright, fake smile. “I remember you!” he says. “From my Wild West
days, before I went legit! No need to congratulate me, VMars. Your dad’s crony’s concession speech
was extremely gracious.”

“Jerry Sacks is one of ten decent people in Neptune,” I say. “Of COURSE you’d disgrace him, and
drive him into obscurity. I’m not here to discuss miscarriages of justice, though. I need information
on a family named Sorokin.”

“I fail to recognize the name of which you speak.” He gazes squint-eyed at the car roof, like he’s
wracking his brain. “I am but the simple Sheriff of a humble beach community. My job is to patrol the streets at the center, and corral the riff-raff on the fringes.”

“And are the Sorokins riff-raff? Or residents of Centerville?” I wonder.

“Ah, Veronica.” He shakes his head, regretful. “You’re SLIPPING. I just TOLD you, I have zero knowledge of, or interest in, this family. But if you’re searching for someone evasive, try the Long Goodnight Detective Agency. Word on the street is, they always catch their man.”

“I’ll make that my next stop,” I tell him, taking the hint. Lev Sorokin isn’t the guy pulling Vinnie’s strings. I assume, based on what Weevil said, that the Fitzpatricks are defunct. If the Russians’ bid failed, too, the man behind the throne could be ANYONE. “I’d say it’s been a pleasure, Vinnie, but you know. My Sunday School teacher taught me not to lie.”

I move to get out, and he holds up a hand. “Hey, Mars?” he says. “You know princes with castles aren’t nice like in Disney, right? If you end up going after any, do yourself a favor. Don’t storm the drawbridge; sneak around the back.”

I nod. This labored metaphor’s clearly a warning. “It’s weird how I actually feel GRATEFUL, right now. It’s sitting in my stomach like indigestion. Hopefully, it will pass.”

“I like tequila, for that sensation,” Vinnie says. “Just a helpful hint.”

“As always, your unwavering moral compass astounds me,” I say. “I’m nineteen and pregnant, Vinnie, get a clue.”

I give him a finger wave, and make my escape. He shakes his head and looks worried, as he watches me go.

XXXXX

The County Courthouse phone book gives me the detective agency’s address; it’s in a bad part of town, between a pawn shop, and a check-cash place. I tell the cab to wait, despite the mounting tab. Then I head, cautiously, up the rickety stairs.

The door has a notebook page duct-taped to it, on which the name of the business is scrawled: not exactly trust-inspiring, plus it means the outfit is new. It’s unlocked, so I swing it open. The outer office is dark, despite the not–late hour.

I enter, turn the corner. And there, behind the desk, feet crossed on a pile of papers, is Jerry Sacks. He’s wearing a fedora, smoking a cigar…and squinting at the roof tiles, like they hold the key to the universe.

I knock on the wall, to attract his attention. His whole body jerks, sending the papers and a cup of coffee spinning to the floor. He stands up, hides the cigar behind his back, still wafting smoke. “Hi, Veronica,” he says.

“Jerry Sacks,” I retort, my smile growing huge. “Looks like I rolled a lucky seven at last.”

XXXXX

I leave the Long Goodnight with Gory Sorokin’s life history, neatly Prying-Eyez’ed, tucked in my messenger bag. I have his dorm room number, his class schedule, a list of his friends, and his school transcript. I’ve also found links to more in-depth media, thanks to our combined expertise.
I pay Jerry to look for Weevil’s parents, while I’m at it. Because why not? It can’t hurt. Access to the tools of my trade has been spotty in the slipstream at best. Might as well take maximum advantage, when opportunity presents.

Here’s what I discover about Gory. A) he’s a big spender, a douchebag, and a player. B) his grades in his Business Major are excellent, however. And C) his police record is spotlessly clean. He’s clearly being groomed for some palatable public position. Which means his family WON’T be happy, if they learn he’s broken the law.

I don’t know Dad’s address, and he’s not listed. Nor does he answer when I call. So I direct the cabbie to the Neptune Grand, book a single, and order room service on the way up. I flop on the bed and register, for the first time, how much I depend on slipstream Logan. I know nothing about my own life, because I leave all the details to him.

His absence expands in my chest, a wingspan of ache. I pull my phone out of my bag, dial his number. He doesn’t answer, of course, and I ought to hang up. But our last communication was that letter, and I just…want him to know how I feel.

“Hey,” I say, when the phone beeps. “Should I call out ‘Honey I’m home!’? You’re in basic training, I just slipstreamed here, and I miss you a lot right now. Like it’s hard to breathe. Things have been…eventful, as usual, and since you’re not around, I had to ask Vinnie for help. It wasn’t so bad, really, aside from the lingering scent of brimstone. He proved useful; although his hints about princes in castles were weird, to say the least. But Jerry Sacks is a detective now, and he found me the data I need.

“I got your letter, you should know, clever delivery system, by the way. I guess this is MY message into the void, in return. I just want to say I love you. I realized, today, how heroic and dependable you’ve been, throughout this slipstream ordeal. I’m just so…glad I have you, to count on. You understand and accept my dilemma, and you continue to love me despite it. You really are extraordinary. I’m so proud of you. And I can’t wait for the day when I see you again.”

My call waiting beeps, so I hang up, and answer. Wallace’s voice comes, agitated, across the line. “Veronica, where are you? It’s dinnertime, and no one’s at your house.”

“Neptune Grand,” I say. “Room 1431. Waiting on a buffalo burger, leaving lovelorn messages on Logan’s voicemail. I forgot my address AND lost my keys, then couldn’t reach Dad.”

“Will you be there for like the next half hour?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say, slowly. “Room service, remember?”

“OK, we’re coming over. See you in a few.”

He hangs up, and I look at the phone with concern. Give up, with a shrug, and decide to wash my face.

I study myself as I pat dry…I’m thin, but I look like REAL me. I realize there’s another mirror, hung on the back of the door. My reflection reflects, and reflects again, ad infinitum. I stare at the funhouse-repeating images, and have a slipstream epiphany.

I’ve assumed there are four realities, which change based on things I do. But what if that’s not true? What if there are INFINITE realities, only some of which I’ve visited? What if every choice I make leads to a different one?

Could I perhaps visit worlds spun from different high-school choices? Am I stuck with the results of
adventures in Improved Past? If I turn the right corner, wish upon a star, could I find my way back home?

Yesterday, in Berkeley reality, I asked to be sent elsewhere; and the slipstream OBLIGED. Could I use that trick again, to navigate? Would being in a place that exists everywhere, like Neptune High or Howl’s, help? I mean, Howl’s hosted that freaky reality nexus, which scared the crap out of Logan. But it doesn’t exist, where I come from, and maybe that’s key.

I still think Berkeley Logan’s lying, about not recognizing me. But whether he’s playing a game or not? Kudos for making me think.

Wallace arrives right after my food does, Dick in tow. The concerned looks on their faces bode ill. As does the way Wallace says, “We need to talk.”

“OK, but I gotta eat,” I say, smothering my burger in curry ketchup. I take a huge bite. “Pregnant, underweight, you know the drill.”

“So you know professional adult life is all about connections,” Wallace begins. I arch my brows at him, chewing, and Dick says, “Dude, just get on with it.”

“We’re connected.” Wallace gestures between Dick and himself, willing me, earnest, to get it. “And everybody tells us, network more. Like Dick joined a frat, and I rushed, but decided too much temptation to party. I was interested in other organizations, though. Like, professional organizations, which help you get a leg up on your career, and we…”

“We got invited to join a secret society called the Castle,” Dick says, interrupting Wallace with a look. “Like Skull and Bones, you know? Or Opus Dei? We’re totally not supposed to tell anybody, this is a major secret.”

“Of course you did. The billionaire boys’ club strikes again.” A thought occurs to me. “Logan, too?”

Wallace winces, and Dick says, “We did NOT mention Logan, Rons. The only reason we’re bringing this up is that Sorokin guy.”

“Yeah, there were these newspapers we had to take, from a special box, at a special time,” Wallace says. “They contained information about a meeting. I showed up early to get mine with…somebody, and we saw this blonde guy putting them in. I said, look, another victim, and ‘somebody’ said, ‘That’s Gory Sorokin. He’s Russian mafia, my friend. We’re in a lot more trouble than we realized’.”

“Dude, she knows who somebody is. She’s not retarded,” Dick says.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Dick,” I say, and eat a handful of fries. “No matter how offensively phrased. Too bad somebody’s shipped his stupid ass off to Illinois, to run ten miles a day in combat boots. I could really use his help with this clusterfuck.”

“Somebody always turns into a pathetic cautionary tale, when harshed by chicks,” Dick agrees. “It’s like his one fatal flaw.”

“Well, girls and booze,” Wallace says. “Got to keep somebody away from tequila, or stupid CRAZY things tend to happen.”

“Regardless,” I say; because bitching about Logan’s poor drunken coping choices will not help. “While I appreciate your candor, I don’t see what this knowledge buys me. Why would a rich boy’s secret society distribute sex tapes of a member’s wife?”
“No, V, you’re looking at this backwards,” Wallace says. “The reason I’m IN this society is YOU. Well, Logan and you. Logan told me the head of the Castle is Jake Kane.”

“Which means it’s cake to deal with Sorokin, Rons,” Dick says. “Jake will NOT be cool with that guy exploiting you on the web.”

Oh, boy. I rub at the headache between my eyes; Vinnie’s warning about princes in castles flits through my mind. “So I just tell my stepfather Piz taped me, and he’ll take on the Russian mob?”

“I’d tell Wiedman,” Dick says, and Wallace nods. They’ve obviously discussed this. “Like I said the other day. That’s dude’s effective.”

“Fine,” I say. “You win. By all means, let’s make him earn his paycheck.”

“You want a ride to Keith’s?” Wallace asks. “After you eat? My mom keeps his spare key, for emergencies. I’m pretty sure this qualifies.”

I nod, and they hang with me while I finish, making jokes to cheer me up. I know they both have places to be, but they care enough to stay.

I sprawl across Wallace’s back seat, on the way home, and listen to their banter. The sun shines warm through the windows, and the world fades slowly to black.
The Sun Disintegrates Between a Wall of Clouds

Chapter Notes

Buckle up, folks, this one's an important and action-heavy chapter.

Trigger warnings for thread 29 inverts: non-graphic canon instances of kidnap and torture, made AU; references to canon abuse

Trigger warnings for thread 30: non-graphic first person accounts of the boat shooter in action. My purpose is always to entertain, never to offend; so I have bracketed the first person accounts in this section with rows of five asterisks, and summarized the reveals in a conversation at the end. Readers who choose to skip the descriptive passages won't miss any important plot points, just some character development. :-)

THREAD TWENTY NINE INVERTS

Someone is humming. It’s a high, clear voice, soprano; pleasant, though not as good as mine. The tune sounds familiar, but my brain slips around it, not grasping. My stomach heaves, and I think GOD, enough with the morning sickness.

Love Hurts. That’s the song. No words, just humming, and I’m back in Java the Hut, watching that slideshow of Logan stripping for Kendall, while Karaoke Guy stabs spikes through my heart. The floor is cold under my cheek. I shift, but can’t get comfortable.

Wait. The floor?

My eyes snap open, but my vision’s blurred. I see grey…cement beneath me, dirty walls, cheap metal door, industrial and slick-surfaced. A girl’s feet, encased in brown loafers, smear of dirt across a long leg. I try to sit, waver, and go back down. Something is WRONG with me.

“It’s déjà vu all over again, huh?” the humming voice says, and I shake my head to clear my vision. Slowly, the room resolves; I gaze up at a very-much-the-worse-for-wear Meg Manning. She doesn’t look injured, beyond a bruise on her chin. But she’s dirty, her hair is snarled, and her pink halter top is torn along one side.

“What do you mean?” I manage. My voice sounds hoarse. “Where are we?”

She indicates our surroundings, like she’s Vanna White. We’re in a bathroom, of the gas-station variety…no windows, one bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. “Same place we were last time those bikers kidnapped us,” she says. “Locked in the john, at their warehouse.”

“Last time?” Panic rises through my esophagus, gathers in my throat. “You mean the night Felix Toombs was killed? We were HERE?”

“You really don’t remember?” Meg looks mildly skeptical, and I remember what Dick said about her two expressions. Shouldn’t she be more upset? “I thought it was an act. I mean, I would have lied too, if it kept me from getting railroaded for murder. Don’t think I’m judging you.”

“I hit my head,” I say. “It’s common to forget the time period surrounding a head injury.”
“Maybe you won’t remember this either, then,” she says. She shifts against the wall, folding her arms, and stretches her legs out. “You screamed and fought so much, when they nabbed us in the mall parking lot, that they hit you today, too.”

“How long have we been here?”

She shrugs. “Sorry, I’m not wearing a watch. It’s been a while. Long enough that I was worried you wouldn’t wake up. Last time, I was here for three days before you came. They brought food at random intervals, usually burgers. From McDonald’s, which I HATE.”

“Did they take you out for any reason?” I ask. I sit up, stretch to test my range of motion. My back is knotted, painful, and the room spins. “Like to walk, stretch your legs?”

She shakes her head. “They’re not overly concerned with our comfort. We’ve got a toilet, and a faucet for water. I guess they figure that’s all we need.”

“WHY did they take us?” I ask. “Do you know?”

She makes a see-saw motion with her hand. “Last time, they said they needed leverage over my dad. I’m not sure why. I THOUGHT, back then, they wanted to extort money. But now I’m pretty sure Stewart’s committing drug crimes, and these guys are mixed up in it. Dick told me yesterday that their leader, some boy called Thumper, was taken in for questioning. I’m guessing he’s scared we’ll come forward, about the first kidnapping? And this is him, cleaning up loose ends?”

“I don’t remember what happened, last time,” I say slowly. Her matter of fact acceptance of this situation both impresses and disturbs me. “Like, at all. Mind filling in the blanks?”

“Why not?” she says, with a shrug. “I thought of all the time, while we wait to be killed. Let’s see...you showed up unconscious last time, too, but you didn’t seem hurt. I learned later that they chloroformed you, when they grabbed you from your car. But that was after I escaped.

“Anyway, you woke up eventually, but you were REALLY groggy. You kept talking about Logan, and how Trina dying was all your fault. Then that Felix guy came to get us, he had a revolver.

“They’d taken our purses, but I guess they didn’t search you, because you pulled a can of mace out of your pocket. You sprayed his face. He started yelling, clawing at his eyes, trying to grab you; hit his hand against a post, dropped the gun. I figured if we went back in the bathroom, we’d wind up dead. So I picked it up, and I shot him.

“You were incoherent, still, you could barely walk, so I tried to drag you out of here. But you wouldn’t leave without your bag. You said you had evidence in it about the Fitzpatricks, proving they were guilty of something bad. You said Trina gave it to you, after her boyfriend hurt her.

“So we came back, and Thumper was here, freaking out about Felix. He tackled you, and the two of you struggled; then he smacked your head against the ground, hard, and you stopped moving. I spotted our purses on a big table in the middle of the room, and I just...grabbed them, and ran.

“I’m sorry, Veronica. I know I should have tried to help you, but I was scared. I thought you might be dead. I figured at least I could give the bag to the police, to prove you were abducted, and tell them where the warehouse was. I could show them the evidence, and help get rid of the Fitzpatricks.

“But I went home before the police station, to clean up, because I just...I CAN’T be dirty in public. And my dad found me. He wanted to punish the gang, at first. But then he took your bag away, and got really mad because of this empty Ziploc inside it. He said I had to keep my mouth shut about being kidnapped, unless he told me otherwise, or God would make him test me. And I...I’m
ashamed of myself, Veronica. He took your evidence. And I didn't say a word."

I stare at her, my brain scrambling to assimilate. In THIS reality you didn't, I think. In Prison Reality, Stewart demanded that you testify against me, and you AGREED. I thought Meg made the whole story up, at the time; but it looks like, instead, she just twisted the truth, to shift the blame off herself.

Meg’s fabrications were never about saving Grace. She did what Stewart demanded out of fear for her OWN safety.

“Grace used those words,” I murmur, as the puzzle pieces start to mesh. “When we took her away from your house. ‘I don’t want to be tested’. She was so terrified, she wouldn’t come out of the closet. Whatever testing is, it doesn’t leave a mark. The court found no evidence of physical abuse.”

Meg looks at me, and something dark shifts inside her eyes. “It’s poison, Veronica. He makes you drink the stuff, in a cup of juice. If you don’t die, that means God forgives you. I’ve been tested 4 times, so I know God REALLY loves me. But I wish he’d showed it by setting me free.

“Instead, YOU’RE the one who did that, you and Lilly, when you went public about Grace. You gave me a chance to break loose of Stewart, once and for all. I felt so guilty, Veronica, I HAD to help you. Because I left you here, and ran, and you still saved my sisters and me.”

“That’s why you testified,” I realize. “You told the police we had a key, and an invitation to enter the house. You kept us out of jail as payback, which must have made your dad REALLY mad.”

“I was DONE.” She sneers, definitely a new expression. “I had one chance to get out from under his thumb, and I jumped on it with a vengeance. I pretended to be sweet and submissive my whole life… I’m SO good at it…but when I went to the cops, I blew my disguise.

“I knew I could never live with him again, once I’d betrayed him; he’d kill me. And I won’t let that happen, Veronica. Not after all I’ve been through, the notebook-writing and cups of juice, the praying for hours, and the dark, locked rooms. If he ever comes near me again, he’s the one who’ll find out how much God loves him. Saving myself from Felix taught me just how strong I am.”

Fuck my life, I think, struggling to keep my face blank. Stewart didn’t drive the car off the cliff in Hearst Reality, with Meg inside. MEG drove the car off the cliff, to get rid of STEWART.

Sweet little Disney Princess Meg Manning, who always wears a smile, and has her hair braided by cartoon birds? Harbors nascent homicidal impulses, on which she isn’t afraid to act.

And I have, all unwitting, hooked her up with Dick.

“You don’t have to worry about Stewart anymore, though, Meg,” I say. Gently, I hope. “He’s lost custody of all of you. And Dick’s very dedicated to making sure he stays away.”

She laughs. “Yeah, Dick Casablancas, knight in shining armor,” she says. “He’s handsome, and he’s funny; and I’ve enjoyed being FREE for once, to live an actual human life. But whenever I want some alone time, to GET STUFF DONE, he ALWAYS interferes. Deep down, I think party boy Dick is more goody-goody than he pretends. He loves talking about your Justice League; but he doesn’t have the stomach for actual justice.”

Okay, I have never even CONSIDERED a scenario where the non-Dick party in a relationship is the scary one. I’m reviewing and discarding approaches, when yelling starts, beyond the door. It’s faint, blocked by sheetrock, but something about it makes me anxious. I glance at Meg, and the concern in her eyes mirrors my own.
Shit is going down.

The noise ceases for a minute, then starts again, climbing in pitch, hysterical. It sounds like someone’s being TORTURED out there. It sounds like…

“Is that Logan?” Meg asks, and my whole body breaks out in goosebumps. Not the good kind.

“We have to get OUT OF HERE!” I shout, jumping to my feet, almost falling over. “We have to HELP!” I case the room frantically, but there’s no handle on the door, no window, nothing but the toilet; which, when I look, gagging, is just a foul-scented thing with no water.

“We can’t,” she says, her face faintly reflecting pity. “I’m sorry, I’ve tried.”

I kick the door and yell, frantic. It feels good, so I do it again. Maybe if I make enough noise, I’ll distract them. Maybe they’ll open the door and give me a fighting chance…at which point, anyone who’s hurt Logan will fucking DIE IN FLAMES.

“I’m gonna DESTROY YOU ALL!” I scream, pounding and kicking with every ounce of my strength. “You have NEVER SUFFERED LIKE I WILL MAKE YOU SUFFER!”

I keep shouting, every curse word and vituperation I can think of, and the noise outside dies down. I dent the metal with my kicks, and keep going. Maybe it’s thin enough to make a hole.

Then the door’s yanked open by two men in black, wearing ski masks. One of them points a gun at my face.

“What, you want to join the party?” he asks, cocking his head; I can tell by the machismo, the body language, that it’s Thumper. “We weren’t ready for you yet… but you miiiiight help move this information-gathering session along.” He jerks his head at his companion. “Grab the other one. She’s Echolls’ best friend’s girl, that’s twice the bargaining power.”

He yanks me out of the bathroom, his grip on my upper arm punishing. We’re in a warehouse, like Meg said, soaring ceiling, exposed plywood and beams. Boxes sealed with duct tape line the walls. Thumper drags me past, out into the room at large, and yeah.

There’s a table in the middle, like Meg said. And Logan’s tied to it.

He’s panting, sweaty, his eyes and mouth open wide with distress; but his wounds are consistent with a minor fistfight. Whatever they’ve done to make him scream, it hasn’t injured him. His gaze meets mine, and his jaw tightens with resolve. He blows me a kiss. I clench my teeth hard, to keep emotion in.

“So this pinche guey here,” Thumper says, gesturing carelessly with the gun at Logan, “ambushed me at the 7-11, tried to beat your whereabouts out of me. As you can see, that didn’t work out too good, from his perspective. What I want to learn is, how’d he hear I took you? And how’d he know where to find me? But he won’t say.

“We just played a couple rounds of Russian Roulette with his arms, and his dick; but he’s STILL not talking. So maybe we play with you cheerleaders, instead. See if that has a better effect.”

He cocks the gun, aims it at my head, and I say, “When I get my hands on you, I’ll make the Spanish Inquisitors look like amateurs. I am so not kidding. I don’t forgive people who mess with Logan.”

He laughs. “Sweetheart, if you’ve got a bullet in your brain, how you gonna stop me from doing anything I want?”
“Wow, every time I think you can’t get dumber, you prove me wrong,” Logan interrupts, voice mocking. “The police have an APB out on you already. Your Fitzpatrick overlords are in jail. If you think a torture-and-murder spree, through a field of your social superiors, will make you LESS of a target? I weep for the future of America.”

The gun swings back towards Logan. Based on the humorless smirk he gives, that’s where he wants it; the attitude-while-tied-to-a-table was him distracting the predator.

“The only thing I’m guilty of so far is kidnapping, and threatening,” Thumper says. His mouth spreads into a grin, filling the lower hole of his mask. “And you know what they say. No witnesses, no crime.” He cocks the gun, aims it consideringly at Logan’s chest. “They also say it’s better to burn out than fade away, and I’m starting to believe it.”

“Maybe so,” a dry voice allows, behind him. “But you ain’t gonna do either.”

Thumper and his crony spin; Weevil, Arturo and six other armed guys emerge from the shadows around us. Thumper makes as if to aim, and Weevil says, “I wouldn’t. You know I don’t point a gun unless I’m ready to fire.”

Thumper looks at the weapon in his hand, back at Weevil. I can see him considering options; burn out, or fade away? I tense, grabbing Meg's wrist so we can drop, if guns start firing. But Thumper just sighs, and tosses the gun to the ground.

I close my eyes, take a deep breath. Thank God I'm the only one around here who's seen the future. If Thumper knew what Weevil has in mind, he would have gone down shooting.

“Did you really have to time your entrance for maximum drama?” Logan demands, behind me, breaking the tension. “Because that’s MY shtick. Also, we need to have a chat about what constitutes full disclosure. When I signed up to play decoy, so we could flush out Thumper’s hiding place and cronies, I didn’t bargain on getting my DICl shot off!”

“Much as I enjoy seeing you sweat,” Weevil says, “Russian Roulette’s a scare tactic. I’ve never seen it played with a loaded gun. This type of situation, however, calls for plenty of bullets, and untraceable pieces. We were unavoidably delayed, waiting for some to show up.”

“Masks off,” Arturo says, from beside Weevil. “We want to see the faces of the assholes who betrayed us.”

Thumper and his friend glance at each other, then reluctantly concede. To my surprise, his assistant is Vinh, the guy who tried to stab Wallace at the beach. I wonder if Chardo switched sides again, when confronted with Weevil’s re-emergence to power. Or if he got run out of town, the way he did back home.

“You idiot,” Weevil says to Vinh, disgusted. “You’re out. Arturo, escort this gentleman to a more private location, teach him a lesson about defying authority. Then make sure he leaves town. Alive,” he adds, with a pointed glance at me.

Arturo walks over to Logan; gazes down at his prone form, with a slight headshake. “This makes us even,” he says.

“Wrong,” Logan says. “The deal was, you're Team Veronica permanently. It was never about me at all.”

“You talk pretty big for a guy tied to a table,” Arturo says. ”But okay. As long as being Team Veronica doesn't land me in trouble.”
Weevil turns his gun on Thumper, ignoring the banter. “Now YOU pose a problem,” he says. “You shot me, as part of your power play, and I can’t let that slide. I’m betting you offed Felix, too, when he tried to set these girls loose. I’m thinking twice the disloyalty equals twice the punishment.”

“If that’s what you believe, you’re an idiot,” Thumper protests. He seems more outraged by the suggestion than scared, like he still doesn't understand his peril. “Felix was HELPING me. He needed a bunch of money pronto, so he could run away with Molly Fitzpatrick. She was like his forbidden love. I was offered a hundred grand by Liam to take these two girls, hold them until he needed them. And I cut Felix in so he’d be out of the way, when the time came for you to…retire. I didn’t want to fight him, I LOVED the guy.

“I showed up that night to get the tall one, because Liam said he was ready for her, and Felix was on the ground, dead. Veronica seems real sincere, when she says she didn’t off him. But she’s a fucking liar.”

A look of indescribable rage comes over Weevil’s face, and he struggles to battle it back. “Veronica,” he says, voice stifled. “I’m not gonna be happy, if it turns out you managed to play me.”

“I’ve told the truth from the start,” I insist, thanking God for the year of torment Logan rained down upon me; I'm very good, now, at making sure fear doesn’t show. “The whole night of Felix’s death is a blank, between getting pulled from my car, and waking up in that alley. But I was drugged to the point where I couldn’t walk, then hit on the head, and there was no gunpowder residue on my hands. The odds that I'm guilty are laughable.

“Meg tells me it was Felix who took us out of the holding cell, and I managed to mace him. Then Thumper showed up, knocked me out, and Meg ran, because she thought I was dead. Her story’s consistent with the evidence, so I believe it. Beyond that, it’s all conjecture.

“I can’t tell you for sure who shot your friend; I have a theory, but no proof. Thumper's definitely CAPABLE, though. If you hadn’t showed up, he would have murdered US.”

Weevil considers me for a long moment, face inscrutable. Then he nods. And this tells me something I’ve never realized; Weevil believes I'll be honest, even when I'm literally under the gun. Eli Navarro, who I’ve consistently failed to trust, trusts ME.

And he can—everything I’ve told him, I believe to be true. A confession with no supporting evidence proves nothing. I won’t subject a kidnap victim, who may have panicked in fear of her life, to possible Old Testament justice. And I won’t let Thumper, a clear and present danger, weasel out of the reckoning he deserves.

Weevil looks to Meg for corroboration, and she crumples. “The whole time I was here, I was so SCARED,” she says, and she looks so innocent and terrified, I almost believe her. Tears well up, spill over her lower lids. “I was sure we would DIE. I’m a coward, and when I got the chance, I ran. I’m sorry.”

Weevil studies her, gaze softening. He looks back at me, resigned, and I can tell he's realized she’s the culprit. I watch his face as the stories merge and mesh, in his mind; and see the exact moment lost, pretty Meg gets a pass. “Veronica, untie Echolls,” he tells me, turning away. “He’s gonna hurt himself, trying to break loose and save you.”

I walk over to Logan, stroke his face, and he nuzzles into my hand. I check the knots, but he's yanked them too tight to shift. “Got a knife?” I ask.

“Right front pocket,” he says. I pull out the little switchblade he uses to cut apples, and saw carefully
through the ropes. He jackknifes up the second he’s free, enfolds me in his arms, squeezing so tightly I can’t breathe. “Jesus,” he murmurs, under his breath. I stroke his back.

“Yeah, enough with the tender moments,” Weevil says. “V, you need to take your friends and go. I got this, from here on out.”

“What are you going to do?” I ask, eyeing Thumper the way I would a bug. He’s not grinning anymore.

“Eduardo’s gonna plead his case,” Weevil says. “With no witnesses around who might sway events. He’ll lay out his reasons for betraying his crew to Irishmen, and I’ll explain my policy on dealing with rats. No need to worry, though, V. You ain’t ever gonna see him again.”

“Remember you’re Catholic, while you’re having this conversation,” I say. “Ask yourself, what would Jesus do? Not for Thumper’s sake, but for yours. Feel free to view him as a moneylender at the Temple, though; I promised him payback, and I expect you to deliver.”

This surprises a laugh out of Weevil. He shakes his head at me, mouth pursed. “So you and I, we’re good now, right?”

“Yeah,” I say, quietly. “We may not always see eye to eye, but you just proved how much you’ve got my back.”

“I do,” he agrees, with the bob of his head he thinks is so smooth. “I won’t always dance to your tune, V, because your tune don’t take into account practical reality. But you can depend on me to come looking, if you’re in danger of ending up dead.”

“Ditto,” I say, and turn to go.

Logan gets up carefully—his limbs are probably asleep—and nods his thanks to Weevil. Weevil nods back. Logan, Meg and I limp out slowly into the night.

Logan’s the one who shivers, and wants to be held, as we trek across to his Range Rover, which someone’s parked out front. I remain stoic, but note, from a distance, that all my muscles are clenched.

Meg, though—she sits silent in the back seat all the way home, composed and serene, unburdened by guilt. Meg Manning is used to suffering, and hiding her feelings. She’s a deeper, scarier person than I ever suspected.

THREAD THIRTY

One moment, I’m in the passenger seat of the Range Rover, reviewing my night at the warehouse, and slowly going numb. The next I’m sprawled on the couch of that horrible grey apartment, watching the family drive away before the Poltergeist house implodes. Empty beers and junk food bags cover the coffee table in front of me; Logan slouches alongside, unshaven and dirty. His eyes are so bloodshot they seem pink. I don’t even WANT to know what I look like.

Loki noses up to the table, eyeing me cautiously. When I don’t move, he knocks a bag of chips off with his paw, and starts eating.

“God DAMN it!” I say, because enough is ENOUGH. I jump up, causing a beer to tip over. Loki abandons the chips to lick the spill, one eye fixed firmly on me. “I CANNOT HANDLE this place right now! It's been a ROUGH FEW DAYS, Logan! I just this minute escaped kidnappers! I WON’T ACCEPT THIS LAME-ASS FUCKING REALITY, UNTIL I’VE HAD A CHANCE
“Well, look who came a’callin’,” he says lazily, drunk off his ass and clearly amused. “Veronica Mars Robinson, inter-dimensional ass-kicker. Lost in space. So does that make me the tacky 50’s robot, shrieking ‘danger’? I do a better Dr. Smith.” He adopts a campy mien, hand to his heart, and intones, “Sarcasm is the recourse of a WEAK mind.”

“This is no time for your so-called jokes,” I snap. “We’re in the Neptune where the Nautilus sank, right? How many people were on board? And where’s Backup?”


“No parents?” I demand. “Dad is OK? Alicia? Jake and Lianne? Your mom? Susan Knight wasn’t there, or Bryson?”

“ALL FINE,” he says, with an emphatic, flat-palmed gesture. He gets up to face me, tense all over. “Are you saying you showed up here before, and those people WEREN’T fine? Are you saying you managed to CHANGE things?”

“You changed things,” I tell him. “You must have convinced Lilly somehow to downscale. You don’t remember the last time I came? You were tripping at some frat party. I rescued you, and brought you home.”

I take a good look around the apartment and wow; it’s unpacked and staged, but not the same way I did it. Despite the hedonism on the coffee table, it shows clear signs of an obsessive cleaning spree, the type that only happens when I’m angling. And it’s been decorated in a flamboyant and haphazard way, heavy on the movie posters. I’m guessing I de-germed, Logan tried to make it homey, and we both gave up pretty quick.

“Are you kidding?” he asks, I guess rhetorically, because he continues before I can speak. “NONE of that happened! Do you know what Veronica would DO to me, if I took drugs among strangers? Not worth the pain, Mrs. R, no matter how fun it sounds. She’s EXTREMELY protective of those loved ones she has left.”

“Did anybody survive?” I ask. “Any passengers, I mean?”

“Lilly and Luke,” he tells me. “And Madison. Luke lost a leg; the shooter thought he was dead, and didn’t waste a second bullet. Lilly escaped to the engine room, and radioed for help. Madison hid.”

“I want to talk to them,” I say. “I want to talk to them all, right now. I need to read newspaper articles, and look at the case file, too, so I can figure out exactly what happened.”

“Neither of us can DRIVE, Veronica,” he protests. “In case you haven’t noticed, we’ve been drinking all morning. We’re having a horror movie marathon.”

“Then we rent a fucking chauffeur,” I say. “We still have plenty of money, right?”

He smiles at me. With the messy hair, red eyes, and general air of debauchery, he looks like a cheerful maniac. “We do,” he concedes.

“Get your ass in the shower and clean up,” I say. “I’ll dig through the yellow pages for a car
“Come with me,” he pleads. He tries to make his voice flirtatious; but when I glance up, there’s desperation in his gaze. “I haven’t seen you in a year. And I hate to shower alone.”

“Give me a phone and phone book,” I say. “Write down our address. Then go heat the water up, I’ll be with you in five.”

I schedule the car, and head to the bathroom; strip, and enter the enormous, grey-tiled stall. He’s clean, still a little soapy, sitting on the floor while water pours down around him. He smiles at me, and stands.

“We have an hour,” I say. “What can I do in that time, to make you feel better?”

His grin turns naughty, but it’s got a frantic edge. “What’s on offer?”

“We’re past the coy phase,” I say. “Use your words. Let me know what you need.”

He steps closer, running a slippery hand down my spine. “I just want you,” he says, and his voice cracks, fervent. “Coming in my arms, telling me you love me. I’ll take you apart with pleasure, you’ll put my life back together. While I stand behind you, playing the role of muscle. Like we do.”

“Deal,” I say, and guide his hand between my legs. “Let’s work on your job first.”

I’m afraid he’ll break down after he comes, he’s so needy and overwhelming, so desperate for touch. He keeps it together; but he does cry a little, holding me tightly, like the orgasm was therapy. I expect this is how it is for him and his Veronica now, both of them raw and damaged and sad. But for me, it brings up uncomfortable echoes of the way things used to be.

When we first dated, when I acknowledged I couldn’t stay away, his need swamped me. His life was so hard…abusive father, dead mother, shitty friends, unsympathetic sister. He was sucked up to yet mocked, by people jealous of his rise, eager for his fall. Desperate for love, he made me his everything, and expected me to save him from spiraling into the pit.

I was damaged too, though, and I responded by withdrawing. I didn’t WANT to be his everything. I knew, even then, that he had to save himself. I was young and scared, and it felt like too much pressure—it WAS too much. So in fear and self-preservation, I ran.

I’ve gotten used to him, in the slipstream, as a guy who’s learned to love himself. Who knows his own strength. Watching him go this route frightens me. I might be going this route too, here, and that frightens me even MORE.

I stroke his hair, tell him I’ll fix things. Tell him it will be all right. And I WILL fix things. Because I can’t end up in this place, watching the two of us sink slowly into squalor. I’m afraid someday I’d run, the way my mother did.

I ordered our ride from a classic car company, because I wanted to make Logan laugh. So when it shows up, a cherry-red ’59 Coupe de Ville, with a black-and-white-interior and tail fins, the grin that breaks across his face feels like sunshine.

He skips down the front steps and swings me off the stoop, kissing my forehead, taking my hand. He
laughs when the Nehru-jacketed driver holds the door open, helps me sit like I’m a Regency duchess. “You sure know how to show a boy a good time,” he murmurs, scooting in beside me. Drapes an arm around my shoulders, kisses my head again.

“This is nothing compared to your generosity in the shower,” I say, elbowing him, and snuggle into his side. He smirks, curving his body to support mine.

He seems content to ride in silence, gently toying with my hair, which works. Because the headache that began while we were lying in bed, exhausted and unmotivated post-coitus, has ramped up to excruciating. My stomach’s queasy, too, and I’m not sure why. I can’t be pregnant, here, and I NEVER get sick, no matter how poor my diet. I press my fingertips to the spot between my brows, trying to rub away pain. Logan looks up from the one-handed text he’s sending, and says, “Hung over?”

“Am I?” I ask. “I’m not sure. Even when I had morning sickness and was puking my guts up, I never felt like this.”

He reaches into the inner pocket of his jacket, matter-of-factly pulls out a flask. Extends it, with a lifted brow.

I smack it away. “That’s the LAST thing I need,” I say. “I’ve had too much beer already.”

“You can’t stop her from drinking, Ronica,” he tells me. “It’s her life, her choice. Have a little whiskey, then we’ll buy some Gatorade. It will keep you functional until you’ve got time to sleep. Trust me on this.”

“Logan,” I say. “Why do you live like this? You have too much potential to waste your time boozing.”

“Veronica,” he parrots. “Except for those years in high school, when you visited regularly? I’ve ALWAYS been this way. I started drinking when I was eleven, to tide me over until the Percocet kicked in.” He uncaps the flask, takes a couple long swallows. “It’s not smart or good or noble, but it gets me through the day. If I wanted to stop, I’d have to leave her, and Neptune, and Lils, and that’s…not ever in the cards. They didn’t abandon me, when our lives went to hell. No way will I be the one who runs, just to save myself.”

I take the flask from his hand, try some. Drink a little more. It burns my throat, makes my nose itch, but yeah. After a few minutes, as the warmth spreads through my system, I realize; whiskey helps. It helps so MUCH it’s kind of seductive, and this must be how addicts are born.

I’ve turned into my mother, here, I realize, as I settle back onto his shoulder. And he’s turned into his.

XXXXX

“All right,” I say. The booze and sick headache merge with hopelessness and lack of sleep to make me lazy, slow. “Who were you texting? Where should we go first?”

He shrugs, and muscles shift under his jacket. He was pale in the shower, but still pretty buff. He hasn’t begun wasting away. “Luke’s in the rehab facility, and can’t leave. He’s still learning to walk with the prosthesis. Not to be gauche, but he’s pretty much a captive audience.”

“Ah, black humor,” I say. “Give the address to the driver, we’ll be the rehab equivalent of wedding crashers. I can already feel Luke’s joy.”
Logan presses the intercom button, speaks to the chauffeur. When he sits back, I say, “I need you to tell me.”

“Tell you what?” he asks. “Interrogate all you want. I promise I’ll fold.”

“Hmmm,” I say, “Experience proves otherwise. I need to know what happened the night of the boat disaster. What we saw. I want to compare your story to the last one I heard. It’s important, or I wouldn’t ask, and bare bones is fine.”

He strokes my arm, shoulder to elbow, languid. Takes another drink. “We were arguing on the dock,” he says. “About New York. There was a loud noise, I thought it was a car behind us, backfiring; then I looked up from your face, and noticed the yacht was on fire. I tried to call Wallace, and Dick, but the calls went to voicemail. The ship tilted sideways. Veronica was on the phone, but she…I don’t remember what she said. I called 911.

“The Coast Guard spent like an hour conducting the rescue, but they couldn’t save the boat. We waited at the Marina until they brought everybody ashore. Lils was laughing with tears running down her face, she had a big cut on her arm. They took her away in an ambulance. Madison stood with Veronica for a minute, but I was talking to the cops, I don’t know what they said. We went to the hospital, stayed there all night. Your dad came with Alicia, then left with her. Celeste showed up too, and cried; turns out she loves her daughter, after all. Is that the same?”

“Substantially,” I say. “Like I said, less people were at the party, here. And you were tripping when you told me before, so you left a lot of stuff out.”

“I have no clue who could have killed them,” he says. “I can’t think of anyone capable.”

“Nobody EVER believes the people they know are capable of mass murder,” I say. “Let’s talk to Luke. Maybe we can get a better picture of how it all went down.”

*****

Luke’s rehab facility is ultra-posh; upscale real estate with high-end build-out, every surface caramel leather or cherrywood. It almost doesn’t seem like a hospital. But the requisite equipment is tucked in the corners of his room, and there’s a slight antiseptic smell.

Luke’s sprawled on the couch watching big-screen TV, crutches balanced beside him. His leg’s still heavily bandaged; one arm, and his right ear, are wrapped in gauze. So much for his baseball career, I think as I circle around. At least he’s not dead, like most of his friends.

“Oh, look who’s here,” he says when he sees us, laying his remote carefully on the armrest. As always, Luke’s attempt at sarcasm sounds strained. “Nothing good can come of this visit. I hope you at least brought flowers.”

“Veronica’s trying to figure out what happened, on the boat,” Logan says, gesturing to encompass Luke’s injuries. “She wants to ask you some questions.”

“Veronica, the FBI wants to know what happened,” Luke says, exasperated. “Don’t you think they’re a BIT more equipped to handle an investigation than two slacker college dropouts?”

“Maybe,” I say. “But since they won’t share their data with me, who knows? Can you handle talking about what you saw?”

“I already told the police,” he says. “Then the police again, then the FBI, then my therapist, like seven times. At this point, I could recite the story to random passers-by and feel nothing. It doesn’t
even seem real, not like the aftereffects do.” He looks down at the remote, up at us. “Is that weird? I mean, the whole thing might as well have been a dream.”

“It’s called dissociation,” Logan says, mildly. “I have no idea how common that is, but it’s happened to me. Helps your brain cope with trauma.”

“Luke should discuss this with his therapist,” I say, because knowing Logan’s dissociated to cope makes me feel icky inside. “He’s more qualified to help than we are. In the meantime, let’s get down to business. Tell me what you told the FBI.”

Luke sighs. “I was on deck,” he says. “There was food and music, some band Lilly knew playing pop hits. Like 4 little tables, scattered around. I was just sitting there eating, talking to Enbom, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ashley go over. I thought she fell; I thought the noise was her falling ON something, and breaking it. I mean, the sound wasn’t loud, like I imagined gunshots would be. Just a faint popping. But she didn’t get up, and Shelly started screaming. There was another popping sound, and Shelly went down.

“I looked around, saw a flash of something from the railing overhead. I guess it was the gun firing, and the dark shape may have been the shooter. Then my chair fell backwards with me in it, and my leg hurt; I realized I was shot, like in the middle of my shin. So I dragged myself under the tablecloth. I don’t know why I thought it would protect me, it’s not like cotton stops bullets, but I guess the shooter believed I was dead. I still had my napkin in my hand, so I tied it around my thigh, and then I passed out.

“And that’s it. That’s all I know. I was unconscious, I didn’t see any bodies, or really any blood, except mine. It wasn’t like in the movies, when Shelly got shot. There was no splatter or anything, she just…fell. I woke up days later in the hospital, and my leg was gone.”

“So just one shot at a time?” I ask. “Never a spray of bullets, like a machine gun?”

He shakes his head. “The guy was methodical, maybe a sniper. Seemed like he had a plan, who he’d take out, and in what order. I heard three shots, I saw three hits.”


He shrugs, turns back to the TV. “I don’t mind telling the story. It’s not like I have anything else to do.”

We head out to the car in silence; the driver’s sitting on the hood, smoking a cigarette. I keep hearing Luke’s monotone ‘It’s not like cotton stops bullets’; and every time it repeats in my head, I'm afraid I'll cry.

“Well that was SUPER fun,” I say, as we emerge into the sunshine. “What’s next on our holiday agenda?”

“Hey this was YOUR idea,” he reminds me. “I wanted more sex on the couch, followed by a rewatch of the Evil Dead. I texted Lils earlier, and she said come over. But I’m warning you now, this will be tougher than Luke. Lilly and Ronica are tight. I don’t THINK they’ve talked about boat stuff; lately it’s hard to get Lils to TALK about anything. But I can’t be sure, and neither can you.”

“Like I’m going to give up, just because things get tough?” I ask. “Have you met me?”

“I don’t know how you even DO this,” he says. “How can you face slipstream bullshit every day, without tearing your hair, and gnashing your teeth, and falling completely apart? You’re five foot nothing of delicate blonde adorableness, but you’re the strongest person I’ve met.”
“I don’t have a choice,” I say. “If I COULD quit, I would.”

“Would you?” he asks. “I’m not so sure. I think you’d keep fighting until everything got fixed, which would never, ever happen. I’d give up, go with the shitty flow until I wound up dead, but not you. You’ll still be punching when you take your last breath.”

“If that’s true,” I say. “Then we’re both full of shit. You PRETEND you’ll give up, because you’re a drama queen, and all the world’s your stage. But you never actually DO.”

He laughs. “You’re just biased because you have the hots for me. I often circle the drain.”

“No, you wallow,” I correct. “Because you feel things so deeply, but that’s actually your superpower. No matter how shitty your life is—and it’s FREQUENTLY shitty—you keep right on loving. You’d die before you’d stop. Look how fucked up I am in this reality, and yet you stay. Even though you KNOW you could pull yourself together, if the rest of us weren’t dragging you down.”

The corner of his mouth twitches, but he says nothing. “You know I’m right,” I murmur, complacent. “I have seen you in MULTIPLE possible presents, and you ALWAYS get your shit together. You never spiral badly enough to end up dead, although I’ve seen your skirt the edge.” I smile, relaxing against him. “Some things are just fate, Logan. Your redemption is unavoidable.”

“There’s always a choice, even if the choice is bad,” he murmurs, breath of sound. “I’ve never told you, but that’s my motto.”


The car pulls up in front of a building with a doorman, chrome and steel, pricey as hell. Logan says, “Next stop, everybody out. And brace yourself, because these days Lils is…formidable.”

I nod, and he leads me into the elegant foyer. Slips the doorman a folded bill, with his you-know-you-love-me grin. “Press the button for the penthouse,” he tells me, when the elevator door slides open.

Lilly answers the door, quirks one eyebrow when she sees us, and says, “Oh, good. The party’s started early today.”

She leads us into the blue and green living room, curls, feline, on the couch. Taps a cigarette out of a pack and lights it, surveying us through the smoke. She’s in black—wide-legged knit lounge pants, barely-there tank—and her hair’s back in a severe knot. She looks cool and supercilious; distressingly, like a sexier version of her mother. “So what game are we playing today, boys and girls? And does this one have any rules?”

I glance over at Logan. He toasts me with the flask he’s extracted, drinks. “We went to visit Luke this morning,” he says.

Lilly’s mouth purses. “Is he still all Apocalypse Now, staring blankly off into space?”

“Yes and no,” Logan says. “He talks now. But his voice doesn’t have much inflection.”

“I don’t visit,” she admits, tapping ash into a crystal tray. She picks up a tumbler of what looks like scotch, takes a sip. “After all those months of watching Duncan rock and stare right past me, twice a week, I just can’t cope. Luke was never really my friend, anyway. He thinks I’m too wild. And his
interest in girls, in general, is minimal.”

I lift my eyebrows at this, but Logan seems unsurprised. “He told us he saw the killer,” Logan says, capping the flask, spinning it in his hands. “Said he acted like a sniper, and was dressed in black.”

“I wouldn’t know.” Lilly shrugs. “I was off by the prow, working through all that destructive shit with Jackie, when the shooting started. Wallace made me.” She bites her lip on his name, and waits, until her face schools back into blankness. “I stopped by the stateroom to change into jeans, and that’s when I heard the explosion.”

“Why didn’t you go back on deck?” I ask. “Why head straight to the engine room?”

She makes a duh face. “Well for one thing, the yacht was tilted sideways, which is always a bad sign. For another, the co-pilot was dead in the hallway, with a gunshot wound to the chest. I knew the closest radio was in the engine room, so I ran straight there, and called for help. They told me to hide, and stay on the line while they organized the rescue. And that’s what I did. I got scared when the boat started to flood, and bolted up to the deck; where I promptly fell and cut the crap out of myself, on a pile of broken glass. By the time I coped with that, the Coast Guard was on board, looking for the shooter, triaging bodies. They didn’t find anyone who wasn’t crew or guest, before they had to abandon ship.”

“I want to know what HAPPENED to the son of a bitch,” I say. “He was on a sinking yacht, where the hell could he have GONE?”

“He probably drowned, Veronica,” she says, making an O of her lips, blowing out smoke. “They didn’t have time to search the whole boat.”

“Who do you think did this?” I ask. “What’s your best guess?”

“Today?” she sighs. “Some random Neptune High loser who hated the 09’ers. Some guy who couldn’t get laid, and used that as an excuse for turning homicidal. That’s who ALL shooters turn out to be, Ronica. We probably wouldn’t recognize his name.”

Logan’s phone beeps, and he pulls it out, looks at the text display. “You busy later, Lils? We have to deal with something real quick, but we can hang this afternoon.”

She shrugs. “There’s a party somewhere, and I’ll be at it, trolling for a reason to care. Catch me if you can.”

“Text me the address,” he says. “No celebrity worth a damn EVER goes out alone.”

Her mouth quirks sideways, slightly. “We’re always alone, Logan,” she says. “All of us, even with other people in the room. The sooner you realize that, the easier your life will be.”

Logan shows me his phone, as we climb back into the car. It’s a text from Madison, which says, “Whatever. Shopping with mom. Alaric’s 12:30 or you’re SOL.”

“It’s 12:25,” I say, raising my brows. “And we’re not really dressed for Alaric’s.”

“Madison will wait,” Logan tells me, dry. “She hasn’t changed THAT much. And I’ll bribe heavily. It’s lunchtime, Alaric’s won’t care.”

Logan’s right. We show up at 12:50 and she’s still there, toying with an undressed salad, twisting the
charm bracelet on her wrist. Logan hands the greeter a hundred with an obnoxious flourish, and we’re ushered over to join her.

Madison flashes us her trademark look of contempt, as Logan sprawls into his chair. I perch on mine. “Hasn’t anyone told you? The ‘woke up in the gutter’ aesthetic is SO last year,” she says, and tosses back Perrier.

“But plastic, social-climbing bitch is still CLEARLY all the rage.” Logan favors her with his nastiest smile, and casually flips open his menu. “So what’s good here? Bourginon? Crepes Champignons? I have to admit, when I crave European food, I generally hop a plane to EUROPE.”

“I’m sorry, did you want my HELP?” Madison clinks her fork against the side of her bowl, like she wishes she could stab Logan in the head. “I put a profitable wardrobe-acquisition session on hold, so I could say my piece about the boat sinking. Watching you two act like assholes while you rapidly self-destruct is NOT on my agenda.”

Logan opens his mouth to answer, and I silence him with a look. “Truce, in the name of answers and justice,” I say. “I just want to know what you saw. I have a theory, and I need corroborating evidence.”

“She didn’t see anything,” Logan mutters, tossing the menu down. “She was puking out all the calories she binged. The Coast Guard found her hiding in the head.”

“I saw the killer,” Madison says mildly. Her eyes gleam with satisfaction, as she notes she’s silenced him. “It’s why I didn’t leave the bathroom.”

“Explain,” I say, nerves jumping with the thrill of the chase.

“I was washing my hands when I heard noise in the hall; people yelling, and then a loud, coughing sound,” she says. “I opened the door, just a crack…I thought it was an argument, and I wanted to get the dirt. Sue me.” She waves a dismissive hand, making her bracelet tinkle, and I notice the charms are weird for her. A basketball, a baseball bat. An airplane, a shell.

Madison wears a charm for each person who died on the boat. Wallace, Jackie, Enbom, Shelly. She’s here to talk because she CARES. She may not like us, but she wants justice.

“And what did you see?” I ask, softer, gripping Logan’s thigh under the table. He looks at me and sits up straight, abandoning the fork he’s been twiddling; he realizes I’ve figured something out. His focus on Madison becomes total.

“A person in black. Slender, medium height, maybe 5’9’ or so, Kevlar vest, ski mask. Holding one of those rifles you see in movies, the kind you have to put together; it had a big cylinder, like a test tube, on the end. He stepped over the body of a waiter in the hall, and walked towards the stairs to the deck. He was whistling. I didn’t recognize the song at the time, but I heard my dad listening to it on the radio one day. ‘Boys of Summer’ by Don Henley. I wrote it down. The Ataris covered it, in 2003.”

I nod. “That song was on the radio a lot, sophomore year,” I say. “Someone our age would know the tune.”

“All the popular boys liked it,” Madison says, abandoning the salad. She runs a finger across her bracelet, toys with a surfboard charm. “All Logan’s friends.”

“My friends who listened to that song are dead,” Logan says mildly, but with dark emotion beneath.
“And you’re well on your way to joining them. Even though you weren’t ON the boat; and you deserve this PTSD you seem to be having WAY less than I do.” She leans forward, suddenly intent. “Are you serious about solving this case, Veronica? Like, the way you used to get? Not in the casual way you care, now that you’re a steaming pile of fucked-up with AWFUL hair?”

“I like my hair,” I say. “And I’m dead serious. If you remember or hear anything else, I’d appreciate a call.”

“I don’t expect much from you, anymore,” she says, because she wouldn’t be Madison if she wasn’t caustically blunt. “But on the off chance this has an effect, I’ll help. Because the cops aren’t doing ANYTHING. And for someone to get away with this…it’s not RIGHT.”

She gets up and walks away. Logan smirks after her. “Aaaand, isn’t it just like Madison, to pick an expensive restaurant, then stick us with the bill?”

“Do you want to eat?” I ask, instead of piling on. He shakes his head, and I say, “Me neither. Leave money on the table. I need to go somewhere and think.”

*****

He takes me to a park, serene and manicured; it’s in the good part of town, so there’s no trash in the grass. He lies down beneath a tree, and I lie next to him, head on his shoulder. I gaze up at the pattern of the leaves, shifting colors and billowing movement in the sunny breeze. “It could be a man or woman, 5’9” and slender. Either 50-ish, old enough to know that Don Henley song, or our age, young enough to recognize the Ataris cover. A student, or a parent or teacher. Someone who knew and resented everyone on the boat. Someone intelligent, methodical and angry.”

“Someone who enjoyed what he was doing,” Logan interjects. He sounds sleepy. “He was whistling, while he worked.”

“Thank you for helping, Logan,” I say. “Thank you for not giving up.”

“I won’t,” he tells me. “Not now that you’re here.”

I blink, the sunlight through the leaves glowing green-gold and hazy. I nestle my cheek into the warmth of his chest. My eyelids flutter, shut. And then it all melts slowly away.
Chapter Notes

Happy (late) birthday to Alzaetia! Once you read this chapter, you'll know why it's dedicated to you. :-)
I turn back to Logan, affronted, and he presses his lips flat so he won’t laugh. I switch on the light, and yes, he IS the high school version. His face is still slightly round, and those are HIGHLIGHTS in his hair. “You lied to me!” I accuse, and he loses his battle with the giggles.

“You know what they say about assumptions, Veronica,” he chides. I tackle him.

“Why are we swimming in JANUARY?” I demand, brushing a patch of sand off his chest. My hand lingers, because damn. “And when did you get so CUT?”

“It’s almost March,” he corrects, flipping me beneath him. He undulates, aligning us, and half the blood in my brain migrates south. “I spent the time you’ve been gone working out. Clearly that was a smart choice, because you’re acting like I’m catnip. God, Veronica, I had no idea you were protecting my innocence by holding BACK in bed! I PROMISE you don’t have to.”

“It’s not you I’m protecting,” I manage, as he bends to nuzzle my ear. “It’s HER. College Veronica’s caught up with me, in terms of experience, but yours…” he sucks my collarbone, gently squeezing my breast, and I lose my train of thought. “Wow, you are SO not playing fair…”

“Mmmm, I care more about results than ethics.” He strokes his palms down my legs; coaxes them up, over his shoulders, with the naughtiest of grins. “And if you’re the result of constant carnal practice, between now and age 20? I will work my fingers to the BONE.”

He ducks, licks a stripe up the center of my sex, and I moan, pushing against his mouth. He closes his lips over my mons, sucks, while two fingers slip inside. I whimper as he plays with my clit, massaging into me like he’s memorized the map.

“Nice,” he says, as I twist against him, shuddering. His hand at my waist eases down, curving around my thigh, and very gently, he pushes his thumb into my ass. I cry out, come, and he laughs. Continues to lick, wringing out every bit of sensation.

“I’m not your college boy yet,” he says, crawling up me while I pant. I spread my hands over his torso, sex clenching in anticipation, and he nips my earlobe. “But I’ll do my best to hold my own.”

He fumbles in the nightstand for a condom, then curls around me, spoon position. Pushes into me from behind, pressing my thighs closed around his cock, so every sensation is magnified. I scramble for something to hang on to, some way to take control, but he’s elusive; body solid along my spine, sex heavy and caressing inside me. There’s nothing I can touch.

I strain back, dig my fingernails into his thigh, and he groans and fucks me harder. His hand slips between my legs, tracing two-fingered circles around my clit, and he sucks my nape, scraping lightly with teeth. I locate his other hand, palm flat against my belly, and twine my fingers in his. I can feel his movements inside me through the muscle of my diaphragm.

“Kiss me,” I say; he bites my shoulder, murmuring, “Soon.” And abruptly it’s all too much, his gorgeous cock and his talented fingers, the fact that he’s a tease. My mouth gapes as I lose myself, and he spills, like that’s his trigger.

“God,” he says, surrounding and overwhelming me, lips on my jaw. He curves his whole giant hand around the place we’re joined, as if to shield that connection. “Veronica.”

“Kiss me,” I say again. He turns my head, his palm along my cheek, smiles into my eyes. His lips feather mine, but he won’t deepen the contact.

“Harder,” I demand, and his grin widens. He shakes his head. “Not until you ask me to the dance,” he says. “I’m not your dirty secret, to fuck at home and ignore in public.”
“What dance?” I ask, and he kisses my eyelids. My mouth trembles.

“What dance?” he says. “You have to take the lead. Bring me flowers and chocolate. Tell me I’m pretty.” He pushes into me again, still half-hard despite his orgasm, his fingers tracing gently through over-sensitive flesh.

“Excuse me,” I retort. “I was just VERY vocal in my appreciation of your looks.”

His lips explore the underside of my chin, and I sigh. I love him when he’s stubborn and contrary, a truth I’ll NEVER admit. “Not appreciative enough,” he says. “You have to ask me OUT LOUD. Make me feel wanted.”

“Will you go with me to the dance, Logan?” My smile leaks into my Amber-the-cheerleader voice. “I’d be the luckiest girl in Neptune!”

“You already got pretty lucky,” he says, nipping the rim of my ear. “But yes, if you insist.”

He kisses me, deep and sure, and I disengage and turn so I can wind around him. I clutch him by his sticky-out ears and lose myself in his mouth. It’s a long time before we surface, and break apart.

“Your dress is hanging on the bathroom door,” he says, his lips brushing my forehead. “You should go get dolled up, we’re already late.”

“Wait, the dance is NOW?” I demand. “You and Veronica already made plans?”

“She asked me,” he says, donning his ‘innocent’ face. “YOU didn’t. I like to know I’m appreciated by ALL the girls I love.”

I grab my pillow, whack him with it. He laughs, and pushes me gently away. “Come on,” he says. “We need to wash off all this sand. And hope soaping each other in the shower doesn’t make us even LATER.”

XXXXX

“I feel like Cinderella,” I tell him, as he helps me out of the limo. “Last time I showed up here, I was the photographer. I skulked around, envying the happiness of others, in a t-shirt and jeans.”

I stroke a hand down the side of my dress. It’s white gauze, embroidered in silver flowers, the pattern accented with crystals. The fitted bodice has a halter neck, which bells into a knee-length, floaty-layered skirt. I’ve pinned my hair in a messy up-do; slicked on dark red lipstick, which made Logan growl. My shoes are rhinestone sandals that refract light.

“Aren’t I supposed to be Cinderella in this scenario?” He grins down at me. He’s in black… cotton dress shirt, sleeves casually rolled to the elbows, black trousers and wing-tip shoes. When he’s spruced up this way, I see glimpses of the man he’ll someday be; face more angular, flesh closer to the bone, smirk creases scored firmly around his mouth. Wholly comfortable in his skin, a confident leader, disinterested in detractors, and focused on me. What he is now is kindling, to the flame he’ll become

The gap between us at nineteen, bingeing on junk food and neglecting school for sex, and actual ADULTHOOD yawns abruptly before me. I haven’t FELT like a kid since maybe age nine, and I doubt Logan ever has. But we’re nowhere close to the end of the learning curve. We’re playing house in a summer cottage, pretending we’ve got shit handled. But there’s a BABY coming, sometime before Christmas, and that’ll lay illusions of competence to rest.
I never thought I’d be the girl who got knocked up before age 30. I was bright and responsible, even in the face of adversity; I had PLANS. And now here I am, struggling through every slipstream day, barely eating and sleeping enough to fend off disaster. Babies need safety, and order, and constant attention, and I’ve only got crisis management skills. They need unconditional love, but I’m all about strings. Motherhood scares me more than inadvertent slipstream implosion, because what if I somehow ruin our child? What if I FAIL?

Logan glances down at me, concerned; my inner struggle must show on my face.

“You look so mature,” is how I articulate my feelings.

He smiles. “It’s a disguise,” he whispers, shielding his mouth with one hand. “Come on, I want to see the jaws drop, when people get a load of how gorgeous you are. I promise not to drink too much this time, and spoil our fun.”

He holds out his hand, and I take it. We walk, fingers linked, into my past.

The gym’s decorated like it was before; the night I circled a disgruntled Logan, while he snarked towards meltdown. I pretended disinterest that evening, still smarting from the Hannah fiasco…but guessed, to the second, when Gia’s prattling would wear through his patience.

Nothing happened at Sadie Hawkins, except maybe to Wallace; but every second’s etched into my memory, like somehow, it was critical. The way Logan made Dirty Dancing jokes, as he folded me close. The way I tried to avoid his gaze. The rawness of his yearning for me, which he didn’t try to hide. Logan’s so open, such an exposed nerve, and I’m the opposite. I think that’s why I need him so much. He loves me wholly, even when I can’t reciprocate.

“You’re moody tonight,” he observes, scanning the crowd. He gestures recognition with his chin, when someone waves at him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nostalgia,” I say. “Fear of failure. This time through my life, we’re a lot more INTIMATE, and it’s good, but it’s SCARY. I can’t cut and run anymore, and there’s so much farther to fall.”

“Veronica,” he says, because he always understands. “I’ll never drop you.”

I let out a shaky breath, and he puts an arm around me. “Hey, this will cheer you up,” he says. “WALLACE is back. And rumor has it Jessica is his ‘just friends’ date for the evening.”


We locate Wallace and Jessica in the far corner, good-naturedly mocking the decorations. Her hair’s longer than it was in Berkeley Reality, dyed a lighter blonde, and she’s sporting more conservative style; a 50’s style cocktail dress in grey silk, embroidered with red roses. She has on red high-heeled pumps, with straps across the insteps, and there’s a red rose tucked behind her ear. It matches the one pinned to Wallace’s chest.

GOD, I wish I could smush them together, and make them kiss.

“Jessica!” I say, with genuine gladness, and she enfolds me in a hug. “You look like an old-school movie star!”

“Vintage Givenchy for the win,” she agrees. “My mom says I can no longer shop with any friends but you. Oh, and she bought the other Vera Wang, for Cannes. The long black one. She looks great in it, but I like the style you chose better.”
“High praise!” I say, as Logan kisses her cheek. “Wallace, aren’t YOU debonair?”

Wallace is in a crimson shirt only he could pull off, with a grey vest and tie over it, and he really DOES look dapper. His hair’s been shorn into a short-but-natural style that suits him; frankly, he’s the ’after’ version of a makeover show, and it couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy. I sense Jessica’s hand in this transformation, but know better than to say so.

“As always,” he says, buffing his nails on his shirt, and Jessica smiles. “Glad you guys could make it, two and a half HOURS after the time we agreed on.”

“Yeah, man, we went surfing and fell asleep.” Logan grins at me. “VERONICA forgot to set the alarm.”

“Oh sure, throw me under the bus,” I say. “We’ll make it up to you, Wallace, I swear. Did I mention you look handsome?”

Wallace rolls his eyes, clearly not fooled, then frowns at something behind me. I turn to see Beaver stagger by, stumbling-drunk and scowling. He’s got his arm around Cindy Gaugento, who seems similarly trashed. She whispers in his ear, giggling, and he forces a weak smile; but his eyes are angry, even tragic. He locks on me for a second, fleeting, and the curve of his lips turns cruel. Then he continues on his discombobulated way.

“Nothing good will come of that pairing.” Wallace says. I twine my fingers through Logan’s, and try my hardest not to think about Shelly’s party.

“Well, I want punch,” Jessica says brightly. She releases Wallace to link her arm through mine. “Walk with me, Veronica. I have a Code Red shoe-shopping dilemma.”

“Are they REALLY gonna talk about shoes?” I hear Wallace ask Logan, as we amble away.

“Dude,” Logan says. “It’s like you’ve never even MET a girl.”

“So give me the scoop on Jackie.” Jessica demands, not mincing words. She gestures at the dance floor, where Jackie’s posing for photos with her handicapped date. “I know Wallace struck out with her, Lilly can’t STAND her, and Logan’s got mild reservations. But people stop discussing her, when I approach, and that’s NEVER a good sign. I’m not investing emotional energy in Wallace and his advances, if he’s pining for a girl he can’t have.”

I watch Madison Sinclair dance circles around Enbom, shaking her shoulders like she thinks it’s sultry. “Honestly? I’m not sure how Wallace feels. He’s definitely attracted to her, but she’s sticking to ‘no’, although she DOES seem to want to be friends. I think it’s fair to say he’s infatuated. As to whether his crush is emotional, or just physical, or whether his interest is returned? I have no clue. I’m sorry. My life’s been crazy, and I haven’t paid attention.”

“Fair enough.” She takes a deep breath, and keeps an even keel, which boosts her ten more notches in my esteem. “I know he truly cares about me. But I’m aware guys cast me as the ingénue, not the unattainable hot chick, when they’re weaving dating schemes. So I guess it all comes down to, does Wallace even KNOW what he wants? And if so, is what he wants fantasy sex? Or a relationship that will make him happy?”

“Wallace has never had a real girlfriend,” I say. “So he CLEARLY yearns to get laid. And I’m almost sure the answer to the first question is no.”

She laughs. “I’m glad I insisted on the just-friends date,” she says. “I think I’ll hold that line, until he grows up enough to figure himself out.”
“Probably wise,” I say. “He’s a GREAT guy, though, Jessica, immature dating choices aside. One of the best. And I doubt he’s dumb enough to miss that you’re great, too.”

“Why thank you!” She flutters her lashes at me. “I AM awesome, aren’t I? But it’s always nice to have that independently confirmed.”

Her phone trills inside her purse, and she extracts it absently. Mouths ‘sister’ at me, and walks off into the quiet hall to answer. I fill three cups with foamy orange punch, and head back over to the boys.

As I approach from behind, I hear Logan say, “Sure, she’s beautiful, dude. But she gives off this doomed femme fatale vibe; even when she’s laughing, her eyes are sad. She’s got real problems, and she’s hiding behind attitude…which means she thinks they can’t be fixed. Unless you can interest Veronica in saving her, she may very well be screwed.”

I smile at this, and decide to spy. Logan’s people instincts are always on point; and Wallace trusts him, here, more than me. And all right, I admit, I’m curious. Why ISN’T Jackie dating Wallace? She seemed perfectly willing to toy with his heart, last time, before leaving him in the dust.

Jackie dances past, curved in some guy’s arms; and yeah, she does look sad. Also maybe a little tipsy. “Her date left, and she went straight into her party girl routine,” Wallace says, gaze hungry. “I FEEL for her, man. She doesn’t want to go out with me, and that’s fine. She gets to choose. But I don’t like to see her throw herself away on some guy who only wants to score.”

“She’s trying to save you from yourself,” Logan explains. He sounds a little wistful, like he wishes he didn’t understand. “Probably she thinks being with her would break you, and she prefers you whole.”

“I’m STRONGER than that!” Wallace snaps, and really, I don’t blame him. Logan and Lilly overprotect like only the world-weary can. “You’re a complete ass, when you get in a mood, but you’ve never fazed me.”

Logan laughs. “You may have SEEN me behave badly, but I’ve never aimed it your DIRECTION. Believe me, I can be a LOT more vicious about where I stick the knife.

“And yeah,” he continues, fiddling with the change in his pockets, bouncing on his toes. “I guess that DOES make you stronger than me, because YOU always control yourself. But here’s the thing; there comes a point in every relationship where it’s masks off. And that’s when the people you need the most can hurt you worst…they feel vulnerable, and they know your weak spots. Jackie’s like me, man. She’d go for your throat. She would, because people lash out when they’re in pain, and they target those with no choice but to take it. She could hurt you badly, worse than you understand.”

Wallace surveys Logan, slowly shakes his head. “Sometimes I’m glad I can’t see inside your brain,” he says.

“You should be,” Logan says. “It’s not much fun up there. And that will probably never change.”

“The inside of Jessica’s head might be all right.” Wallace gestures with his chin at his date. She’s been waylaid by Shelly Pomroy, and they’re chatting and laughing.

“Dude,” Logan says. “If you ever get the chance to be inside Jessica’s anything, you should fall on your knees and thank Jesus. She’s pretty fucking amazing, and you know I hate everybody.”

“The fact that I look to you for relationship advice,” Wallace says, “is proof that Neptune has warped me.”
“I’m on a Captain Ahab quest to not get sucked down the drain of this town.” Logan looks up from under his brow and smiles, which manages to melt even Wallace. “It may kill me, in the end, fighting the power. But I won’t give the bastards the satisfaction.”

I stop lurking at this point, because no encouraging the fatalism, and approach. Logan grins as I nudge under his arm, wrap it around me. “Miss me, boys?” I ask, with a bright smile, and hand out drinks. “You DO remember that parties are FUN, right?”

“Mmmm, you know what’s more fun?” Logan kisses my hand as he takes his drink. “Conversations with people who actually understand me. While drinking fine carbonated beverages, procured by the world’s most gorgeous blonde.”

He takes a sip, grimaces, and I say, “Yeah, it’s punch. You want to re-evaluate that statement?”

He sets the cup down on a window ledge, flicks his fingers like he wants it to shoo. And that’s when Lilly marches in, wearing street clothes, hair gloriously wind-mussed.

I touch his arm. “Look who decided to crash our prom. Again.”

“And she’s STILL on a tear,” Wallace observes, consuming the punch without complaint, because calories. “She’s been pissed lately. Snapped my head off all DAY the other day, and I went SHOPPING with her. I held her BAGS!”

Lilly scans the room, scowling, and I think she’s looking for us, so I wave. She doesn’t see me, though. Instead, she laser-focuses on Jackie, and stomps that direction.


“Jackie doesn’t have to do much,” Logan opines, a smile lurking at the corners of his mouth. “She’s incredibly skilled at pushing Lilly’s buttons.”

Lilly yanks Jackie away from her dance partner and lets her have it, in a low angry voice that unfortunately doesn’t carry. The guy’s eyes get big. One venomous glance from Lilly, and he holds his hands out, warding her off; then makes his escape.

Jackie preens, unsteady on four-inch heels, lobs her crystalline quips. They’re clearly hitting the mark, too, because Lilly looks steadily more murderous. She grabs Jackie’s wrist and yanks, hauling her outside, giving an extra jerk at the doorway when Jackie refuses to budge. We all watch, fascinated, as they disappear into the lot.

“Should we follow them?” I ask. Logan shakes his head. He still seems amused, which makes sense; pissing people off was once his primary form of entertainment.

“Yes,” Wallace counters. “Jackie’s drunk, and Lilly crossed a line with the manhandling. When she gets mad this way, no telling what she’ll do. She’s even crazier than YOU, Veronica.”

“Gee, thanks,” I say, and hand my drink to Logan. “Come on, we’ll go together. I’m good at coaxing Lilly to behave, and whoever approaches her should have backup.”

I look at Logan and he does his hands-off gesture, sloshing punch onto his wrist. “No way,” he says. “I broke up with her YEARS ago, and have yet to miss these painful scenes. I don’t mind taunting her into an ordinary fury; but I still bear scars from coping with THIS mood.”

“You have zero problem with MY rages,” I argue.
“Yours end in the good kind of sex, and the words ‘I love you’,” he says. “Hers never turned out that nice, where I was concerned.”

I shrug and kiss his cheek. He settles back on the windowsill, and salutes us as we sally forth.

Our footsteps echo down the hall, silent, dark and paper-streamered, go quiet on the packed lot’s asphalt. Wallace scans the vista with squinted eyes, searching for flashes of movement. “Sometimes being friends with Lilly is a tough gig,” he observes. “I love her, but MAN is she high-maintenance.”

“Enh, her antics keep me on my toes,” I say; then hear Jackie’s laughter, sharp, high and cruel.

“There,” he murmurs, pointing to a big white SUV. We creep cautiously closer, and peer around the side.

I stop then, nonplussed, and Wallace crashes into me. Because Lilly’s got Jackie shoved up against the car, and they’re kissing. Not exploratory, first-time busses either, like you’d expect from a brand-new couple. These two are full-on making out. They’ve been sleeping together for a good long while.

Lilly goes for the double-grope, ferociously devouring, and I lift my brows. This is the way Logan and I kiss; eager, hungry, all-in, world narrowed to span one person. They’re not playing games, or experimenting. They’re fully invested, and maybe even in love.

It feels wrong to stand here unannounced. We’re watching them have make-up sex, basically, and we’re definitely not welcome.

I shove back against Wallace, making sneak-away hand gestures, but he doesn’t share my sense of delicacy. “What the hell is this?” he yells instead, and the girls jerk apart, startled. Like they forgot they weren’t in private.

Lilly just stares at him, big-eyed and purse-lipped, in speculative and sullen silence. Jackie wipes her mouth with the back of her hand, presses her lips together, and looks down. She smoothes her gold crepe dress, but won’t quite meet his eyes. “If you can’t tell, you haven’t paid attention in Health Class,” Lilly quips finally, her voice like steel.

Wallace gets that bright-eyed, trying-not-to-cry expression I HATE, while simultaneously acting disappointed. Lilly doesn’t seem to enjoy it much. “I can’t BELIEVE this,” he says, not to Jackie, but to Lilly. “You KNEW how I felt about her. I thought we were FRIENDS!”

“Wallace.” Jackie tries unexpectedly to intervene. “I care about you, for sure, but you don’t get to be possessive. I NEVER led you on.”

“I realize that,” he says, but it’s unconvincing, and he won’t look her in the eye either. “This, though…” he gestures at both of them. “It’s not what friends do.”

He shakes his head and strides off; after a few feet, he breaks into a jog. Lilly tilts her chin towards the sky, one of those bits of body language she and Logan share. An actual tear runs down her cheek, and I realize with a pang that she and Wallace are tight. Or WERE. “Fabulous,” she says. “Yet more proof that I was never meant to be good.”

Jackie strokes her arm, and that’s when it hits me; stupid Jackie Cook has BOTH my best friends twined around her manicured finger. I fight hard against the jealousy that swamps me. “He’ll get over it,” Jackie soothes, her voice uncharacteristically soft. “Some things just…can’t be denied.”

“I’ll find Wallace,” I say, and they turn to look at me in tandem. I try to sound kind, so they won’t
think I’m judging, but GOD. Could Jackie pick just ONE person I love to monopolize? “I’m sorry we interrupted. I didn’t know…this…was going on, or I would have stopped him from chasing you.”

Which is what Logan tried to do, I realize. Did he guess?

“I TOLD you my secret was juicy,” Lilly says, and I can’t help but laugh. Also, soften.

“Lils, you never, ever disappoint,” I manage.

She runs to me, hugs me tight; there’s a fine shiver running through her. My hands come up to stroke her back, because she’s LILLY. She’s my girl. “I love you, Veronica,” she whispers in my ear. “Thank you for accepting me the way I am.”

“BFF’s forever,” I say, and rock her. “Besides, I’m the bitch who dragged you through court and stole your boyfriend, and you still love ME.”

She laughs. “Yeah, you suck. But my opinion stands.”

I kiss her forehead, the way Logan kisses mine, pat Jackie awkwardly on the shoulder, and head off to find Wallace. As soon as I step away, they sink back into comforting embrace.

Logan saunters out of the gym as I approach; I’m careful over the asphalt in my dainty heels. He’s checking his watch, and looks up without lifting his chin. The outer corners of his brows quirk down, as he notes my flustered state. “Did disaster strike?”

I laugh, breathless, although I’m not sure what’s funny. “Well,” I say. “Lilly and Jackie were second-base soft-porn making out against a car, and Wallace saw. He’s MIA right now, licking his wounds, leaving his date potentially stranded. I have no idea where the girls went. I’d guess they’re parked somewhere private though, to work out their frustrations, based on what I witnessed.”

Logan laughs. “Classic Lils,” he says, with a shake of his head. “I’ve wondered about them since the barbecue last week. They had WAY too much fun, arguing.” He bends to my ear, accommodating lack of height. “Guess we’re not the most Taylor/Burton couple at Neptune High anymore, sweet cheeks. Maybe Dick’s right, and we’ve lost our edge.”

“I never threw an empty Mai Tai glass at your head,” I admit, as he embraces me back-to-front. “Not that I wasn’t frequently tempted.”

“Yeah, you’re a model of physical restraint when riled,” he says. “Practically Mother Theresa. Only smoking hot, and DEFINITELY no nun.”

“You should find Wallace.” I plant an elbow in his gut for this quip. “Hand him over to Jessica, or offer your trademark comforting sarcasm. I was mature enough, just now, to support Lilly’s potential dating trainwreck. I can tolerate your on-again bromance with Wallace, for the higher good.”

He laughs. “See? Mother Teresa.” He kisses my neck, turns me to face him. “You’ll be OK alone for a while? The band’s playing, and they just brought out cake.”

I nod. “I’ll text you if I need you.”

He kisses his fingers, presses them to my lips. I point in the direction Wallace went, and he ambles off after.

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I wander inside, over to the snack table, where the cake plate lies sadly empty. I’m staring at it, forlorn, when Carrie sidles up.

“I want the name of your lipstick,” she tells me. She’s got on a navy-blue Mandarin dress that shimmers, and her big dark eyes are mysterious in the colored-spotlight gloom. “You and Logan disappeared for a good long time, yet it still looks perfect.”

My best friends’ love lives are not food for gossip; so I open my bag, extract the tube, and hand it over. She examines the gold case, speculative, and says, “What was the girl-fight about?”

I shrug. “Who knows? Jackie and Lilly are always at each others’ throats. I think they enjoy waging war.”

She turns, balancing her hips on the table, plants her hands on either side. She’s unsatisfied with my non-answer, but not willing to press. “Have you noticed the Casablancas brothers?” she asks, giving back the lipstick tube. “Drunk as skunks, and steadily getting drunker. Ever since Dick and Meg split, and the SEC zeroed in on their dad, those two have been partying like the apocalypse is coming. I don’t know where they’re getting the money; Big Dick’s assets are frozen. Once they waste the cash in their accounts, it’s crack the trust funds, or they’re screwed.”

I scan the crowd for Dick and Beav. They’re stumbling around by the stage, shoving each other and laughing, and I sigh. “Sometimes, caring about Dick is actually painful,” I say. “He’s willfully blind when it comes to Cassidy; and that HURTS, because I know it can’t last.”

Carrie shrugs. “Beaver’s never actually COMMITTED a crime,” she says. “He may be a secret villain, but he’s really BAD at it.”

I turn to gape at her. “Carrie,” I say. “He’s murdered at LEAST two people, attempted to murder another, and he’s plotting an unwholesome end for three more. He thinks he’ll get away with it, too, but I won’t let that happen. If you have any influence at all with Veronica, please. Convince her I’m not imagining things.”

She blinks, then smiles, grabbing a carrot stick from the crudite plate. “Well, well, well,” she says. “The plot thickens! Veronica told me she emailed you, and you were full of paranoid schemes. Sounds like she understated the case.”

I snort. “I used to act jaded like you do, while secretly being naive,” I say. “I believed people were basically nice. And when that proved untrue, I hoped things would someday get better. I was dumb, but I learned. You will too, Carrie, one way or the other.”

“Cynical!” she says. “So where’s the evidence? Since even your dad couldn’t find any?”

MY dad. Veronica told her we’re the same person, then. Jesus, I will NEVER understand why Other Veronica trusts Carrie. It’s like she’s WILLFULLY blind to the truth about those she loves and hates. And determined to see the best side of a girl who doesn’t HAVE ONE.

Ugh. Some people are SO stubborn and frustrating.

“Does witnessing a crime count?” I ask Carrie. “Because I have personally watched Beaver murder a politician, attempt to murder me, confess to blowing up a bus with 8 people inside it, and admit to roofie-rape. And that politician was collateral damage; he meant to kill DAD, just to make me cry. So if Veronica doesn’t want God KNOWS how many deaths on her conscience? She might want to consider GETTING WITH MY PROGRAM.”

Carrie arches her brows at me; but then Cassidy stumbles onto the stage and takes the mic from the
singer, and she bites back her retort.

Beaver’s very much the worse for wear as he fumbles with the mic, making it shriek. His shirt’s half-unbuttoned, his hair’s a mess, and he’s spilled something red and sticky all over his jacket. “Hello?” he calls, his amplified voice echoing. “Hello, Neptune High! I have something to say.”

He glares out over the audience, which watches in breath-held atavistic silence. “I know you hate me,” he says, with a self-deprecating laugh. “I know you ALL hate me, thank you. You’ve always called me Beaver. Well I don’t care, because that’s not my name. My life is shit, my dad’s in jail, and you know what? It doesn’t matter what you assholes think. This time next year, I’ll be gone; and you can speak of me in whispers, or maybe not at all. So fuck you very much. Thanks for not trying to help. Now, I’ll let you go back to your regularly scheduled entertainment, and pretend I never spoke.”

He hands the microphone to the singer, jumps off-stage, stumbling and then catching himself on the edge. He smacks away Dick’s extended hand, and strides off, weaving slightly, into the night. Carrie and I share a look of dismay.

“Fine, I’ll talk to Veronica,” she says. “I don’t know WHAT that was, just now, but the guy’s clearly not right.”

“Thank you,” I say. I extract the lipstick, hand it over, and walk away.

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I find Dick out in the parking lot. He’s sitting on the trunk of a random car, drinking straight from a bottle of Jim Beam. I climb up next to him and sit, staring at the stars. Wait for him to speak, because I know he’ll crack before I do.

“Is this like in Charlie Brown?” he asks, proving me right. “When Lucy opens up that psychiatrist stand? And Charlie pays her a nickel to tell him he’s a fucking idiot, then yank the football away? Because I gotta tell you, Rons, I’m not in the mood. The SEC already yanked my football.”

“Well, BEAVER’S clearly coping like a pro,” I say, gesturing at the gym with one hand. “I thought I’d check in, see about the rest of you.”

He huffs a laugh, shows me the bottle, to demonstrate HIS therapy of choice. “Kendall’s started selling shit from around the house to our neighbors,” he says. “She thinks I don’t notice, but really I don’t care. And my dad, wherever he is, probably gets a happy-ending massage every morning, while smoking hundred-dollar blunts. He could give a fuck what goes on here, as long as he’s not in jail.”

“Will your mom help?” I ask.

He snorts. “She bought a house in Italy,” he says. “This last go-round convinced her that parenting isn’t her thing.” He looks at me sideways. “Too bad it didn’t work out with her and your dad. He’s not moving too fast, these days, but at least he gives a damn. And when they were dating, it seemed like she did, too.”

“He ran himself ragged, giving too MUCH of a damn,” I say, because the Dad/Bettina fiasco isn’t something we can discuss. “Hazard of his chosen profession.”

“That’s why I’ll never work for a living,” Dick says. “If mom isn’t willing to cash out my trust fund, I’m gonna be a beach bum. Live in a shack, stay high all the time. Sounds better than caring, right?”
My phone beeps with a text; Logan. “Where are you? I thought you’d stay by the table, hogging the cake.”

“I’m in the parking lot with Dick,” I text back. “He needs a friend.”

Logan texts ‘OMW’; a minute later he, Jessica and Wallace appear. Jessica’s got her heels in one hand, and Wallace is piggybacking her.

“Emergency beach party,” Jessica decides, when she gets a load of Dick. “We could all use a picnic. Logan, get on the phone and order tons of good food, from someplace beach adjacent. Wallace, set me next to Veronica, so I can put on my shoes.”

He pivots and puts her down; she promptly leans across me to lay a hand on Dick’s forearm. “Just us?” she asks. “Or should I invite some female friends? Of the type who won’t put out, solely because you’re rich and blonde?”

He smiles at her, just a little. “Wallace,” he says, “if you don’t date Jessica soon, I will.”

She grabs his nose between two fingers, wiggles it, and says, “I hope somebody’s got clean blankets in their trunk. Because if not, our next stop is Target.”

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Hours later we’re at Cape Crescent, lying on primary-color fleece throws, gazing up at the stars. The night is cool and quiet; I’ve got Logan’s best leather jacket over my dress. We’re playing truth or dare, but it’s desultory, because everybody’s moody and drunk. It’s two o’clock in the morning.

“Truth or dare, Veronica?” Jessica asks, turning her head on Wallace’s shoulder. She’s peeling the wrapper off an egg roll and eating only the filling, which I just don’t GET.

“Truth,” I say complacently. Wallace snorts…apparently he knows my tactics. I just settle my skull into Logan’s belly and wait.

“Who was the first boy you ever kissed?”

Wallace groans, I wince, and Logan starts silently laughing. “Um, no comment.”

“You do NOT get to no comment,” she argues. “Did I no comment when you asked about my crush on Lance Bass?”

“Ronnie doesn’t want to say, because the first guy she kissed wasn’t Duncan,” Dick announces to the blankets at large. Logan laughs harder.

“You TOLD him?” I demand, rising affronted onto my elbows and gazing down.

“Um,” Logan says. “I had cherry lip gloss all over my face when I came out of that closet. It wasn’t my fault.” He adds, for the edification of our friends, “That was also the first night Ronica drank a COCKTAIL.”

“Logan, you perv,” Jessica says comfortably, not bothered. “Using Seven Minutes in Heaven as an excuse to scam your best friend’s girl?”

“Hey, she was nobody’s girl at the time!” he protests, pretending affront. “And it was a dare!”

“YOU dared me,” I say, and he grins.
“You, me and closets. Always a winning combination.” He strokes my spine, soothing, and I lie back down. “SO not sorry,” he mutters, under his breath.

“Dick,” I say, ignoring this. “Truth or dare?”

“Dare,” he says. “Like I trust your questions.”

“I dare you to sing any song from the Sound of Music at the top of your lungs in falsetto, while standing on top of that rock.” I point.

Dick heaves a giant, put-upon sigh, levers himself up without letting go of his bottle. Treats us to a rock-top rendition of the Lonely Goatherd, without knowing any of the words, which makes everyone gasp with laughter.

He’s still up there, grinning and taking a bow, when his phone rings, in his pocket. He pulls it out—a little clumsy, he’s wasted—checks the display, frowns. Hits answer and says, “Yeah, I don’t want any Sham-Wows. The shit all over my life is caked on and dried. Fuck off.” Hangs up.

It rings again. He gazes at the ocean, and his arm tenses to throw. Jessica says, “What if it’s your brother?”

So Dick answers, and this time he listens, saying ‘yeah’ and ‘okay’ periodically. He sinks to a sitting position on the rock. Hangs up again, and stares off into space.

“What’s up, man?” Logan asks, displacing me gently and rising. Relaxed, but ready. He knows something’s wrong.

“That was the cops,” Dick says, his voice flat. “Beaver drove his car off the cliff, up by that Road Hog biker bar. They’re still looking for the body, but they think he’s…dead.”

He looks at Logan, who looks silently back; no doubt remembering the night Trina died. I don’t think HER body was ever found.

Then Dick tilts the bottle to his lips, chugs as much as he can; and with an inarticulate yell, flings it savagely against the rock. It smashes into a million shards, wet and sparkling, and I flinch and cover my eyes.

**THREAD THIRTY ONE**

I pull my hands from my face, and I’m by the Howl’s dining room table, staring at broken glass on the floor. There are papers scattered over the wood, surveillance logs and Prying Eyez printouts; and Weevil is crouched beside me. He’s in a nondescript white t-shirt and jeans, sweeping the mess into a dustpan.

“Lift your feet, V,” he says, running the brush beneath my chair. “You got no shoes on, and you go to the doctor enough already.”

I comply, studying the view out the French doors. It’s the Berkeley beach, and what the HELL is Weevil doing in Ideal Reality? “Thanks,” I say. He glances up at me sideways and smiles.

“So I been thinking,” he informs me, carrying the pan into the kitchen, dumping debris in the trash. “We need to set up a sting on Williamson, prove he’s a loser for sure. He’s too smart to cut loose where I can get photos; and Mrs. W’s all kinds of restless, waiting. If she files for divorce after the
ten year mark, she’ll owe him a LOT more money.”

I glance at the papers, assimilating the case, and my mind flashes back to Bobby’s birthday dinner. Mac told Dad we had ‘someone else’ doing man-on-the-street work, because I was pregnant, and thus too vulnerable. Apparently ‘someone else’ meant Weevil, which makes a surprised laugh bubble up in my throat. But I like it. This WORKS.

“What about hidden cameras?” I ask. I still have that stupid Russian spy-tech on my brain. “Can you dress like a repairman, infiltrate the place where shenanigans are afoot? Hide the bugs inside a lamp?”

“I’d crack some joke about how you’re hot for plumbers,” he says, sitting beside me. “But you got a ring and a baby daddy now. Maybe we should stick to which location, and which uniform?”

A key scraped in the lock, making replies unnecessary; I smile as Logan moves into view. He’s carrying two giant Babies R Us bags, and a ten pound sack of espresso beans. He’s unshaven, in a sweat-stained green hoodie and jeans, which tells me he’s been at school. “If it isn’t Eli Navarro, professional lurker,” he says, by way of greeting. “I’m STILL impressed that you made your life of crime pay.”

“Opie,” Weevil greets him, lounging back in his chair. “What’s wrong, you got tired of waxing your board all the time? Went out to buy some new toys?”

Logan fake-laughs and sets the bags on the floor by the table, flops into a third chair. “Check this out,” he tells me, extracting a stuffed turtle. He presses a button on its belly, and glowing stars appear on the ceiling, projected through holes in the turtle’s back. “It makes a sound like the mother’s heartbeat, too,” he explains, pressing another button to demonstrate. “Peanut will always feel safe.”

I run my hand over the turtle’s head, kiss Logan’s cheek. This is the version who might not know me, and I ought to be upset. But it’s hard to summon outrage, when he’s being intensely adorable.

(That was ALWAYS my problem, to be honest, where Logan’s concerned. No matter how jackassy he acts, there’s a thread of sweetness running through him. And he misbehaves mostly to get my attention.)

He hands the turtle over, boops me on the nose, and heads off to the kitchen with his giant bag of beans. I set the stuffie on my shoulder, soft against my throat, and ask, “Where, in your opinion, is Mr. W doing the deed?”

“Gotta be his office,” Weevil says. “There or nowhere, ‘cause he’s in it all the time. Carmelita’s seen me around the building as the air-conditioner guy. If you got batteries for the motion sensor cameras, I’ll go early in the morning, and plant ‘em in the vents.”

“Batteries are in the car,” Logan calls, over the grind and swish of his coffee machine. “I hit all the stores on my way home from my sociology final. There are still four bags in the back seat.”

“I’ll get them,” I say, as he moves to abandon his task. “Just the batteries, I won’t carry anything heavy. You caffeinate and entertain my business associate. And no fistfights in my dining room, please.”

Logan extracts his keys from his pocket, tosses them over. “I’ll be a model of modern maturity,” he promises, carefully tipping in grounds. “You want a latte or espresso, Navarro? Veronica bought six kinds of syrup and whipped cream, to doctor up her decaf.”

I shake my head as I cross to the garage. Logan’s not much of a sharer; I’ve never really known what
went on between him and Weevil, original Senior Year. Based on what I’ve seen while slipstreaming, though, it was eventful. They seem to have bonded, as a result, despite vestigial snarking.

I climb into the Range Rover. It’s littered with giant sacks, all filled with smaller ones; I remember Alicia mentioning that Logan loves to shop. I snicker as I dig through home and baby purchases, unearth the bag from the battery store. Peanut’s first birthday will make Bettina look like a piker.

Wait, I think. Bobby’s birthday party. I fought with dad at the picnic table, ran out to the car to calm down. I loaded Victor’s files onto my laptop, and then…

I tossed the thumb drive into the glove box.

A full minute later, I’m still laughing.

I unlock the little door, dig inside; sure enough, there’s the gift Victor gave me, lo these many slipstream moons ago. I’ve had easy access to his files all along. So much for my perfect recall.

The drive fits neatly into the pocket of my shorts. I sashay back to the house, a spring in my step.

Logan’s taken my spot at the head of the table, feet propped up on my paperwork. Both his huge hands curl around a tiny espresso cup. Weevil’s lounged back on two legs of his chair, sipping the same. I toss the batteries on the table; Logan gestures at a large, whipped-creamed latte in the spot across from Weevil. I smile, pick it up, drink, and mmmm. Chocolate and cinnamon. “You’re the best little woman EVER.”

“Gotta keep the breadwinner happy,” he says, unperturbed. “And on that note, you guys need to wind this meeting up. Ronica’s got a test in three hours, and she’s threatened bodily harm if she’s not in the library by one. Did you decide how to handle the abdication of Mac?”

Weevil shrugs. “Clearly we got to hire a replacement. Someone who knows computers, and whose face I don’t want to punch. Your boyfriend over there’s provoking enough.”

“What did I say about fistfights?” I ask, pointing. “I’ve heard of a guy named Max Dobrolyubov, hacker genius who sells test answers at Hearst. I’m not sure where he lives, but cash is DEFINITELY his king, and he doesn’t mind skirting the fringes of law. He’s funny, too; he won’t make your teeth itch.”

“Sold,” Weevil says, slapping his palm on the table. He drains his espresso, sets the cup on its saucer. “I’ll track him down, and plant the bugs. Call me tonight when you’re done with tests, and we’ll plan our next move.”

I shoot him with a finger gun, making a clicking noise and winking. He rolls his eyes, and heads out.

XXXXX

I ought to read the files in the library, out of sight of those who know me (cough overprotective fiancée cough). But I have waited TOO LONG. I fiddle ‘til Logan’s engrossed in de-tagging; then I plug in my laptop, and go to town.

Fifteen minutes later, I’m furious. Because the goings-on chez Duncan are beyond hinky, and well into criminal.

Patient one, who Victor calls Bob (and I have no idea if it’s the guy’s real name) was involuntarily committed, despite the fact that he’s not crazy. Victor claims he’s inconvenient to his family, for
unspecified reasons; he details multiple electroshock treatments, which have pretty much fried the man's memory.

Patient two, one Ellen Shepze, receives preferential treatment due to regular bribes. These include food catered from outside, unlimited internet, and what Victor refers to as 'conjugal visits' from someone other than her husband.

Patient three, Eric, is periodically sneaked off the premises for three or four days. He returns exhausted, red-eyed and uncommunicative.

I punch the couch cushion, to vent, but it doesn’t help. My feelings for Duncan are complicated; love, resentment, and squick, all mashed together. I’m afraid of him, a little, because he’s not right in the head. I’m angry that he was ALWAYS oblivious to my feelings and needs. And I try not to think about what he did at Shelly’s party, since it makes my stomach hurt.

Once I adored him, though; and he’s Logan’s friend, and Lilly’s brother. Besides, no matter WHAT he’s done, nobody deserves to be mistreated while insane. Indulging the vices of mentally unstable people is zero percent better.

“‘I should have known,’” Logan says, over my shoulder. I turn to discover he’s crept up on me, and is reading Victor’s text. “It’s impossible to keep dirty secrets out of your hot little hands. You have a sixth sense for where they’re buried.”

I smack the laptop shut, and he smirks at me. “Duncan’s FINE,” he says, smirk turning taunting as I stalk around the chair. “Lils and I pay several people VERY well to protect him at all times.”

“This is unacceptable,” I snap, way beyond furious. “Crazy people are being HARMED! We have to put a stop to it!”

“I agree,” he tells me. “AFTER finals. See, this is why we tried so hard to keep you and the data separate. You angst when you can’t act; and you need to not angst right now, at ALL.”

“Victor feels it can’t wait,” I say. “Or he wouldn’t have given me these, the minute he caught me alone.”

“VICTOR is the one who can’t wait,” Logan says, frustrated. “He’s bored out of his mind, and when he gets that way, he makes trouble. God, sometimes I think I should write ‘cat herder’ instead of ‘surfboard designer’ in the occupation spot of forms. Everyone I love is IMPOSSIBLE to manage!”

“Are you under the illusion that you CONTROL me, here?” I demand, temper rising. “I’d be HAPPY to disabuse you of that notion!”

He grins. “Wow, are you daring me to fight you? Because I know better. NOBODY gets to dare you, and win.”

I open my mouth to retort, shut it. I can hear him clear as day in FBLA class, talking about Beaver. (Now he’s done it. Nobody gets to DARE you and win.) My jaw clenches. Is Logan refusing to admit he knows me, and then throwing out HINTS?

“Now WHERE have I heard you say that before?” I murmur, tapping my bottom lip and casting my eyes heavenward. “Maybe if I think REALLY hard, the answer will come to me.”

“I’m told pregnancy can cause brain damage,” he offers, not backing down. He tosses the onesie he’s holding onto the coffee table, hooks a thumb in his front pocket; gazes down at me, jackassery
gleaming in his eyes. “It’s a shame you’re losing it so young, Ronica. You used to have a mind like a steel trap.”

I narrow my eyes. He cocks his head, and narrows his, too. I press my lips together, and his mouth curves into a smirk.

“Are you plotting my downfall?” he asks, pulling me closer by the placket of my sweater.

“Maybe,” I say, letting myself be pulled.

“Should I worry?” He curves his hands under cashmere, around my ass, leaning down to whisper in my ear.

“Only if you’re doing something of which I’d disapprove,” I say, tilting my head as he sucks lightly on my neck. “Lying about critical stuff, for example.”

“Do you disapprove of me doing YOU?” he asks, sliding a hand between my legs. He delves beneath my pajama pants, stroking lightly, and the pressure of his tongue and teeth increases.

“Not on principle,” I murmur, easing my own hands inside his jeans. I dig my nails into his ass. “Did you just give me a hickey?”

“Mmmm,” he says, scraping teeth lightly over the bruise. “Always makes you SO wet. Much like accusing me of evil. Hop up on the table, I’ll let you manipulate me to your heart’s content.”

“Do you EVER tell the complete, unvarnished truth, with no spin?” I muse, letting him hoist me onto the surface. I spread my legs for his hand.

He kisses me, teasing with minimal tongue as he pushes 3 fingers deep. I moan, because God, he’s hot when he’s infuriating. “I love you,” he murmurs. He circles my clit with his thumb as his hand fucks me hard, nips the rim of my ear. “Always, and completely, and that’s the truth without spin.”

He pulls his fingers out, sucks each one clean, kisses the tip of my nose. Then he puts his mouth over the hickey and draws on it, as he shucks his jeans and shoves into me. I moan and come, because Jesus, while he pounds me with everything he has.

He presses his forehead to mine, teeth bared. My fingers dig into his shoulders, his into my hips, my heels lock tight against his ass. He begins to grunt expletives, each time he plunges deep. Then he spills with a sound like a tiger’s coughing roar, eyes squeezed shut.

“I love you, Veronica,” he says, spreading his palms flat on the table so he won’t collapse. His face falls onto my shoulder. “God, I love you so much.”

“Is it really ME you love?” I ask, pressing my cheek to his scalp. “Do you even know who I AM?”

“You’re my heart’s desire,” he says, and looks right at me.

I kiss him, because he told me that once, in Fiji. I hope he remembers, too.
Flame and Glass Fragments

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to the fabulous silverlining2k6, without whom this chapter would make very little sense, and would involve falcons. :-)

Trigger warnings for drug references, non-graphic descriptions of violence, and POSSIBLE character death.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

THREAD THIRTY ONE INVERTS

My head swoops and spins as Logan kisses me, gleeful, dizzy. I twine my arms around his neck and hold on. His hair is soft against my wrists; when I pull away, his face is rounder, and he’s wearing his pajamas (aka nothing). He’s got his arms around me tight, instead of planted on the table, and the quality of light screams ‘dawn’.

“Mmmm,” he says. “I love it when you taste like coffee. My two favorite flavors, mixed together.”

“Sweet talker,” I say. He bobs his eyebrows at me, nestling into the vee of my thighs. I’m in a tank and sleep shorts, my hair falling in my eyes, and the parts of me not touching him prickle with morning chill.

“There’s a box of pastries on the counter,” he tells me, pressing a kiss to my scalp. “And bacon. I doubt our morning schedule is rigorous, on account of the festivities, but we should probably get dressed and head in. Seeing as I’m the Very Special Guest Star, and all.”

I wind my legs around his hips in answer and he squeezes me, rocking back and forth, humming softly. It’s a quiet, peaceful moment, as the morning light brightens and mellows through the glass. Eventually, I take a deep breath, smile, and let him go.

He kisses the spot beneath my ear where I dab perfume, and saunters off towards the bedroom. I watch the muscles in his back shift, and wonder how much longer I’ll be able to tell him and the older Logans apart.

The bacon’s still warm. I snag four slices, chewing thoughtfully as my gaze drifts around the room, cataloguing. Two backpacks are set neatly on the foyer table, above two pairs of shoes; beside one is a small stack of paper. I sidle over, curious.

Top page is a schedule for the Shark Stadium demolition ceremony. Beneath lies Logan’s award winning (plagiarized) essay on freedom.

I smile, pick both up, and settle on the couch to read, shoving the last of the bacon handily into my mouth.

“Freedom. That’s what it’s all about, all right,” the essay begins. “But talking about it and being it, that’s two different things. I mean, it’s real hard to be free when you’re bought and sold in the marketplace.”
Okay, I remember this line from the movie…it came AFTER our popcorn fight, while Logan’s hand was in my jeans, teaching me exciting new things about g-spots. The words are burned into my brain, by sheer Pavlovian association. But what follows on the page is unfamiliar.

“Easy Rider is my favorite film, and this speech is the reason why. Because truer words were never freaking spoken. I’ve been a commodity since the day of my birth, when my baby pictures sold to People magazine for 2.5 million dollars. I made my film debut at age 3, playing the adorable toddler son of my harried single mom, who had every good quality except the love of George Clooney. (That was her last role until my dad died, by the way. Her Emmy made him jealous.) My presence was required for Parade Magazine interviews and Annie Liebovitz photo shoots before I spoke in full sentences. I had to wade through mobs of autograph-seeking fans just to fetch the morning paper.

“I don’t expect my tale of woe to inspire pity; I have it ALL, right? Money, fame, devastating good looks. But when everyone you know sees you as a source of cash or status? Or wants to observe you like a zoo animal, learn how the other half lives? You’re not free. It’s a nice cage, with leather couches and satellite TV…but you’re trapped all the same.

“The next part of the Easy Rider speech contains a warning. ‘Don’t ever tell anybody they’re not free. Cause then they’ll get busy killing and maiming to prove to you that they are.’ And again, kudos, that’s spot-on. It’s how I coped with powerlessness, for a long time. Life inside the bubble was ugly, but there were decadent diversions a-plenty; and no one interfered, unless my antics made the paper. I took MAJOR advantage, during my early teens, to the point where my mom’s agent suggested a reality show. You know, so my crash and burn could be documented in High Def, for the enjoyment of the avid masses.

“I chose the other path. When my dad died, my mom returned to acting, but I picked anonymity. I surrounded myself with people who would never court the press. I stayed straight and narrow to keep out of the tabloids, and my house has a guard and gate. I make good grades, I’m headed for college, and now I want to give back. I want to help others be free. Because this SPACE to not be scrutinized, to not be the world’s whipping boy, means everything. My life finally feels like MINE.

“Nobody approves, needless to say, except, of course, my girlfriend. The money men talk to me, and talk to me, and talk to me, as the saying goes. They’d prefer I be a slave to the dollar, in the image of my old man. My freedom SCARES them, after lives spent tethered to exploitation and greed.

“I take flying lessons, in my spare time. Pampered brat’s expensive hobby, right? But up there in the sky, where all the control is mine, it’s so quiet and clean. I feel the same when I’m surfing, in the early morning. When I’m in the arms of the girl I love. Everything becomes simple and pure. I have a purpose, and the steps to achieving it are clear.

“So yeah, self-determination is freedom, to me. I build my own house around myself, the walls where I want them. When I can, I help others do the same. Nobody needs to tell me who I am anymore, because I KNOW. And I’m happy with my choices. I prefer not being a star.”

I set the essay down, stroke my fingertips across it. Even when Logan wasn’t quite sure what right and wrong WERE, he had a supremely exacting sense of ‘fair’. He doesn’t mention the abuse, but it’s the unspoken subtext to every sentence, the helpless-making bad thing with access to his cage. This admiration for cleanness, simplicity, justice; I can see why he joined the military. I can see why he fell in love with me.

I vow never to leave him trapped in unhappiness again. I pick up the schedule, study it, then head for the bedroom to dress.

He watches me shower, in the mirror, while he shaves. I encourage him with a smile and wink.
Delighted by the game, he laughs and helps me dry myself, gentle with the towel over skin. He observes while I put on makeup, seeming fascinated; brings me a rose colored bra and panty set. Munches a Danish, while I don it.

I find him in the kitchen once I’m dressed, jeans and a mandala-printed tank, hair in his favorite dual knots. He’s drinking espresso and reading Kerouac, hip balanced on the counter. He hands me a to-go cup full of iced coffee with cream, a pastry oozing almond custard. Rests his hands on my waist as I tilt my jaw to swallow, nibbles the curve of my throat.

“I hate to ruin this golden moment,” I say, voice breathy… the pressure of his teeth goes straight to my groin. “But we have to talk about what’s happening at Shark Stadium. Or rather, whether we should change something that’s SCHEDULED to happen.”

“He, I KNEW it was you! I recognized that wink in the shower.” His lecherous grin closes around a slice of bacon, but he keeps on talking. “By all means, let’s discuss. Is another disaster brewing?”

“Weevil hinted once that when the stadium blew, Thumper was crushed in the rubble. I don’t know if HE trapped Thumper there, or if the Fitpatricks did—he claimed the latter, during his trial. Either way, though, you should be aware… if you press the plunger, you’re pulling the metaphorical trigger. I don’t want you going into that ceremony blind.”

He sighs, returns to the bedroom. In a minute, he’s back with a burner phone and slip of paper, which he hands over with a flourish. “Call it in,” he says. “That’s the Sheriff’s anonymous tip line. Use a fake voice, and make sure you mention Thumper’s Fitzpatrick connections. Smash the SIM card when you’re done. I’ve gotta find my missing shoe.”

He wanders off, and I snicker… thwarting murder’s become routine. I use a Russian accent to comply, just because, and crush the SIM card with a Williams and Sonoma Citrus Juicer. I’ve dumped the debris, and made it halfway through my excellent coffee, when our doorbell chimes.

I open up, breakfast in hand, to find Sacks in uniform on the porch. I’m glad I didn’t slack about the call; this may be one of those days where the fun never stops.

“Aw, look, the sun came out in the form of you,” I say, pushing the door wide. He shoots me a quietly exasperated sideways glance and enters, thumbs hooked in his gun belt. “How can I help on this fine, festive morning?”

He hovers in the foyer until I gesture for him to sit, then sinks into the closest chair. “Coffee?” I ask, but he shakes his head. I perch on the couch arm adjacent.

“I understand you were with Wallace Fennel last night, for at least a few hours?” he asks, producing a notebook and pencil.

Fuck. “Logan?” I call. He wanders out of the bedroom, Sketchers in hand. “This nice man in uniform wants to know what we did with Wallace last night. Is this where we call our lawyer?”

Logan sits beside me, dons one shoe. “A bunch of us hung out after the basketball game,” he says pleasantly, studying Sacks while he ties the lace. “We went to Jerry’s for burgers. After that, Wallace took his Chicago friends clubbing, and Ronica and I headed to the gelato shop. We came home early, bought a movie on pay per view. Snuggled.”

He laces his other sneaker, then sits back and drapes an arm around me. Sacks writes, with concentration. “Did you notice which vehicle Fennel left in? Or who was behind the wheel?”

“It was a big red SUV,” Logan says. “A rental. I can’t remember the driver’s name, but all the
basketball fans were kissing his ass. Tucker, maybe?"

I sigh, because I know where this is going. “Rashard Rucker?” I ask, and Logan glances at me, surprised.

He covers with a snap-and-point. “That’s right,” he says. “Rucker was driving. He’s the kind of dude who LOVES to be in charge.”

“Were any of your friends intoxicated, when you saw them last?” Sacks asks. Logan shakes his head.

“Nah, man, like I said. We were at a high school basketball game, then a burger shop. None of us can drink, we’re all underage.”

Sacks gives Logan a look, which he blithely ignores, and favors me with an explanation. “There was an accident on the freeway, at 2:00 AM, just inside Balboa County lines, right around the time your friends returned from Tijuana. The driver of the other car was injured. It was a hit and run, a red SUV; Rucker’s rental was found in the Neptune Grand parking garage, dented. I had all four passengers in for questioning this morning, at which time they appeared hung over. Each denied driving, but the other three gave up Fennel.

“I’d hate to base a case against Wallace on hearsay, considering…you know. But if I don’t identify the culprit soon, Rucker and Thompson will leave town. You two are Fennel’s closest friends. Has he confided anything relevant?”

“He hasn’t,” I say. “But I’m positive they’re all covering for Rucker. You need to separate the guy from his Uncle Monty if you want him to confess, though. Rucker is shaping up to be the next Le Bron, and Monty sees him as his meal ticket during the golden years. He’ll lie, cheat and steal to keep Rashard out of jail, even if it means framing an innocent party.”

Sacks nods, decisively. “I’m glad I caught you before you headed out to the stadium. I wanted…” his phone rings; he glances at it and says, “Sorry, I need to take this.”

He wanders, murmuring, across the room. Logan says, in an undertone, “Thank God you showed up. Wallace has been through ENOUGH these last few months, without tossing vehicular assault in the mix.”

I nod, but put my finger to my lips; Sacks’ voice has grown loud enough to hear. “No, Barney, tell the DEA lady that can’t be right. Uh-uh, that’s Freedom Rider territory. Didn’t you listen to Keith’s presentation?” he sighs, fiddling with his moustache. “They’re putting too much faith in Mrs. Casablancas. She’s a financially motivated informant, so she’s unreliable.” He nods, nods again, and did he just roll his eyes? Heh. Sheriff of Neptune is nobody’s dream job. “I’m doing interviews about the Robinson hit and run, I can be there in 20 minutes? Yeah, scramble whatever resources she needs. The DEA are calling the shots.”

I press my forehead to Logan’s so Sacks won’t think we’re listening. He’s paying zero attention, though, as he hangs up and strides back over. “Veronica, I have official police business. Please get in touch if you find evidence for this case?”

I nod, and he waves like he isn’t sure he should. Takes himself unobtrusively off. I meet Logan’s gaze.

“Something tells me I won’t be the guest of honor at the demolition ceremony,” he says, corner of his mouth crooking. “And I was SO enjoying the irony. Since my prize-winning essay detailed my
LOATHING of public appearances.”

“Kendall Casablancas just sent the cops on a wild goose chase,” I say, assembling puzzle pieces. “She wants them in Freedom Rider territory, where a Fitzpatrick deal could NOT happen. My bet is, it’s a diversion, because Kendall sticks to the oldest tricks in the book. So what is the right hand up to, I wonder? While the left hand’s giving Sacks a good long look down her cleavage?”

“The FBI’s done a great job dismantling the Fitzpatrick gang,” Logan tells me. “At this point, the only brother not in jail is the priest. You think HE’S in charge?”

“Stranger things have happened,” I say. “Although the one time I met him, he seemed like a decent guy. Of course, Aaron could fake decency too, and he was the world’s shittiest actor.”

Logan traces a finger along the back of the couch. “So if we followed Kendall today….would that buy us anything? I mean, I know you said she was Cormac’s girlfriend. But were they actually partners? Or did he just use her as a decoy?”

“I honestly don’t know,” I say. “Kendall’s smart, but no telling whether Cormac can see past the boobs. She’s invested enough that she took the rap for him once, and did time. Plus, she’s got a talent for long cons. It couldn’t HURT to follow her.”

He sighs. “All right, I’m going to tell you something. But you have to swear you won’t get mad.”

“Um.” I cross my arms. “If this confession involves Kendall, I’m gonna have to say no dice.”

“I promised I’d avoid her, and I HAVE.” Logan takes my hand, fixing me with the soul-deep stare that makes me sure he’s not lying. “But it’s been…challenging. She’s REALLY not fond of the word no.”

The noise I make sounds like a snarl; his grip tightens. “She kept ambushing me, Veronica. Sucking on Bloody Mary celery stalks, sitting in my lap. Once she took her swimsuit off while Dick was in the bathroom, and handed me a bottle of sunscreen. The more caustic and insulting I got, the harder she chased. I’ve been boycotting the Casablancas place since your birthday.”

He takes a deep breath. “The situation came to a head, so to speak, about a month after Big Dick did his dine and dash. She climbed into my shower at the gym. I guess she was running out of cash? Maybe she thought I’d play sugar daddy, or prove dumb enough to blackmail? Whatever the reason, the fallout was ugly, even by MY standards. I was afraid, afterwards, that she’d go psycho on me for humiliating her. Or on you, to hurt me. So I….bugged her watch.”

The red haze of rage recedes a little. I say, “You WHAT?”

“I planted a bug in her Cartier,” he says, patiently. “So I could avoid her. And make sure SHE stayed clear of YOU. Also I built a home gym in the garage; hot-stone massages and a smoothie bar just weren’t worth the stress.” He tucks a strand of my hair back, hesitant. “If you want to locate her at any time, it’s no problem, is what I’m saying. She loves that stupid watch. Wears it everywhere.”

He takes a deep breath. “The situation came to a head, so to speak, about a month after Big Dick did his dine and dash. She climbed into my shower at the gym. I guess she was running out of cash? Maybe she thought I’d play sugar daddy, or prove dumb enough to blackmail? Whatever the reason, the fallout was ugly, even by MY standards. I was afraid, afterwards, that she’d go psycho on me for humiliating her. Or on you, to hurt me. So I….bugged her watch.”

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“Logan,” I say. I tilt my head against his hand. “I need more ugly details about this fallout.”

“I made a HUGE scene,” he says. “I was stark naked, verbally eviscerating her in the locker room while water sprayed everywhere. We drew a CROWD. I know you have no reason to believe me, Veronica, because other me sounds like a total dick, but I would never cheat. I just wouldn’t. I love you.”

I stare at him, and I guess my heart is in my eyes, because the corner of his mouth quirks. He kisses
“Only you would view this revelation as peak romance, Mrs. R.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I say. “I’ll bet YOUR Veronica would, too. Come on, let’s check out the bug. See if it gives us any insight into Kendall’s latest nefarious scheme.”

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One activated tracker and one disguised-voice call later (twice today, a new record) we know the sordid truth; Kendall’s getting a blow-out and mani-pedi at the Rigaletto salon.

“TOTAL fail,” I say, tossing the tracker onto the couch. “We should proceed with our scheduled activities. Bring that along, in case she makes a move.”

He nods, pockets the equipment, extends a hand to help me up. “Hey I just had a fun thought,” he says. “If we make it to school on time, we can ride to the stadium on the FIELD TRIP BUS!”

We’re halfway into town, me powering through a Zip-Loc full of bacon, when inspiration strikes. “The paddle!” I say, snapping my fingers.

Logan arches his brows, but refrains from the kink joke. “The paddle Thumper made, smartass,” I say. “In auto shop. The license plate numbers of his Fitzpatrick drug customers are burned into the wood; an insurance policy, I guess. Since the winter carnival went down differently, here, I’ll bet it’s still in his shop locker.”

“We’d have to skip the field trip to retrieve it,” Logan says, checking his watch. “We’re running low on time. Plus, how will license plate numbers clarify what Kendall’s up to?”

“Weevil has keys.” I extract my phone, thumb through the contacts. “He’ll keep it safe, ’til we have time to match names to plates. That data in our possession gives us leverage over the whole distribution network; it’s worth the effort, even if it buys us nothing today.”

“Sure would have been nice to have in reserve, back when the Fitzp’s were bent on killing us,” he says sardonic. I shake my head.

“I doubt it existed, then,” I say, dialing Weevil’s number. “My first sighting was at Winter Carnival, well after the FBI bust.”

The phone goes straight to voicemail (‘Yo. You know what to do.’) and I wrinkle my nose. “Weevil it’s me. Your favorite walking disaster. I need a favor, but it’s more like you’ll be scratching your own back. Can you sneak into auto shop, get a paddle etched with numbers out of Thumper’s locker, and keep it safe? Time is of the essence, FYI; someone’s gonna notice the guy’s missing pretty soon.”

I flop back onto the seat, close the phone. “Hey, can I see the bug tracker? In case Kendall decided to lunch with the ladies?”

He extracts it from his pocket, tosses it over, and says, “I don’t get what’s keeping her in town. The Rich Husband Money Train dried up, the stepsons are broke, the secret boyfriend’s doing life. And she clearly can’t find a replacement sucker, if she’s reduced to chasing high school students. Seems like she’d hit the road, search for greener pastures. LA, maybe, or Palm Springs. Both MUCH more profitable hunting grounds for a predator of her type.”

“Oooh, pithy questions,” I say. “Which I can’t answer. I’d bet she’s waiting for a payoff, though. From who or for what, that may be the key to this mess. Did incorporation happen?”
“Soon,” he says. “Idea’s still floating around. The current mayor seems VERY interested, though, so it’s only a matter of time.”

“Interesting. She scored big in another timeline, but only because incorporation fell through. Back to square one.”

“Well, she’s continuing to help the Fitzpatrick’s, so that’s a clue. There must still be blood she can suck from those veins.” He makes a brushing-off gesture of disgust, and I smile, because his dislike of Kendall THRILLS me.

“DEA involvement means drugs,” I say. “The FBI already cleaned up the organized crime element, so this is vestigial. The person selling to the Freedom Riders is small potatoes. Logan, this could be MANNING. Maybe he’s trying to dump his toxic stock, and Kendall sent the DEA to crash the party. Boom, the bad drugs are off the market, the main Fitzpatrick competitor is out of business, and Kendall becomes an informant the DEA trusts. If the Russians move in, or across-the-border cartels, all the Fighting Irish have to do is hand her a phone.”

“So the Fitzpatricks are getting rid of Manning FOR us?” he asks. “We just sit back with popcorn and watch, while the DEA takes our main threat down?”

“I doubt Manning will be present,” I warn. “But his need to make this deal must be high. Like Vinnie said, product that kills customers is tough to unload. Weevil thinks this under-the-table drug dealing’s about untraceable cash. Guns for the Apocalypse were mentioned.”

“Huh.” Logan frowns. “Stewart’s awfully complacent for a survivalist. Usually that type’s paranoid; but HE thinks he’s untouchable, maybe even by God. The guy barely bothers to HIDE his crimes.”

“Logic and Stewart Manning might be incompatible,” I say, dismissive. “He’s Looney Tunes.”

I flip the bug tracker idly in my hand, abruptly sit up straight. “Logan,” I say, elbowing him. “Kendall’s on the move. And she’s out of the 09 district, headed straight into the barrio. Not Fitzpatrick territory, not even Freedom Rider territory, and for sure no place I’d park a Maserati. Something’s going down.”

“Show me,” he says. I turn the map screen to face him, and he pulls over to study it. Restarts the car, and flips a U-Turn. “This is dangerous. You should call someone you trust, and let them know…”

My phone rings, interrupting him; it’s Weevil. I answer with, “How goes Operation Spanking?”

Weevil chuckles, voice tinny over the poor connection. “Tell the truth. Thumper stole this thing from Richie’s frat boy buddies, right? It’s like a cut-off oar.”

“Those are plate numbers for every sucker he sold Fitzpatrick drugs,” I say. “The associated names are valuable, to harassed parties like ourselves. Kinky or not, the guy did us a big retroactive favor.”

“Yeah, funny thing about Thumper. My boy Hector just called from Shark Stadium, he’s over there holding us seats? He says some cops showed up and delayed the ceremony, so they could search the premises. His cousin’s husband’s a deputy; scoop is, some Russian lady called in a tip that Thumper was tied up inside.”

“Did it they find him?” I ask, with a glance at Logan; he’s focused on driving, periodically checking the tracker.

“Sadly, no. But I’m sure wherever Thumper is, he’ll be glad to hear somebody cares.”
“Those pesky anti-murder advocates ruin all the fun,” I say. “Hey, if we don’t make it to the ceremony, tell them to start without Logan, OK? We’re tailing a trophy wife though your personal stomping grounds, and having WAY too much fun to quit.”

“Spying on an affair?” he asks, amused.

“Investigating Fitzpatrick shenanigans,” I say. “If we disappear off the face of the Earth, you know where to search for bodies.”

“In MY neighborhood?” he asks, surprised. “Interesting. Are they not keeping track of current events? Maybe I should send a memo.”

“Yeah, it seems like poor decision-making to me, as well. Hopefully I’ll know more details, when we meet to hand off the paddle.”

I hang up, and Logan says, “She’s gone stationary. About five blocks that way, one over. Where should we park?”

I scope our surroundings; brand-new, tricked-out Range Rovers are not the norm. My gaze passes over a Hyundai three cars back, and…fantastic. “Logan,” I say. “How long has Vinnie Van Lowe been following us?”

“What? Where is he?” The upside-down v between Logan’s brows deepens.

“DON’T turn around. Behind us to the right, grey Hyundai. How do you want to deal?”

He smirks, and makes a two-wheeled, tires-screaming, Dukes-of-Hazard left turn. We wind through several neighborhoods, way outpacing the speed limit, then Logan asks, “Is he gone?”

“Looks that way, Evil Knievel.” I pat his knee. “Proceed at will.”

He studies the tracker, and follows the route to the stationary dot. This turns out to be the Toco Loco Cantina, a sleazy bar with half-shorted-out neon palm trees in the windows. The front wall features a mural of a crazy-faced guy, dancing with a hot cartoon lady. “Classy,” Logan says, driving past. “Let’s find the back door.”

He hooks a right, then a left, into a narrow, gravel-strewn alley. Where Vinnie leans nonchalantly on the bumper of his Hyundai, arms and ankles crossed.

Logan asks, “Should I reverse out?” But Vinnie beckons with one finger, so I say, “Nah, let’s listen. He’s clearly got something to say.”

Logan parks, and we settle on our own front bumper, about ten feet away.

“How did you find us?” Logan asks, and I say, “I’m not sure he DID, muffin. I think he was coincidentally headed to the same location. He spotted us when you decided to play INDY 500 on a residential street.”

Vinnie’s eyes narrow, his tell that I’ve guessed correctly. “That’s the thing I like about you, VMars. It never takes you long to get the gist. What’s your interest in this place, anyway? Because I gotta tell you, the margarita machine hasn’t been cleaned since 1995.”

“What’s YOUR interest?” I counter. “What’s happening in there that requires you to stand guard?”

“See, you say I’m standing guard. I say, I’m doing you a favor.” He indicates the restaurant with an
expansive wave. “None of the people on your hit list are inside that bar…unless you REALLY resent Mrs. Casablancas for making passes at The Mouth. But I would be remiss if I did not explain—you go rushing in, investigating, and you’ll make a whole slew of new enemies. Why don’t you tell me what you’re doing here, I’ll let you know if you’re hot or cold?”

“I want to catch Stewart Manning red-handed,” I say, and he laughs.

“Mars, you’re in Norway. Try his church. This is one of those days when he’s gonna need to pray.”

“I’m not interested in chatting with the guy,” I say. “I want evidence that puts him away for good. Maybe the Fitzpatricks and I have that in common?”

“You should visit his retreat,” Vinnie says. “Word is, that’s where the guy plots his humdingers.”

“Got an address?” Logan asks. Vinnie shrugs.

“Negatory,” he says. “But this is an excellent time to consult your Yellow Pages. I have a feeling it’ll be short-staffed all morning.”

“Fair enough,” I dust my hands together and hop off the car. “Enjoy stooge duty. A job with a PROMISING future, and currently, an excellent view.”

Vinnie makes his sardonic duck face, re-folds his arms. We climb in our car, and drive away.

“So now what?” Logan asks, checking his watch. He turns on the radio, tunes to ‘Let’s Take a Ride’. “Admit defeat? Hit the movies? Make out in the back seat?”

“You’ll never succeed in business with that attitude,” I say. “I know one person who’s familiar with Stewart’s habits, and hates him enough to want him out of commission. Let’s play that card, and maybe we can catch him napping instead of praying.”

“Someone hates STEWART?” Logan fake-gasps, pressing a hand to his chest. “What is WRONG with this world?”

“That’s the PI business for you, sweet cheeks,” I say. “Kick over a rock, bugs crawl out.”

I pull out my phone, as Logan arrows back towards the 09, like overexposure to the 02 will contaminate him. Meg answers on the first ring.

“Where ARE you guys?” she demands, cheerful and carefree as ever. “They had to skip the slideshow with Logan in it, and Mayor Sinclair just pushed the plunger.”

“Mayor WHO?” I demand, and Logan says, “Crap, I KNEW there was something I forgot to tell you.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Meg’s voice moves closer. “The background noise here is UNBELIEVABLE.”

“Meg, I need a favor,” I say. “It would be really great today to have a certain kind of proof, about a certain guy we all know and don’t love. And I think I can find it, if I get access your dad’s retreat. Any chance you could give me an address?”

“Is this the kind of proof that lets my sisters move back to town?” she asks. “DAMNING proof?”

“So I’m told,” I say.
“It’s out near Casper’s Wilderness Park off Ortega Highway,” she says. “85 Vallecitos. It’s a long drive down an unpaved road, take a four-wheeler.”

“Thank you,” I say. “And in case I never said so, thanks for the other thing you did to help me, too.”

“Nobody messes with the head cheerleader,” she tells me, and hangs up.

“How do you feel about a road trip?” I ask Logan. “It’s kind of far. We might need to book a hotel, after.”

“I feel invigorated,” he says. “As long as it’s got room service, a big bed, and adequate thread-count linens, you know I’m in favor.”

“And that’s you, roughing it,” I say, as he turns onto the access road.

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Stewart Manning’s ‘retreat’ is not so much a rustic cabin as a gated compound, built smack in the middle of nowhere, and patrolled by dogs. The buildings are squat and utilitarian, beige-painted cement, and the German Shepherds on guard duty seem much less friendly than Backup.

“I’m getting that not-so-fresh drug-production vibe off this place,” Logan says, from behind the binoculars he keeps in his car. “Are we sure there aren’t machine-gun-toting, mustachioed villains lurking? Maybe with eye patches?”

“You can take the boy out of Hollywood…” I say, snatching the field glasses. “I wish the slipstream allowed for research and planning. I feel more like I’m hanging by my fingertips from a cliff every single day.”

“Welcome to my ENTIRE LIFE.” Logan drapes an arm across my back. “You get used to it, eventually. And when the stress overwhelms you, adrenaline and sex numb the pain.”

I turn to look at him. “So I’m both the best and worst thing that’s ever happened to you?”

“Aw, snookums,” he says, kissing my cheek. “Cross out the word worst. I love to live on the edge.”

“How should we go in?” I ask, because I can’t see an inconspicuous entry point.

“Does it matter?” he asks. “Back door, window? What kind of gear’s in your messenger bag? I’ve got credit cards and paperclips, but I doubt these doors have cheap locks.”

I take off my cropped brown army jacket, spread it on the grass, and upend my purse. “Taser,” I say, poking through the pile. “Ziploc containing five trackers. Lockpicks, keyring, wallet, sunglasses. Three lipsticks, spy pen with camera, map of Neptune; first-aid kit, prescription bottles of Valium and OxyContin made out to…Logan Echolls?” I glance up and he shrugs, still watching the compound. “Cell phone, beef jerky, Skittles, small pink sparkly notebook, containing case notes for a defrauded client…written by Lilly? Jesus, what has Other Veronica been DOING?”

“Justice League,” he says, nabbing the Skittles and tearing them open. “You knew about that. Wasn’t it, like, your idea?”

“Logan, who’s IN the Justice League right now?”

“The usual suspects,” he says. “You, me, Lilly, Dick, Wallace, Weevil. Couple others who consult as needed. Lils isn’t around much, since she ran off to NorCal for college, but she helps sometimes
“Are our phones set up to be tracked, in case of emergency?”

“Duh.” He shoots me a look. “Technically we’re amateurs, but we’re not, you know, amateurs.”

“Call Dick,” I say. “Tell him where we are, and have him activate the trackers. If we don’t call him back by, say, noon, he needs to send in the cops. We might get arrested for breaking and entering; but it’s better than the alternative, if this all goes to hell.”

He follows instructions while I re-pack my bag, tucking my phone into my pocket for easy access. When he hangs up, he asks, “What next?”

“You’re good with dogs,” I say, handing over the beef jerky and Valium. “You want to handle bedtime?”

He looks at the stuff in my hands. “I’m not doing this if it HURTS them,” he says. “I may not have the world’s most pristine ethics, but I draw the line at injuring puppies.”

“I would NEVER,” I say. “One tablet each, wrapped in jerky, and they’ll sleep, that’s all.”

“Loki gets a walk on the beach after this,” he says, handing over the binoculars and hopping up. “And a hot dog.”

“Deal,” I say, amused, and watch him stride off to save the day.

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Once the threat of dog attack’s neutralized, breaking in proves simple. Like Logan said, Manning’s complacent; the locks are hardware-store standard, keyed knob and deadbolt. No alarm sounds, either, when we walk inside. Our steps echo in the dark hallway, without background noise to muffle them. The place is deserted.

It’s aggressively utilitarian. There’s a room at one end for storage, currently empty. A second room, shotgun-style, houses cots and bedside tables, maybe for rush times when workers can’t go home. The bench-filled space onto which the door opens has an altar and cross along one wall; for prayer, I guess, thought I doubt God would approve of this place. At the far end, behind another locked door, is a lab.

“Don’t touch anything,” I warn Logan as we edge inside, gawking at the glassware and centrifuges, the freezers and shelves full of bottles. “We don’t know what he’s making. Could be chemical, could be biological; and considering that people died from his drugs, could very well be toxic.”

“My money’s on toxic,” he says, halting in front of the shelves. “Come check this out. Let’s see if you paid attention in Mr. Wu’s class.”

I join him, and he points. “Remember that day he described all the ways household chemicals could kill you? We’ve got a whole laundry list, here, of the nastiest over-the-counter varieties. Drain cleaner, cuticle remover, turpentine, rat poison, iron tablets. Nobody keeps all these substances in one place, unless their goal is to cause horrible, lingering death.”

I turn to him, and his face is grim. “The bad drugs weren’t an accident,” I say, slowly. “They were DELIBERATELY laced with harder drugs, or cleaning products. Manning’s not just poisoning his own kids to test them. He’s poisoning everyone in Neptune who buys cheap weed.”
“Including my sister,” Logan says. “This must be why Trina jumped. God, Vinnie even SAID it, pot laced with PCP. Trina was the biggest stoner on the planet, and she dabbled in heroin, too.” He shakes his head to clear it. He’s got that focused glint in his eye that never means anything good.

“And what do you mean, he poisoned his own kids?”

“I didn’t tell you this?” I ask. “I’m sorry, everything’s been crazy. When Meg and I were locked up at the PCH warehouse, we discussed her abuse. Stewart’s made her drink tainted juice four times, as a test of God’s love. Probably he’s done it to Lizzie as well.”

“Jesus,” Logan says, appalled. “WHY?”

“Exactly that,” a voice calls, from the doorway. We turn, and there’s Manning. He’s got on tennis whites and a windbreaker, a terry band around his head; he’d look ridiculous, if it weren’t for the big-ass gun in his hand.

“Jesus,” Manning explains, approaching. Logan steps forward, putting himself between me and the gun, and my heart starts to hammer. “Uh-uh, don’t move,” Manning warns. “I had to interrupt a politically important doubles game to deal with this break-in, I’m not in the best of moods. And I ALWAYS shoot to kill.”

I manage to grab my phone and press buttons while he’s looking at Logan, but Manning notices, and turns the gun on me. “STOP!” he shouts. “Give me that! You won’t be calling anyone!”

I hand over the cell, schooling my features, and he shoves it in his pocket. Smiles, and continues his diatribe.

“People in the modern age don’t love Jesus enough. They don’t OBEY him. They stray from the path of righteousness, and refuse to recognize their sins. The poor and huddled masses need to be taught. Learn to travel the straight and narrow path, feel grateful for God’s mercies. If they can’t, they must be wiped from the face of the Earth, before they infect the rest of us with their blasphemy.”

“You’re the one killing people,” I say, easing away from Logan. “YOU, not God. That isn’t divine justice, it’s just one crazy dude and his minions, MURDERING.”

“The time is coming, soon,” Manning says, “when the criminals and sinners will be judged. All of them will fall, I’m arranging it. And then Neptune will be wiped clean of pestilence, and it will be a Godly place again. A place where a godly man can be appreciated, for his true WORTH.” He circles behind us, indicates with the non-gun hand that we should leave the lab.

“You’re ARRANGING it?” I ask, as we file out. “Holy shit, you ARE! By pitting all the gangs in the city against each other, right? Then double crossing them, one by one. You took out the original local drug supplier, so the Fitzpatricks would have to buy from you. Funneled bad shit through their network until all the dead bodies brought the FBI down. And you paid a PCH’er to burn my house and frame Liam, so he would go to jail.

“The Fitzpatricks had already neutralized Weevil’s gang for you. So after Liam and crew got busted, you turned your attention to the Freedom Riders. And the deal you’re making today will roll out your next batch of bad drugs.”

“This latest scheme didn’t work so well,” Manning says. “Someone tipped off the police. But at least those disgusting Freedom Riders were arrested. Thanks to the new drug laws, they’ll languish for a long time in jail.”

I scope out the chapel unobtrusively, while I lean on a pew. “So what’s the next step? Sabotage the
Russians? Infiltrate the cartels? Just how ambitious IS your megalomania?”

“You heard him,” Logan chides, walking in the opposite direction, so Stewart can’t keep eyes on both of us at once. “He wants the underclass wiped away, the whole Travis Bickle fantasy. I thought my dad was an entitled prick, pretending to be a man of the people. But YOU take the sociopathy of privilege to a whole new LEVEL.”

“Stop moving,” Stewart says. “Or I will kill you. I didn’t want to do it in the lab…there are dangerous things in those bottles. But God will approve, if I end unbelievers here.”

“You think I’m afraid of bullets?” Logan asks. “Or bullies?” He spreads his arms wide, takes a step towards Stewart; then, when he doesn’t get shot, another. “My father was a lot like you, Manning. He enjoyed torturing those who couldn’t fight back. As a result, I’m PHENOMENAL at threat assessment. So I can tell you’re too fucking scared of repercussions to shoot.”

Stewart cocks the gun, fires, and Logan goes down on his back. I scream, voice reverberating through the echoing room, and surge forward, but Stewart shoves me to the ground.

“UNBELIEVER!” Stewart shouts, as I claw hair out of my eyes. He walks over to Logan, pointing the gun at his head, and my brain goes horribly blank. Stewart tilts his jaw, considering, takes careful aim…

Then Logan’s feet rise off the floor, ankles locking around the gun arm, and he yanks. Stewart goes over, thunking hard against the wall. Before I can register what’s happening, Logan’s got the weapon, and Stewart’s left cradling a broken wrist.

Manning shrieks, with rage and pain; Logan disassembles the gun in three efficient moves, tosses it aside, and kicks Stewart in the ribs as he tries to rise.

“What the hell was that?” I yell, and Logan glances at me, barely winded. There’s a manic gleam in his eye.

“Krav Maga,” he says, smirking. “Told you I needed to up my game. Hand me your taser, and grab some duct tape from the storage room. We need to immobilize this asshole before he slithers away.”

I comply. I hear the buzz of the taser and another Stewart-scream as I walk out, but Manning gets no pity from me.

I bring back two rolls, and we get to work binding limp limbs. “Are you shot?” I ask tersely, as I yank makeshift shackles tight.

“Nah, he has shitty aim,” Logan says. “But I knew he’d come closer to gloat, if I was on the ground. I must have gotten mom’s acting gene instead of dad’s, huh? Because if I do say so myself, I was pretty convincing.”

I smack him on the shoulder, not gently, because he scared the CRAP out of me, and he pulls me into his arms. “What now?” he asks, against my hair.

“Veronica?” a high voice calls from outside, and I pull away from Logan, meeting his eyes. “Veronica, are you here?”

“In the church,” I yell, and Meg appears in the doorway, backlit by sunshine so her hair’s limned in gold. She’s got on jeans and a periwinkle sweater, less precious than her old Meg-wear, and her hands are in the pockets of a lemon-yellow coat.
She assesses the situation at a glance, Logan and I huddled on the floor, Stewart disarmed and tied, the gun disabled. “I drove out here to play cavalry,” she says, coming to stand beside us. “But I see you have the situation well in hand.”

“We told Dick to send the police, if we didn’t call in thirty minutes,” I say. I remove my phone from Stewart’s pocket, check the time. “And that was 42 minutes ago. I’d say we’re about to have company.”

“Did he confess?” Meg asks, unemotional. Her eyes haven’t left Stewart, who’s begun feebly writhing. “To all the awful things he did?”

“Oh yeah,” I say, pressing stop to end the ‘record’ function, showing her the voice file. “Got it all right here, ready to upload. He’s not getting away with squat.”

“Good,” she says. “Someone should guard him while we wait for the police. So he doesn’t get away.”

“Young dad’s trussed up like a turkey,” Logan tells her, gently, slapping a strip of tape over Stewart’s mouth. “He’s not going anywhere.”

“I know.” She glances sideways at me, and there are tears in her eyes. “But I should guard him anyway. We can’t take chances.”

I cock a brow at Logan and he nods. Leans close to my ear, murmurs, “She’s used to not having any power over him. It might help, psychologically, if she’s the one to turn him in.”

I’m about to explain why this is bullshit, when I hear sirens. At which point, I bow to necessity. I don’t want to be caught in a room I broke and entered, where the owner’s been tased and tied. “Fine,” I say. “But when the cops come in, lie on the floor with your hands behind your head. Situations like this scare deputies, and you don’t want to get shot.”

“I promise,” Meg says. Logan and I hurry outside.

We put our hands on our scalps as a patrol car crests the hill; a deputy emerges from the passenger seat to pat us down. “Are you Logan Echolls and Veronica Mars?” he asks. “Is Stewart Manning on the premises?”

“Yes, yes, and yes,” I say. “He found us poking around his toxic meth lab, and tried to shoot my boyfriend. We disabled him and tied him up, his daughter’s guarding him inside.” I gesture with my head at the pocket of my jeans. “He confessed to murder, drug distribution, all kinds of nastiness, and I recorded it. The file’s on my phone, right front pocket.”

The deputy, a middle-aged Hispanic guy with kind eyes, extracts my cell. “This is yours?”

“Only phone I’ve got,” I say.

“I’ll have to cuff you, and take you in,” he says, suiting action to words, reciting the Miranda as his partner emerges from the car. “Is anyone else in the building, besides the two you mentioned? Is Mr. Manning’s daughter armed?”

“Yes, yes, and yes,” I say. “He found us poking around his toxic meth lab, and tried to shoot my boyfriend. We disabled him and tied him up, his daughter’s guarding him inside.” I gesture with my head at the pocket of my jeans. “He confessed to murder, drug distribution, all kinds of nastiness, and I recorded it. The file’s on my phone, right front pocket.”

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“Taked apart Manning’s gun,” Logan says, accepting the cuffs with the ease of frequent practice. “And Meg’s the nicest person on the planet. She wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“You never know,” the cop murmurs, shoving us unceremoniously into the back seat, while his partner calls in their status. We watch through the window as he draws his sidearm, and the two of
them enter the building.

“Good thing you warned Meg,” Logan says, relaxing back against the dingy seat. “Bambi’s mother getting shot was traumatic enough the first time.”

“Meg Manning is NOT Bambi’s mother,” I say absently, gaze pinned to the warehouse door. “She offed Stewart handily, in another reality. And she’s the one who took down Felix Toombs.”

“She WHAT?” he demands, and then shots ring out, one, two, three, four, cutting the clear cold air like cracks in Arctic ice. The radio goes crazy, and we look at each other, appalled. Screams and shouts from inside penetrate even across walls, distance and car.

A shower of leaves flutters from the tree overhead, spilling across the windshield and obscuring our view. An animal lands, skates across; a raccoon, or escaping possum.

Everything goes silent, and the deputy who took my phone emerges from the building. He’s leading a cuffed Meg. She comes along docilely, as serene and unruffled and innocent-looking as ever. Even from this distance, I can tell she’s covered in blood.

“So much for fairy tales,” Logan whispers, and I lean against his side.

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Six hours later, an officer approaches my holding cell, and tells me I’ve made bail. “What about Logan?” I ask, as he leads me down the hall.

“Still processing,” he says. “He’ll be out in a few. You can wait in the interrogation room with your lawyer.”

He opens a door, ushers me through, and there’s Mr. Frost, looking no different than he did the day I was questioned about Toombs. I’m 18 now, though. No need for Mommy to try and hold my hand.

“We meet again,” I tell the silver fox, shaking his hand and having a seat. “Only we must be star-crossed, because it always seems to happen in jail.”

“Miss Manning has confessed to the Toombs murder,” he says, uninterested in banter. “In addition to the one she allegedly committed today. She claims she asked you to visit the Manning compound when you phoned her this morning; that she requested you and Mr. Echolls find proof of criminal activity; and that the two of you were unaware of her intention to murder her father.”

“She called Stewart and told him we were there, I’m guessing?” I ask. Because it makes sense; he would have arrived later, had the cops notified him of the break-in.

“It appears so,” he says. “She seems to doubt that the California legal system will appropriately punish a rich defendant. She wanted his victims to stop living in fear.”

“Snow White, vigilante,” I say, softly. “Some people just can’t be saved.”

Logan enters the room, and I rise to embrace him. He shakes the lawyer’s hand and says, “Thanks Don. I appreciate the top-notch service.”

“You didn’t steal anything, and you weren’t in possession of a deadly weapon,” Don says. “You attacked the property owner only in self-defense and used non-lethal force. He did have the legal right to shoot you, by the way, so it’s fortunate you’re unharmed.”
“Also, you requested the police be sent to the scene, and solved a large number of open felony cases in one fell swoop. If the charges against you stick, which I doubt, I’m confident I can get you both off with community service.”

“Don, you’re worth every penny,” Logan says. We all shake hands again, and Logan escorts me from the building, wrapping an arm around me to shield me from night-in-the-desert cold.

Clarence Wiedman is waiting, in the driver’s seat of our car.

Logan hesitates for the briefest of instants, muttering, “Great,” but climbs in on the passenger side anyway. I take the back without comment. His Krav Maga display upped my confidence in his ability to manage Clarence.

“Well, look who came late to the party,” Logan says, sprawling back nonchalantly, crossing one foot over the other knee. “Does this mean Jake’s FINALLY developed an interest in the well-being of his stepdaughter? After what, TWO YEARS of letting her flounder unaided while disaster loomed?”

“I’m employed by Kane Industries,” Wiedman says, flashing him a brief, opaque glance. “Which is jointly owned by Jake and Celeste Kane. Miss Mars and her mother are a topic of some controversy between them. Until today, I’ve never been asked to intervene.”

“Heartwarming,” I say. “So Jake prioritizes conflict-free board meetings over the safety of his own wife?”

“Miss Mars, it’s in your best interests to put resentment aside, and let me protect you,” he says. “You almost stumbled into a meeting of the Sorokin crime family this morning, in your zeal to implicate Stewart Manning. That’s the local Russian Mafia. I don’t know how you happened upon it, or why you stayed outside, but you were lucky. If you’d entered the building, you’d probably be dead.”

Logan and I share a glance, and I grit my teeth. Does every criminal in this TOWN know Kendall and Vinnie?

“Are the Sorokins really that paranoid?” I ask. “You’ve seen my face, eating lunch, so now you must die?”

Wiedman raises a brow. “Clearly you haven’t watched the news. There was a gunfight in the restaurant at 9:00 AM. Three Sorokin associates are dead, and my source tells me a large amount of money’s gone missing. Vinnie Van Lowe was working a case nearby, and notified the police when he heard shots; he then entered the restaurant, and led the patrons in the front room to safety. The press is calling him a hero, and crediting his quick thinking with saving lives.”

“Who died?” I ask, shooting Logan a ‘keep your mouth shut’ glare. “And was anyone arrested?”

“There were only bodies at the scene, when the police arrived,” Wiedman says. “Three young men, all of whom immigrated within the last year. They haven’t been identified, but they were likely couriers. I’d guess the back room of the restaurant was used for collecting protection money.”

Logan whistles. “Someone looking for a payout found one,” he says, with significant intonation. “Someone who knew the cops would be occupied elsewhere.”

“It takes a thief,” I say, softly, settling back against the leather seat. “OK Clarence, you’ve convinced me. Protect me for all you’re worth. Make all today’s problems go away.”

THREAD THIRTY TWO
“I’d love to,” Dad says drily. “But I can’t, unless you level with me about what your problems actually ARE.”

I shake my head to clear it, and I’m in the courtyard outside the Hearst Government building. Dad’s on a park bench, arms folded, legs crossed, wearing the sport coat/tie/khaki ensemble he thinks is haute couture. I’m facing him, like I just walked out the front door…clutching my backpack in one hand and some papers in the other, squinting into the bright spring sun.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I say. Because when in doubt, deny.

“Veronica,” he chides, in the ‘don’t disappoint me’ voice that cuts to the quick. “You’re not sleeping or eating well. You and Logan have been fighting for some time, and your shotgun marriage is on shaky ground. In the last few days since you passed out, I’ve watched you grow increasingly agitated, but you won’t explain why. And an hour ago, when I was looking for a misplaced letter in the desk of your room, I found this.”

He holds up the DVD I gave Other V, the one containing the hated video of Piz, and everything inside me freezes. “I want you to level with me, Veronica,” Dad says. “I don’t care how bad your problems are. I can help, if you tell me the truth.”

I take a seat next to him and shove papers in my pack, stalling for time. I can’t say anything about the Sorokins. God knows what Dad would do, in an effort to protect me; and after two heart attacks, he doesn’t need the stress. Plus I’m guessing, based on my just-now conversation with Clarence, that my relationship with the Russians is fraught.

I mean, CLEARLY the Fitzpatricks weren’t ended by the FBI sting… Kendall and Vinnie, two non-sentimental types, were just spotted running their errands. Vinnie’s ‘act of heroism’ was likely planned to grab votes, and here in Hearst Reality, it worked.

And three dead bodies screams ‘gang war’. Really any faction could swing anti-Sorokin… Fitzpatricks, bikers, even another Russian with a grudge. But regardless of who shot, someone took the money and ran—and by someone I mean Kendall, it’s her signature move. I doubt that theft left the Sorokins smiling.

“I really hope you didn’t watch this DVD,” I say, because I have to say SOMETHING. “Or both of us will need years of therapy.”

“I watched the part with clothes,” Dad says. “I got the gist and quit, when they started to come off.”

“And you’re here why?” I ask. “To confront me, because I kept a secret? Or to kick Piz’s ass? If it’s the latter, you don’t need to bother. I tased the crap out of him DAYS ago, and let Dick go ten rounds with his face. I’ve had the dubious satisfaction of his babbling apologies.”

“So this kid’s name is Piz?” Dad asks, nonchalant, and I curse my wayward tongue. “And to clarify, he made the tape without your knowledge or consent?”

I sigh. “His name is Stosh Piznarski. I dated him briefly after Logan and I split, but dumped him before I turned up pregnant. And to answer your next question, no, Logan hasn’t heard about the tape. I’m as disinclined to tell him as I was to tell you, and for all the same reasons.”

“Do you think Logan will JUDGE you?” Dad demands, pretending he’s not mad.

“Of course not,” I say. “Remember Aaron’s pool house tapes? He’s had his privacy violated too. No, I’m more worried that you’ll both go off half-cocked. And Logan’s in the Navy…he might end up court-martialed. I can’t be the cause of that. So I handled things myself.”
“Veronica, you’re nineteen and pregnant,” Dad says. He looks pained. “You shouldn’t HAVE to handle problems this awful by yourself. Logan turned out to be a better man than I thought he would, back when he was drunkenly vandalizing. And I’m sure he straightened himself out at least partly because of you. But no matter how much he loves you, he’s a kid, too. You need an ADULT in your corner. Maybe I haven’t been present in your life the way you needed, and maybe that can’t be fixed. But I want to do better, going forward. I want to be the dad who sticks around, and helps his kid cope.”

“The hero who stays,” I say, smiling through tears. “Help me by not endangering yourself, okay? Piz isn’t worth the trouble. What he did was terrible and exploitive, but apparently? Not illegal. I don’t like that he won’t pay, but them’s the breaks, I guess.”

Dad sighs, gazing down at the DVD. Looks back up at me, hands it over. “I want to put the fear of God in this kid,” he says. “I was prepping for an important meeting, and realized I misplaced my best referral letter. Found this instead. I got so upset I just… piled in the car and drove out here. And now, I’m in no state for a meeting, but I still have to go.”

“I thought you were living a life of authorly leisure,” I tease, trying to lighten his mood. “But every time I turn around, you’re off somewhere, wheeling and dealing.”

He smiles faintly, shakes his head. “This IS writing-related,” he says. “I’ve been promised the true-crime story to end all stories, and I’m collecting proof that my source is on the level. I know you’re well provided for; but I’d sure like to line my own retirement nest. Could we maybe have lunch, though, after my meeting? Will you let me buy you food, and watch you eat?”

“Mama Leone’s at one?” I ask, checking my watch. “All the ravioli I can choke down?”

“Deal,” he says. “I won’t do anything about this Piz character until we talk. But Veronica, don’t think I’ll let him get away with this. There are avenues we can pursue, and I want to discuss them.”

“As long as we agree on a course of action,” I say. “No Molotov cocktail throwing in my absence.”

He fake-laughes, and hugs me. “Love you, kid,” he says. “I don’t tell you that enough, but I do.”

“Same, Dad,” I say, inhaling his comforting smell, which I’ve MISSED. “Always have, always will. Us crazy Mars types need to stick together.”

“You better believe it,” he says. “Now go, learn something. Put Jake’s money to good use.”

“And you, earn a bunch,” I say. “Maybe we can vacation in Biarritz once you get paid, you, me and Logan? Get a tan on you, introduce you to some ladies who foxtrot?”

“Sounds like a plan,” he says, and kisses me on the head. “Although I MIGHT bring a dance partner with me.”

Dad goes, hands in pockets, studying the ground. I gaze down at the DVD, trace the words I wrote with a fingertip. Wallace and Dick were right on two counts. If DAD was reckless enough to storm the campus in search of Piz, despite his much-vaunted maturity? No TELLING what Logan would do.

Clarence Wiedman is an expert at making embarrassing video disappear. Plus, he’s had all the goods about the Sorokins for more than a year. Maybe he’ll spill, if I can avoid raising his suspicions…and decode his impressive poker face.

Now my only problem is transportation, since once again, I have no idea where I left my car. I sigh,
pull out my cell, and call a cab.

The only thing that’s changed about Kane Software is the way the receptionist treats me.

In my reality, the middle-aged gatekeeper to Jake’s domain was all suspicious glares and whispered phone calls. But today she smiles, calls me by name, and waves me past.

Wiedman’s perusing a sheaf of papers when I enter his office; he’s nattily attired, as always, in a custom-tailored suit. “CW, old buddy, old pal,” I say, affecting breeziness. “Could you give a girl a hand, for nostalgia’s sake?”

He looks surprised to see me, but sets his papers neatly face-down, and gestures at one of the guest chairs. “Miss Mars,” he says, with typical sangfroid. “What kind of help did you have in mind?”

“The scrubbing-things-from-the-internet kind,” I say. “I know you keep Jake’s connections sanitized on the web, as a matter of course. But you somehow missed this little gem.” I extract the DVD, hand it over. “A friend found it while surfing for porn, and needless to say, I was unaware. I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t watch past minute one. This is not how I want to be remembered.”

He turns the case over in his hands, ALMOST making a facial expression as he notes the written message. “I’ll need the names of everyone involved in distribution,” he says. “Insofar as you know. Anything you can tell me about how and why it exists would also be helpful.”

“The other party in the video is Stosh Piznarski, he was briefly my boyfriend,” I say. “It was filmed via spy camera, which I found hidden behind his dorm room mirror. The camera’s Russian-made, but how it ended up there, I have no clue. As to who put it on the web? If it wasn’t Piz, I don’t know. A lot of people out there dislike me, which honestly, I don’t GET.”

“Certainly a lot of Russians aren’t fans.” He meets my eyes and seems…reluctant? Rueful? Like he wants to apologize for something but can’t, because we don’t have that kind of relationship. It’s disconcerting, coming from him, and I feel a stab of unease. I was right that he knows things I don’t. And I’m starting to really worry about how BAD those things might be.

GOD, I hate the Navy right now. Stupid no-phone-calls basic training!

“I can’t promise anything, Miss Mars, but I’ll try,” he says. “I will, however, remind you; if you’d followed my advice, and left town for college, this particular incident wouldn’t have happened.”

“You know me,” I say, lightly, wondering if this is how the Berkeley Reality split happened. “I get stubborn, when people try to fence me in.”

“I have noticed that trait.” He’s gazing down at the DVD again. Almost imperceptibly, he shakes his head. “I’ll be in touch.”

He nods, check my watch. “I should get going,” I say. “Lunch date. As always, it’s been scintillating.”

I’m halfway down the hall, rummaging through my bag for my ringing phone, when a conference room door opens, and Jake steps out. He’s dressed in his standard office-casual ensemble, polo shirt, jeans and sneakers; studying his blackberry so intently, he almost runs into me.

“Veronica!” he says, looking up, with his blandly charming invest-in-my-company smile. “This is a
nice surprise. Are you having lunch with your mother and me? Is she here already?”

“Can’t,” I say, giving up on my phone as it ceases to ring. “I’m hitting Mama Leone’s with dad. But I appreciate the attempt at bonding. Better late than never, right?”

His brow furrows, confused. He looks so much like Duncan, when he fails to comprehend that others have feelings, it gives me a little start. “You aren’t here with Lianne?”

I shake my head. “I had a minor image-polishing task for CW,” I say. “No cause for alarm. He’ll get it tidied away by closing time.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Jake says, with another smile….this time, it resembles Lilly’s fakest. “Clarence is an invaluable asset to our security team.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” I say. “Give mom my love.”

“Of course.” He pats me on the shoulder, awkwardly. Walks on past.

I turn to study his retreating back. Reflect upon how weird it is that I’ve lived with this guy for YEARS, yet our interactions feel stilted. Despite my estrangement with dad, though, THAT relationship is still warm. I’m overjoyed, once again, that Jake isn’t my real father. He’s better than Celeste, for sure, but I never get the sense he CARES.

As I watch him knock perfunctorily on Wiedman’s door, walk in, I reflect that Lilly turned out pretty well, considering.

XXXXX

I remember the phone call as I’m exiting the building. Hold up a finger, instructing the cab driver to wait, and listen to Dad’s message.

“Hi honey,” he says, over a lot of noise…a restaurant maybe? A bar? “Listen, I need a favor. Go back to the house, and get my safe deposit box key out of my file cabinet, first file, top drawer. Kendall’s got a disk drive that’ll make this book a best seller for sure, and I want it properly protected. Biarritz here we come, baybeeee!”

I imagine him doing his goofy happy dance, and smile to myself; GOD, dad’s a dork, but I love him anyway. “Oh, and Veronica?” the message continues. “My address is FOUR three one one Golden Dawn. Just in case Wallace and Dick aren’t around to give you a ride, when you inevitably forget.”

I make a face at the phone, even though he did, in fact, just save me a lot of trouble. Climb into the cab. “4311 Golden Dawn,” I tell the driver, then relax against the seat.

And I contemplate the fact that Kendall Casablancas wants dad to write a true-crime thriller about her life. Towards which purpose, she’s handed him a disk drive, chock full of damning evidence.

I make it to the house without incident, change out of my jeans and striped tee. (Peanut is big enough, at this point, that I have to shove the waistband down below. Which puts an uncomfortable amount of pressure on my already struggling bladder). I yank on stretchy green shorts, a white tee with a decal of a daisy, and pin my hair up so the breeze can reach my neck. Then I locate the key Dad wants.

I’ve just finished a precautionary apple, and am headed to the foyer to collect my bag, when there’s a knock on the door.
I swing it open, saying, “I thought you wanted ME to run this errand,” and Logan is standing on the porch.

He looks exhausted, like he’s been up all night; dark circles give him a gaunt mien, and his freckles stand out. His hair’s shorn close to the scalp, just like soldiers in movies, a bronze velvety film in the sunlight. Even his t-shirt and jeans hang differently…he’s already lost weight.

He’s the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen.

“Hey Veronica,” he says, summoning a smile. I grab his wrist, drag him inside, lock the door, and shove him against the wall. He braces himself so he won’t fall, and I smack him hard on the chest.

“You LEFT,” I hiss, as the tears come. I thought I wasn’t mad about the Navy thing, but apparently, I AM. “The slipstream’s hard enough when I have you around to HELP! We’re PARTNERS! You’re not EVER supposed to LEAVE ME!”

His gaze softens, like he’s about to spout some patented romantic nonsense. But all he says is, “In my defense, I’m here now.”

“For how long?” I demand. “A weekend? A day? Oh GOD, I am so MAD at you! You joined the MILITARY, and there’s a WAR! Do you have a DEATH WISH?”

He laughs, dragging his knuckles down my cheek. His fingers tangle in my hair. “I must,” he says. “I married you.”

We stare at each other for a moment; then I grab his head, pull it down to mine, and kiss him for all I’m worth. He slides his hands around my waist as he deepens the contact, just as voracious as I am. I wrap my arms around his neck and climb him, forcing him against the wall once more.

He pants as I bite his neck, not gentle, tugging my shorts over the curve of my ass; I yank the buttons free on the fly of his jeans. We thrash and struggle until I mount him and slide down, and both of us groan as he hits home.

He shoves my shirt up over my breasts and stares as I fuck him, eyes hooded, breath coming fast. His hands curve around my ass, grinding me closer. I growl and grunt frustration as I fight towards pleasure.

“LOOK at you,” he says, voice throaty, Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallows. “This is like every pep squad fantasy I’ve ever HAD. Oh God, Ronica, slow down, you’re so beautiful and I can’t…”

I shout my frustration and go harder, and he comes, mouth falling open with a helpless gasp. But I DON’T, I can’t, and that makes me angrier and more determined. I redouble, and his hand smooths up my back. He kisses my cheek.

“Shhhh, baby, I’ve got you. It’s okay.” His fingertips dance, sure and delicate, over my breast, down my abdomen, between my legs. He strokes my clit gently in little circles, kisses my jaw, my chin. I shudder, surging against his hand. He kisses my mouth, and I love him so much. I curl into his insistent fingers, and come.

He smiles and keeps stroking, still thrusting slowly inside me. “That’s right,” he murmurs, as I go up again and stall there, and my head falls back from the bliss of it. “Just like that. JUST like that, Ronica. I love to watch your face, when you lose control. I love you so much.”

I open my eyes and look at him. He gazes steadily back in his inimitable Logan way; he never reveals much, but he never hides. “Welcome home,” I say, and he kisses my forehead.
“I wish it was under better circumstances,” he tells me, with a half-smile. “I didn’t expect you to be CAREFUL, Mrs. R, because I mean, you’re you. But the CASTLE? Vinnie Van Lowe? How big a hole did you DIG, in the space of one week?”

“Medium-sized,” I say, and he laughs. I kiss him, disentangle, and head to the kitchen for wet paper towels. I bring some back, once I’m clean, and dress while he tidies up. “We might not get a Christmas card from the Sorokins, for instance.”

He grimaces, buttoning his jeans. “See, this is why I came. Discussing the Castle and Sorokins with random people is like poking a sleeping bear. Can you list everyone you’ve grilled? And don’t leave ANYBODY out, no matter how innocuous they seem.”

“This is serious,” I guess, and he nods. “God, I KNEW it, when Wiedman made that face this morning! OK fine, Dick and Wallace. Max Dobrolyubov, this Russian guy at Hearst who helped me translate text. Piz, Vinnie, Sacks. Dad maybe a little, indirectly. I had a meeting with Clarence Wiedman just now, like I said. And, of course, you.”

Logan closes his eyes, and his head thunks back against the wall. He looks even more tired than before. “Go back to your room, and quickly pack a bag,” he says. “Your toiletries, your valuables, anything you can’t leave behind. Dick and Wallace should be safe for now, because they’re nowhere near Neptune. But if you told your dad ANYTHING important, you should pack for him, too.”

“I’m not the one who joined the Navy,” I say, crossing my arms. “I don’t obey marching orders without hearing the reason first.”

“I’ll explain in the car,” he says, running his hands, agitated, over his scalp. “You’re lucky you’re still alive, we can’t expect that luck to hold. Please, Veronica. Because you love me, because we have a baby on the way. Go pack NOW.”

It takes me four minutes to fish the spy-cam and Logan’s letter from the bottom of a box of tampons, and throw essentials in a bag. It takes another seven to handle dad’s necessities. When I open the laundry room, Backup and Loki wander out, and I’m forced to pack for them, too.

By the time I finish, Logan’s filled a grocery bag with food, and he’s peeping out at the street from behind the curtain. “Looks clear,” he tells me, glancing back, so serious and still it’s eerie. “Let’s roll.”

I wait ‘til we’re in his rented black Cayenne, both dogs trying to climb between the seats, and say, “OK, I humored you. Spill.”

He gives me a wary look. Checks his rearview, picks up speed. “Yeah. About that. I’m really sorry, Ronica, but…I can’t.”

“You CAN’T?” I demand, in my dangerous voice. “Your Veronica knows everything about the Sorokin shenanigans of the last year. Yet you want to keep ME in the dark?”

He bobs his head side to side, equivocating. “She remembers the sequence of events. But I may have neglected to mention the deal I made.”

“Deal,” I say, flatly. “With the SOROKINS? Logan this is no time for your usual infuriating secrecy. I’m not going ANYWHERE with you until you quit jerking me around!”

“I CAN’T, Veronica,” he interrupts, exasperated. “Not only is it against the rules of the Castle, but it would fuck up the whole slipstream! You made me promise! And you were VERY convincing!”
“I made you PROMISE?” I demand. “No I didn’t. I would never ask you to keep secrets from me because I really, really LOATHE that. You KNOW how much I need the whole truth. We’ve MET.”

He closes his eyes briefly. “Keep up, Ronica. You haven’t made me promise YET.”

“YET,” I repeat. And the pieces fall into place. “You’re saying I WILL make you promise, in my future. Because it’s already happened, in your past. Have I got that right?”

He nods, terse.

“You’re telling me you remember things time-traveling me has done, in the period between late Senior Year and now, that I myself have not experienced yet?”

He sighs. “Yes.”

“But you said, back when I first started visiting this reality, that you hadn’t seen me in a long time. So long, in fact, you thought I was never coming back. I therefore assumed that the last time I appeared in your past was the last time you REMEMBERED me appearing. Like if I haven’t done it yet, it hasn’t happened.”

“You know what they say about assumptions, pumpkin,” he tells me, turning right, and then, quickly left. Shoots me a smirk, because he can’t help playing with matches.

“So the slipstream’s not even close to over,” I say. “We won’t be strolling off into the sunset together any time soon.”

“T’m TRYING to stroll off into the sunset with you right now,” he says. “But you’re ruining this golden moment, arguing.”

“You know EVERYTHING THAT’S HAPPENED between the night Meg Manning killed Stewart, and the night I broke up with you after Freshman Christmas Vacation, and you’ve been HIDING IT FROM ME?”

“Is that where you’ve been today?” He merges onto the freeway, speeds up to eighty. “Watching Meg Manning lose her mind? Jesus, that week was whack, from beginning to end. I impressed you with my Krav Maga, though, right? Admit it. Your whole face lit up, and you could NOT stop petting me, after.”

“Yeah, it was super hot,” I say, drily. “But I’m pissed at you right now, and you already got laid. Concentrate.”

“I know everything you’ve done in my timeline,” he concedes, relenting. “Up to the point when you disappeared. And, as you may recall, I read that chart you hid in the vent. But I DON’T know if the choices you made, in my reality, are the ones you’re GOING to make, moving forward.”

“I just can’t see why I’d demand secrecy,” I muse. “I mean, the more data the better, right? It’d be against my best interests to tell cocky high school jackass Logan, ‘say nothing to Mrs. Robinson of our sorrows, for mayhem shall result!’”

“Ay, is jackass your pet name for me?” He bats his lashes. “I trust you with my heart, Mrs. R. The rest is details.”

“Ugh,” I say. “We are literally fleeing for our lives, and you are STILL flirting. You are a reckless, overly romantic adrenaline junkie, Logan Echolls, and don’t think for a second you’ve successfully
changed the subject.”

He snorts. “Pot, kettle. Except for the romantic part, your pragmatism’s depressing.”

“You’re romantic enough for both of us,” I say. “Quit driving like a bat out of hell.”

He glances at the odometer, which points to one hundred, and that’s when I realize we’re being chased. I look into the rearview, and yup, a big black Lincoln, keeping pace. Behind the wheel is a gloved man in a Ronald Reagan mask, NEVER a good sign.

“So,” I say, conversationally. “We are LITERALLY fleeing for our lives, at this very moment. You couldn’t warn me?”

“Time-travelly, pregnant, faints when stressed,” he says. “This combination doesn’t work for me. I need you calm, awake, and focused enough to not slipstream, so you can mastermind.” He checks the rearview. “Besides, I’m seventy-five percent sure this is intimidation, not a murder attempt, or we would have been shot at Keith’s house.”

“So we should chill and crank some tunes?” I ask, and Logan cracks a laugh, shrill, a little desperate. Kicks the speedometer higher, making me glad it’s a high-performance Porsche. The Lincoln tries, but it can’t handle one-twenty, and falls behind. “We need to get off the highway. Lose him in a tangle of streets. The last thing we want is to lead him to Dad.”

“Not gonna happen,” Logan says, watching in the rearview as Reagan recedes. “Grand romantic gestures are worthless if they fail to save the day.”

I pause, reviewing his words. “Logan, why would a paid assassin let himself be seen, in order to intimidate us?”

“Final warning would be my guess,” he says. “Note we’re on the highway headed out of town. If he could have kept up, he would have chased us right to the Balboa County Line.”

“So they don’t care if we’re dead or just gone,” I guess, studying him. “As long as we stay out of their business.”

Logan crosses three lanes at light speed, careens down an exit, and hooks an immediate right, without waiting for the light to change. “I tried to get Veronica to go north for college, but she wouldn’t. She DID agree to quit investigating the sensitive stuff, and that’s kept her safe. But you…well…it’s not really your fault. You didn’t know what would happen, if you stirred this pot.”

“Logan,” I ask, carefully, “are you here on leave, or are you AWOL?”

He grimaces, says nothing. Twists onto a residential street, and begins a looping pattern. I guess I’ve taught him to evade a tail, at some point in our relationship. Or hell, maybe he learned on the internet.

I moan. “So on top of everything else, you’re now a fugitive?”

“What, I’m supposed to let my wife and baby DIE, just because the rules say I can’t leave town? Fuck that. The Navy can make me pay LATER, once you’re safe.” He veers around a red convertible with a frustrated screech of wheels.

I press a hand to my forehead, furiously collating data. “So this deal you made involved getting me out of town, and convincing me not to investigate something. Other Veronica just barely cooperated, by consenting to the latter. I, however, managed to screw the pooch, spurring our assassin into reluctant action. Have I got that right?”
“Pretty much,” he mutters. “Although I was told there wouldn’t BE second chances, so I’m shocked he didn’t shoot. Any idea where your dad is right now?”

I check my watch. “Waiting for me at Mama Leone’s,” I say. “We should leave the dogs with a friend. We’re in peril, and they’re unpredictable. Who’s close?”

He checks the dashboard map. “Casey,” he decides. “He’s back for the summer… left a message on my voicemail last night, bitching me out for joining the Navy. Even if he’s not around, his housekeeper will be. She’ll make sure they’re all right.”

“Number?” I ask, extracting my phone.

“Use mine.” He pulls his cell out of his pocket, tosses it over. “Speed dial 6.”

I press the button and Casey answers. “Seriously, dude? The fucking NAVY? If you wanted to bang Thad Wilson after a greased-up game of volleyball, you could have just gone for it in high school. Now I have to surf all summer with a bunch of losers, just ‘cause you got rah-rah patriotic after your girlfriend dumped you!”

“It’s me, Casey,” I say, dry. “I need a favor.”

“Oh hey. ‘Sup Veronica? Like I’m gonna say no to you. You’d HURT me.”

“Damn straight,” I say. “Dad has an out-of-town emergency, and I’m headed to the airport to visit Logan. Can you watch my dogs for a few days?”

“Yeah, no prob, Backup and I are pals. I’m playing Call of Duty with Bodie at my place, bring ‘em whenever.”

“You’re a prince,” I say. “Be there in five.”

Loki noses me from behind the headrest as I hang up, licks my face. “Hey, boy,” I say, scratching behind his ears. “How do you feel about being the smartest guy in the house, for a change?”

Casey and Bodie are so baked they can’t quit giggling, but Casey gets down on the floor to hug the dogs. So I guess Mr. Mooncalf Collective is still in there, somewhere.

Loki whines and tries to follow me out, pressing against my leg in a way that breaks my heart. I kneel to pet him, and he tucks under my chin, forehead to my chest. “Just for a couple days,” I tell him, ruffling his fur. “Next time we see each other, I’ll let you sleep on the bed.”

Logan can tell I’m upset, when I climb back in the car; he covers my hand with his. “I’ll have Casey send them to us,” he says. “They can fly first class. I know you love those dogs.”

I nod, and he starts the engine. “Let’s go get your dad.”

“I don’t like this,” I say, as he starts to drive. “I don’t like giving up. We’re not cowards. We fight, Logan. We make the bastards pay. It’s how we ROLL.”

“Veronica,” he says. “The guy in the Reagan mask is not a pissed off PCH’er or religious nut. When he decides to stop playing, we’ll be outclassed.”

“I love that you’ve mentally organized death threats based on skill level,” I say.
“Well, I tried color-coding, but they kept peeling off the stickers,” he says. “Come on, Ronica, it’s a strategic retreat. They’ll calm down once they know we’re gone, and we can negotiate a truce.”

“I promise nothing, down the line,” I say. “But I’ll lay low until everyone’s safe.”

“That’s my girl,” he says, taking my hand. He kisses my knuckles.

“Logan?” I ask, as he turns into Mama Leone’s strip mall. “The future adventures we’ll share…they include whatever happens on the Nautilus, right?”

He shoots me a sideways glance. “Of course,” he says.

“Any hints you can give me, about how we evaded disaster?” I ask. “Since clearly all the people who got on that boat didn’t bite it, here?”

He makes a face like he wants to correct me, but doesn’t. “Ever the multitasker,” he says, instead. “OK, here’s a hint. Cultivate the habit of wearing a watch.”

“Are you kidding?” I demand. “Disaster looms, and that’s all you can offer?”

“See, you have no clue how valuable that advice will prove to be,” he says. “Oh, and also? Always look where you’re going. A little public service announcement from the Saving Veronica’s Ass Society. I’m Logan Echolls, President and founder.”

“You have plans for my ass,” I chide. “That’s what motivates you to save it.”

He laughs. “Can you blame me? It’s world-class. You put on those little green shorts, and my brain turns to mush.”

“You, on the other hand, barely HAVE an ass,” I say. “Your other excellent qualities make up for it, however.”

“Good to know,” he says, and pulls into the Mama Leone’s lot.

Dad’s at a table already with his back to the wall, perusing the menu he knows by heart. He looks happy, until he clocks Logan walking beside me. Then his expression shifts to ‘puzzled frown’.

“Well, this is a surprise,” Dad says, standing to shake hands, clearly thinking ‘what the fuck?’ “I assumed you’d stay gone for a while, Logan.”

“That was the plan,” Logan says, pulling out a chair for me. “Until Veronica tangled with the Sorokin heir, and got targeted for a hit.”

“I Shoot him a dirty look for spilling so bluntly, but he only raises calm eyebrows. “Gorya tangled with ME,” I correct, gritting my teeth. “I just tried to clean up the mess.”

“The Russian camera.” Dad sighs, and Logan’s brows inch higher. “I wondered about that. I haven’t had a chance to connect the dots between Sorokin and Piz yet, though.”

“PIZ?” Logan demands. “What does THAT douchebag have to do with anything?”

“I’ll tell you later,” I say. “When we’re safely out of town.”

“Yeah, so speaking OF,” Logan tells Dad. “We picked up a tail on our way here, which I managed to lose. But it means at MINIMUM, Ronica’s under active surveillance. And at worst, that’s the only warning she’ll get before shots are fired. I want to take her overseas, until I’m sure it’s safe; Aaron
stashed money in Swiss accounts like you would NOT BELIEVE. And I’m thinking, since you know what she’s up to, you ought to come along.”

Dad frowns. “Logan, I can’t do that. I have responsibilities here. Are you sure you’re not overreacting?”

“Have you ever heard of the Castle, Keith?” Logan asks, and that shuts Dad up. He stares for a minute, tapping his cardboard coaster rhythmically on the table. “Veronica packed you a bag, man. Let’s talk in the car. I’m feeling painfully exposed.”

Dad extracts his wallet, still studying Logan inscrutably, tosses bills on the table. He gestures with his head for us to follow, strides out to the lot. We’ve barely got the car doors closed when he demands, “What do you know about the Castle, Logan?”

“You must realize I can’t tell you,” Logan says, cranking the engine. “My actions are constrained, forever, because I leapt without looking. Ditto my two best friends. I’d view it as the biggest mistake of my life; but it kept Veronica safe, when things got REALLY hairy. So, no crying over spilt milk, as the saying goes.

“I THOUGHT, between the pregnancy, and finals, and patching things up with you, Ronica would have plenty to occupy her for a couple months. I could fulfill my training obligation safely, and get back before stuff went wrong. But events conspired. She didn’t realize she was breaking the rules, because I’ve kept her in the dark, too. Which is going over super well, as you may imagine.”

Dad snorts, and I say, “Blame Piz, not me. I was on my way to water aerobics class when I got dragged into this nightmare.”

“I don’t even know what Piz did,” Logan says, “but I want to beat the crap out of him right now, just on principle.”

“That won’t change,” Dad predicts, and I groan frustration as Logan pulls out of the lot.

“So here’s an idea,” Logan says, rolling towards the main road, not bothering to stop at the deserted four-way. “I called mom last night; told her I wanted to surprise Veronica with a trip to Paris, before she got too pregnant to travel. Mom offered the use of her plane. I flew down here in it, left it at the private airport across town. What say we all three go, enjoy a little vacation? Demonstrate that I’m abiding by the rules, and keeping the two of your in compliance. Then I open negotiations, see if I can heal the breach. Figure out who sent the ‘check your wife before she wrecks herself” text, yesterday, to my unlisted phone.”

“You got an anonymous threatening text?” I demand. “What kind of neurotic assassin warns his victims twice?”

“Calm, not passed out, focused, remember?” he says, swerves around a car at FAR too high a speed, and yells, “FUCK!”

“Slow down!” Dad snaps, gripping the oh-shit handle.

Logan says, “You know, I’d really like to, Keith. But the BRAKES DON’T FUCKING WORK!” he skids around the car ahead of us, mouth grim, and I can see the pulse throbbing in his temple. “They must have found us at the restaurant. They must have cut the line. Who knew you guys were eating there? Who did you TELL?”

“Alicia,” Dad says. “Kendall, as I was leaving…”
“Kendall CASABLANCAS?” Logan demands, laying on the horn. We’re rolling downhill fast now, boxed in on both sides by retaining walls. There are two cars up ahead we probably can’t get around. “Fuck, we’re gonna crash. Lock your seatbelts, NOW! Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, I love you, Veronica! I’m sorry!”

He spins the wheel hard to the right, turning my side of the car away from the obstacle. There’s a second, then, when time stretches out to infinite. I look into his eyes, he looks into mine, and I see his truth; always loved you, always will. If it has to be you or me, it’s gonna be me. Then impact, noise, glass spraying, airbag in my face. I’m suffocating in a cloud of billowing white.

Pain, orange behind my eyelids. I breathe out, in. Awareness is a spark that spreads, grows.

I try to lift my right arm, bat the airbag away, can’t. It’s pinned. Manage to lift my left, smush the fabric down.

I can see Logan’s hand, limp on the gearshift, long fingers loosely curled. My leg, foot in shoe. A spill of blood, vivid, the color of my red satin dress. It drips down over the gearshift, skeining to the floor in streams.

I try to turn, check Dad in the backseat, but end up facing the window. Through it, I see smashed cars, a little grey Subaru, a big white SUV. And creeping past, a black Lincoln, driver in a Ronald Reagan mask.

He slows, and I can’t be sure, but it looks like he meets my eyes. Then he creeps on, circles the accident, and drives away.

I drift, half-conscious. Breathe in, out. This is what happens, I think, when you fight the power in Neptune. You lose, and you hurt the ones you love.

My breath hitches, in, out. My chest hurts. I try not to stop, but the orange haze eats everything, and I can’t focus, can’t control it, can’t….

Stay…..

I feel the wrenching, pain gone. Then I tumble down into the slipstream, and drift elsewhere.

Chapter End Notes

Please don’t hate me, but I have to move in March, so my posting schedule will be irregular for the next month or so....:-(

In the meantime, I'd love to hear what you guys are hoping for from the final third of this story. What are the major s3 themes, in your opinion? And what outstanding storylines do you most want to see resolved?
When You Look In the Mirror, Do You Smash It Quick?

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long delay, guys, when you read the chapter you'll understand. It's humongous, and there's a ton happening.

Trigger warning for mild drug use, fighting, and non-graphic descriptions of violence.

THREAD THIRTY TWO INVERTS

I snort awake when bubbles fill my nose. Gasping and thrashing, I claw foam off my face; flashes of the accident filter back. Glossy sheen of blood, dripping. Guy in a mask, driving away. Logan’s limp hand. A moan spills from my throat as I swipe my eyes clear, because are we all DEAD?

But I’m NOT, here. I’m flailing in a tub while soap tsunamis onto the mat, seeking balance. It’s a fancy, indulgent bath of the type I NEVER draw; candles on the vanity, rose-scented soap, loofahs and scrubs filling a nearby tray. Music thrums softly, ambient techno with chanting…Other Veronica’s weird tastes in play. The normalcy of her life feels foreign. Things she takes for granted are FANTASIES to me.

My head sinks onto the porcelain lip. Tears spill out, an ugly, snorting flood. I’ve taken the slipstream’s shit, and TAKEN it, but the moment’s finally come when I CAN’T. I sit forward with a water-displacing surge and yank the stopper from the drain. Jerk the curtain shut, turn the shower on, watch patches of irridescence spiral away.

When it’s dark, and uncomfortably hot, I give in. Scrub my hands over my throat, shoving at the lump inside, and it’s terrible irony that THIS feels familiar. I can’t handle catastrophic segues anymore. I can’t watch my loved ones suffer because I FAILED.

I want to pull a Lianne and run, so badly I can taste the urge. I need this responsibility for other peoples’ fates to END. I want to hide in my room with my headphones, while Backup licks my face, even if it takes DECADES to exit the slipstream. Even if they find me when they tear the building down, Miss Havisham in combat boots, nails like Howard Hughes.

There’s a knock on the door I barely register… I’ve made myself hysterical. Another, then Lilly’s voice approaching, shrill because she’s freaked. “Veronica? What the HELL?”

She yanks the curtain back; I cry up at her from my fetal ball. Her eyes widen in shock.

With a snap of her wrist, she shuts off the shower, yanks a bath sheet off the warming bar, and wraps me in it. She coaxes me out and sits beside me on the mat, arm around my shoulders, cheek to my skull. “What the fuck is going ON, Ronica? Because I love Logan, but if he’s the reason you’re sobbing this way, I’ll KILL him!”

“No, he didn’t…” I wave an ineffectual hand, let it sag. “It’s just an awful…bad dream. I was stupid. I shouldn’t have… I did EVERYTHING wrong…”

Lilly misinterprets, because how could she not, strokes back my matted hair. “You can’t control your dreams, Veronica. And besides, it’s not like they’re REAL.”
Is ANY of this real? I wonder. Are these slipstream happenings delusion? Am I hallucinating, or sleeping, or trapped somehow in my own mind? “It FELT real,” I say. “Logan, Dad and I were in a car crash. I was pregnant, and I think we all died.”

“Oh, Ronica,” Lilly says. “You are wound WAY too tight. Come on, you need to have some FUN. Relax. This is why the universe brought us together, babe. So I could teach you to enjoy your own life.”

She drags me into my room, shoves me so I sit on the bed. Digs through the dresser, tossing clothes everywhere. “Getting-ready-wear,” she says, handing me a wad of jersey and khaki. “Put these on, we’ll start with makeup and hair.”

I’m fastening the button on my shorts, tears slowed to sniffles, when there’s another knock. “Everything OK?” Jackie calls.

Lilly raises her brows at me, and I say, “Yeah, come in,” wrestling my face into blankness.

Jackie slinks around the door frame, the hips-thrust-forward catwalk strut that’s her trademark. She’s in black cigarette pants, heels, a blue tank and a cropped grey jacket; her curls are pinned up, a style both haphazard and chic. Jackie Cook’s effortless glam has always made me feel unfeminine.

She casts an assessing glance at me, and asks Lilly, “Crisis?”

“Ronica had a bad dream, but we’re going to cheer her up.” Lils pats my cheek. “Ugh, WHAT is this music? It’s like old nuns, moaning. No wonder you’re angsting in your sleep.” She stabs the CD player with a nail, rummages through a stack of jewel cases. “Make the smart choice, Jacks. Groovy upbeat, or nostalgic-but-silly?”

Jackie frowns faintly, like she doesn’t buy the ‘bad dream’ excuse. But all she says is, “Groovy. Girl bonding requires dancing. It’s a moral imperative.”

Lilly loads her pick, and ‘Give Up the Funk’ kicks in. She claps. “Just WAIT until you see your DRESS, Ronica. Ramona took in the waist and finished the beading, and it looks UH-MAAAAAA-ZING!”

I glance at Jackie, confused, and she winks. “It’s fabulous,” she agrees, slyly, which surprises a laugh out of me. She smiles back, tosses her purse on the chair, and goes to hip-check Lilly by the mirror. “Whatever blemish you’re imagining is invisible to the rest of us.”

“Oooh, flattery! Tell me MORE!” Lilly poses, lashes batting. “Am I gorgeous? Am I irresistible?”

“Less so when you’re needy,” Jackie retorts, dry. “Repeat after me: Jackie Cook likes me because I’m confident and brave. I never, ever, EVER have to try too hard.”

“Of COURSE not,” Lilly says, like this is obvious. She turns her back to her reflection and surveys me. “Because I’m gorgeous and irresistible. Right, Ronica?”

“Absetively,” I say, managing a thumbs-up. “You’re a goddess of best friendship and fancy dress procurement. And you make me feel better just by being around.”

“That’s the spirit!” She sashays over to kiss the top of my head. “Come on, let’s get you decked out. Nothing like being hotter than all the judgy bitches to lift a girl’s mood, am I right?”

“It’s MY modus operandi.” Jackie exits briefly, breezes back in with garment bags. “I may leave disaster in my wake, but I look like a million bucks doing it!”
She doles out the gowns, one each, then tosses a La Perla sack on the bed. “Logan bought you lingerie,” she says, with a grin. “He ordered it by phone from the dressmaker’s, while they let out the shoulders on his tux.”

I have never felt less like glamming it up, dancing with friends, or going on an elaborate double date. But if declining was an option, Lilly would have cancelled already. Mentions of bitches and disaster hint at controversy, too; she must need me in her corner.

And I suppose, by extension, so does Jackie.

Screw it. I’m pretending Hearst Reality WAS a dream. I’m going to deny/suppress, focus on the task at hand, and be CHEERFUL and SUPPORTIVE if I have to KILL myself, pretending.

Oh God, poor choice of words. Quit spiraling, stat, Veronica, and put on your pep squad face.

Lilly dumps my gift out on the bed. Displays a black Merry Widow with embroidered pink hearts, and sing-songs, “SOMEBODY’S getting lucky tonight!” She flicks a garter strap, and I yank it away, embarrassed.

“Quit pawing my undies,” I chide, grabbing up the matching panties and stockings.

“Yeah, babe,” Jackie agrees, with an arch look. “Pretty sure Logan wants that job. You should try that all on with the gown, Veronica, the back dips low. Gotta make sure your hearts stay hidden.”

I wrinkle my nose and she laughs, points at my garment bag. I retreat into the bathroom and quickly dress, lining up the stocking seams precisely.

The formal I’ve chosen is black satin, floor length. It’s got a sweetheart neckline, a fitted bodice, and a poufy skirt underlaid by net. Jet beads, sewn on in subtle Starry Night swirls, flash and sparkle when I spin. The fabric’s heavy, luxurious, and tailored to fit just right.

I dig through my closet for a pair of high pumps, then swish in front of the mirror, seduced from sadness by Grace Kelly glamour. When I open the door, music and laughter swamp me.

Jackie’s in a black velvet tuxedo with no shirt, tightly fitted at the waist and cut to fasten mid-cleavage. The matching pants are narrow, second-skin, and she’s got on sky-high heels with straps across the instep. She’s twirling in lazy circles, tossing M&M’s into her mouth, while Lilly tries to straighten her lapels.

Lils has donned white satin, a halter-style fitted number that would do Marilyn Monroe proud. She’s neglected to zip the back, though, and keeps tripping over the hem…she’s barefoot, and it drags.

“Hold STILL,” Lilly laughs, lifting her skirts to circle; Jackie relents dramatically, hands-on-hips, jaw tilted towards the ceiling. “Better,” Lilly says, smoothing, and spots me hovering in the doorway. “Oh my GOD, Veronica, you look GORGEOUS!”

She prowls around me happily, while Jackie nods approval. “You’re like an aggressive blonde Audrey Hepburn,” Lilly pronounces, with a grin, and engulfs me in a hug. “And the BEST BFF that ever F’d, wearing black to draw fire. But you need DIAMONDS! Where’s the box Lynn sent?”

I shrug, and Lilly and Jackie share a ‘seriously?’ look. “Honestly, Veronica,” Lilly chides. “Thank God for Logan and his Hollywood panache. Now SIT. I’m doing your makeup, so you don’t cake on gold shadow and pink lip gloss and call it a day. Jacks, you need help with your hair?”

“Hmm, no,” Jackie says, arch. “Planning something more sophisticated than a ponytail, thank you
very much.”

Lilly makes a face, bumps her with one hip. Jackie tosses her head back and gives her breathy laugh, and I hide a smile. These two shouldn’t work, by any sane metric, but somehow they DO.

Logan walks in while Jackie’s unpinning her hair, and Lilly’s dusting my nose with a giant brush. He’s in a t-shirt and jeans, garment bag in tow, slurping a Big Gulp through an extra-long straw. He stops short, pulls an exaggerated-incredulous face, and presses a hand to his heart. “Have I died and gone to Heaven? Because I seem to be surrounded by angels.”

Somehow, he makes this slice of sleaze sound charming.

Jackie laughs; Lilly applies one last dab of powder, and favors him with a sly look. “I hope you know where the diamonds are,” she says. “Or we’ll be getting an angry call from Chopard in a couple days.”

“Don’t be gauche,” he says, leaning close to her ear. “Mom BOUGHT them.” His gaze is fixed firmly on me, though, so intent I find I can’t hold it. “Stand up,” he tells me, smile spreading slowly. “Let’s see.”

I get out of the chair, twirl, and he whistles. “Jackie give you my present?”

“I wear it,” I say. His grin turns feral.

“And the evening JUST got better.” He tosses his bag on the bed, tilts my chin up for a feather-light kiss, and makes a spinning motion with one finger at Lilly. She obligingly presents her back; he sets the Big Gulp on the dresser to zip her up.

“Nice,” he says, assessing her dress. “Not too edgy, not too demure. I like that you and Jackie coordinate, but don’t match.”

“Hey, Celeste has referred to this event for six months as my ‘coming out’ party,” Lilly says, with a toss of her head. “I’m just trying to oblige.”

Logan snorts. “I’m just jealous I didn’t think of the velvet tux first. It doesn’t seem right, somehow, that I’M the sartorially boring one.”

Jackie points a hairpin at him. “Hey, I’m an African-American teen mom from a broken home, outing myself publicly to a bunch of rich snobs. I get to wear whatever makes me feel invincible.”

“You look fantastic,” he says. “They might gnash their teeth at our combined heresies, but they won’t be able to stop staring.”

“Oooh, so smooth!” Jackie pats him on the cheek. “No wonder all the best ladies like you.”

“I’m a lucky sonovagun,” he agrees, deploying his pretend-modest smile. “Who doesn’t smell great, at the moment. Carry on with your bonding experience, ladies. I’ll be out after I bathe.”

He kisses me again, whispers, “Just WAIT until I get you alone,” and saunters into the bathroom, bag dangling from one arm.

Lilly shoves me into the chair and goes to work on my hair. Jackie says, “You know what? Logan’s right, we look amazing. We need to document this moment of flawlessness, for posterity.” She locates her grey handbag, roots through it for a digital camera. “Say ‘Fuck ’em if they don’t agree’!”
Lilly sinks into a sultry pose, lips puckered, and Jackie laughs, snapping. “That’s right, baby,” she coaxes, in a low, fake ‘fashion photographer’ voice. “Make LOVE to the camera. Show me your PASSION!”

With a toss of hair Lilly dances behind me, wraps her arms around my shoulders. “Smile, Ronica,” she whispers. “Fake it ‘til you make it.”

I clench my jaw and grin, mug the way we used to in junior high. Because how will I benefit from sinking into despair? What can I DO about Hearst Reality, really? Nothing but wallow in Lianne-like indulgence, which will help exactly none.

And I’ll be DAMNED if I let the slipstream beat me. It may rip my life to shreds, but I will go down fighting. I saved Lils, she’s standing right here. I kept myself alive and out of jail. It’s not too late to avoid the Castle and the Sorokins. If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that the future’s not set.

Jackie hands the camera off to Lilly, who chases me around the room; I vamp dramatically, and they egg me on. Original Senior Year’s shrouded in a haze of repressed rage, but I vaguely recall Jackie making an effort then, too. She spent time with Wallace and me, even though I bored her. She tried, for a while, to be my friend.

Her fondness for him didn’t equal commitment, though. In the end, she chose not to stay. Maybe she couldn’t, with a kid back home, and maybe I can’t blame her. God knows I’ve angsted over Schrodinger’s Pregnancy, and I chose to put MY child first, too.

I’m reserving judgment on Jackie, I decide, until we make it past Graduation Day. If these are Lilly’s last moments with her girlfriend, might as well let her seize them.

When Logan emerges tuxedo’ed, on a cloud of steam, I’ve commandeered the camera. “Make Senior memories!” I chirp, snapping a smiling kiss. He circles behind me, curls an arm around my waist, and grins at the image in the viewfinder.

“Let me see!” Lilly demands. Logan takes the camera, and with a last kiss to my temple, beckons her closer. She wrestles it from his grip, so she can view the whole sequence.

“Oooh, Jacks, you’re SMOKIN! Awwww, THIS one’s sweet, too. And look, HERE we have Miss Veronica Mars, all mussed up on her elbows, making bedroom eyes.” Lilly twinkles at Logan, and he rumbles, deep in his chest. “You should get that framed.”

“Why? So you can tell everybody you’re the photographer?” He quirks a brow, and she laughs.

“Duh, Logan.” She flicks his ear. “NO ONE can resist my charms.”

“Quit trying to make him jealous.” I’m not sure why, in that moment, I choose awkward conversation stoppers for a hundred. Lilly’s a wonderful friend to me, and the taunting’s a harmless game. It’s just, there are so many realities that end in tears; places where I’m mostly missing, and Other V’s affections are in doubt. Yet he’s a pillar of strength in all of them, the person who has my back.

I’m tired of Logan feeling less than, when he’s so much more than most girls get. I want him to understand, whether I’m here or not, that he deserves love. “I realize you’re joking around, Lil, but tonight I’m not in the mood.”

Logan frowns; we ALWAYS tell Lils she’s amazing, much like we always joke about pain. He directs the expression at Lilly, and she rolls her eyes. “Ronica fell asleep in the tub, and had a bad dream,” she explains, sotto voce. “Apparently you two and her Dad were in a car crash, and maybe
everyone died. She’s been grumpy ever since, despite our UNAPPRECIATED heroic efforts.”

His frown deepens as he studies me. I make a wan attempt at apologetic-face, which ignites real concern. Jackie looks back and forth between us, sighs, and says, “Come on Lil, let’s finish our makeup in the other bathroom. Logan wants to play mother hen.”

She pats Logan’s arm as they gather up their stuff. He winks, barely paying attention. As soon as the door shuts, he says, “We’re alone now, Ronica. Spill.”

“It’s just a slipstream thing,” I say, with what I hope is an airy hand-wave. “I was crying over spilt milk. Don’t worry about it.”

“A slipstream thing where we DIED?” he asks, to confirm. “Veronica, this is BAD!”

I fight tears, but one escapes, carving a wet channel through my makeup. “You and I were in the front seat, dad was in back. I could only see your arm, after, but the whole floor was covered in blood. I mean, I realize it’s one possible reality. But the you there SPUN ME AWAY from the impact, even though his V kept jerking him…”

“Look at me,” he interrupts. I manage to meet his eyes, which are warm, focused and sure. “We’re not going to let this happen, Ronica. Just like the boat murders. Just like jail. Whatever went wrong, we’ll FIX.”

“Oh, the way we fixed Meg Manning?” I demand. “HOW many times did we try to save her?”

“That was her CHOICE,” he says. “Nobody FORCED her to be a gun-toting vigilante!”

“This car crash was the result of some Faustian bargain you made, Logan. Either with a bunch of gangsters, or a secret society. I’m not clear on the details yet, but you thought you were protecting me, and it all went awry.”

“Fantastic,” he says. “Once you know how I screwed up, fill me in, and we’ll update our list of catastrophic looming threats. But Ronica, light of my life; you need to be straight with me now. Are you about to melt down? Because we’ve got a huge event happening in less than an hour, and it’s critical we play our A game. We can’t bow out, much as I would like to, and there will be reporters present.”

“Of COURSE we do,” I say. “Because the universe hates me. What am I in for? Academy Awards? Mom and Jake, renewing their vows? Celeste finally getting crowned Ice Queen?”

A smile plays around the corners of his mouth. “Veronica Mars, this is your life. You’re a debutante, pumpkin. And tonight’s the ceremony.”

My mouth falls open in abject horror. Puffy dresses and tuxedoes. Diamonds and pearls. Lilly claiming I’m a hero, just for wearing black. It makes awful, perfect sense.

It’s my worst nightmare come true.

“No!” I take an involuntary step back. “No fucking way! This is where I draw the line, Logan. With a knife, in the dirt. I am NOT a self-indulgent trust-fund princess. I live in the Sunset Cliffs Apartments. I wear combat boots! I own a PIT BULL!”

His lurking smile grows. “You’re a Kane by marriage,” he coaxes, taking a sauntering step closer. “You’ll probably be PROM QUEEN.”
I sketch the sign of the cross and he bursts out laughing. “What can I do to make it better?” he asks, trailing a finger gently down my cheek. Wiping away the tear. “You want to fool around for a few minutes before we leave? Work out your angst on my body? Bet I can make you forget all ABOUT your wealth and popularity…and those terrible slipstream things that won’t ever happen.”

“It’s always sex with you,” I accuse, turning to the mirror. But the idea burns through me, and sounds right. I flash him a look in the glass. “What if I’m not in the mood? What if I ENJOY being pissed off, and plan to DITCH your asinine celebration?”

“Maybe I could convince you?” he sidles up behind me, nuzzles my ear. “You look AMAZING in this dress, by the way. You have the most beautiful back, and your skin is flawless.”

He strokes a knuckle down my spine, and I let go a puff of breath. “Are we still on double birth control?”

“For the foreseeable future.” He meets my eyes, serious. “My genes are admittedly gorgeous, but they can’t be trusted not to snap.”

I just smile; slipstream Logan’s proved definitively that he’s worthy of trust. “When I mentioned your condom fetish to Lilly, she suggested we switch to oral and anal. Like, as a no-pregnancy guarantee. She assured me you have a gift for perversion, and could make it worth my while.”

“DID she?” His hands curve around my waist, cinched by the satin bodice. Tighten. I balance my palms on the dresser and dare him with my gaze. Because, yeah. If anything will take my mind of the day’s horrors, it’ll be naked pervy Logan time.

I nod, and his eyes dilate black. “You KNOW I want to,” he says. “But these things take time, and lots of lube, for maximum female enjoyment.”

“Too bad we’re not in our bedroom, with a door that locks, and intimate supplies readily available,” I say.

He stares at me in the glass for a long moment. “So that’s how it is?”

I smile, feral, in response, and he says, “We should take your pretty dress off first. We don’t want it to wrinkle.”

He unzips me, eases fabric down so I can climb out. Takes a look at the heart-covered black lingerie, and makes a deep, fervent noise. “GOD,” he says, laying the gown carefully on the bed. “Going slow might prove challenging.”

His arms curve around me as he kisses my jaw, one hand sliding into the cups of the corselet, the other into my panties. I inhale sharply as he touches me in all the best ways; keep my eyes determinedly open, so I’ll see this instead of the crash. The muscles of his ropy forearms, tensing. His lower lip pouting, as he watches me respond.

His fingers slip inside me, sleek against the damp, and I can’t control my moans. He bites my shoulder… the visual takes me halfway there. He’s so fucking big and gorgeous, and TALENTEED at sin.

“I need to visit the nightstand,” he says, deepening the penetration, because he knows, he always knows, when I’m about to come. “And then I swear to God, Mrs. R, I’m going to COMPLETELY blow your m….”

There’s a hammering on the door, and Logan jerks against my spine, stills. “I don’t know what
you’re DOING in there,” Jackie calls, her voice making it clear she has a good idea. “But we need to leave five minutes from now, or we’ll miss the ceremony. Do you really want to explain to our parents, and the newspaper, why exactly we didn’t show?”

Logan shuts his eyes in frustration, clenches his teeth, and withdraws his hand. He backs away quickly, adjusting himself like it hurts.

I am going to kill Jackie, the debutante committee, and the entire town of Neptune.

Because now I’m even MORE angry and frustrated than before.

Logan retreats into the bathroom with an apologetic grimace; the lock clicks. I growl my fury and put the STUPID dress back on. I pat my hair into place, add an extra coat of lipstick, but the paint only enhances my grimace of rage.

We emerge three minutes later, neatly groomed, Logan suspiciously relaxed. Probably he managed to jerk off in the john, which puts him firmly on my shit list.

Jackie rolls her eyes when she sees tooth marks and calls, “Lil, V needs CONCEALER!”

Lilly dances up, kisses Logan on the cheek. Stage-whispers, as she dabs cosmetics, “At least NOW she’s upset for a completely different reason!”

Logan fastens a zillion dollars’ worth of diamonds around my throat, drops a matching bracelet and earrings into my palm. “No matter how bad things get, Lils,” he says, “I can always count on you to make them worse.”

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I’m one skirmish from explosion when we settle in the limo. Logan, clocking my nitroglycerine mood, tries to hold my hand, but I shove him unceremoniously away. He subsides into the corner, brooding, then gets to work opening champagne.

“We should drink,” he says, collecting glasses from the mini-bar. “Numb ourselves. Maybe a game of I never would sweeten some unnamed tempers?”

“I’ll start,” Lilly says, lifting her glass with a troublemaking twinkle. “Never have I EVER left my girlfriend unsatisfied, due to time constraints.”

Logan sighs, rolls his eyes heavenwards, and drinks, realizing his mistake. “Never have I ever left my partner unsatisfied for NO reason, just because I felt like being cruel,” he counters, leveling her with a look.

Lilly laughs, uncowed, takes a sip, and says, “Jacks?”

“Never have I ever run my mouth about private matters,” Jackie says, uninterested in one-upsmanship. She smiles faintly at me when I don’t drink either.

Lilly dons a seraphic expression, leans back, and sing-songs, “YOUR turn, Ronica.”

“Never have I ever planned a surprise graduation boat party, for a friend who loathes nothing more,” I say. Because what the hell, I’ve already picked a fight. And I’d rather have my friends safe and mad at me than the other way around.

“You haven’t been to one thrown by ME,” Lilly counters, her expression shifting from hurt-but-
hiding-it to angry-and-obstinate. “I’ll bet you a THOUSAND dollars I can prove you wrong.”

“I would literally rather eat dirt,” I say, blunt. “I would rather scrub toilets for HOURS with a TOOTHBRUSH.”

Jackie raises her brows. “What is your PROBLEM tonight, Veronica? Are you still throwing a tantrum over a dream? Or did Logan short-circuit your brain, back in that bedroom?”

“I TRIED.” Logan gazes at me sullenly from a three-foot distance. “But you HAD to steal the pot roast from the hungry lion. If you don’t regret it yet, Cook, believe me. You will.”

(When did you know I loved you? I ask, in a memory much more pleasant than this car ride. He replies, on the Nautilus. When you said you didn’t regret a minute.)

Fuck, I think. I forgot that particular Scylla-and-Charybdis twist. If I prevent the boat trip, a relationship-critical moment vanishes into the slipstream. And if I DON’T, half my friends die.

That’s not really a choice, right? I mean, surely he knows how I feel, I JUST took a Logan-defending stand. But God, is there ANY scenario in this slipstream that counts as an unqualified win?

My mood sinks further. I chug champagne.

“Never have I ever learned, to my chagrin, that saying ‘no’ to Lilly Kane yields poor results.” Lilly lifts her brows at me, and I hold out my cup for more. Logan pours, and I chug that, too.

“Never have I ever regretted fighting with someone who loves me?” Logan suggests, quietly.

I turn to look at him, and the lurking vulnerability behind his eyes undoes me. I’m still a seething mass of angst, but I take his hand and drink, and Lilly and Jackie follow suit. I nudge Lilly with my foot, and her stiff, offended pose relaxes.

“Never have I ever gotten THIS dressed up to have an emotional root canal,” Jackie says, sprawling back. She toasts the car at large, and Lilly laughs.

“Never have I ever heard rumors about the sanitarium where Duncan lives,” I say quietly. Because it’s not like I WANT to hurt these people who matter; but I just learned the hard way that there might not BE a tomorrow. So I have to make today count.

Logan’s hand tightens on mine… have I mentioned the asylum wrinkle to Improved Past him? Lilly sits forward, intent.

“Why would you even say that, Ronica?” she demands. “Do you KNOW something?”

“I’ve been checking up,” I tell her, ignoring Logan’s efforts to get my attention. “And the stories I’ve heard worry me. I’m aware you pay a guy to keep Duncan safe, but is your snitch really doing his job? Or just taking your cash and spouting lies? How much do you KNOW about that hospital, anyway?”

“Okay, that’s enough. You need to calm yourself down.” Jackie points at me, cool evaporating. “We’ve got a potentially shitty evening ahead, and I am done being tolerant of your mood. Quit stirring the pot before you ruin things in advance.”

“If my brother’s in trouble, now is DEFINITELY the time to tell me,” Lilly insists. “Spill, V, PRONTO. I want to hear it ALL.”
“Just…check things out,” I say. “The rumors may be false, but please, make sure. None of us want him to suffer, right? We all used to be friends.”

Lilly nods, subsiding into the seat. “You’d better believe I’ll make sure,” she says. “You see, Jacks? The three of us may fight, but we go to bat for each other when it counts.”

Jackie sighs, loudly, like she’s seen too much Fab Four drama. Lilly shoots her a look, and Logan mutters, under his breath, “Great, now I have to worry about Donut, too.”

The car pulls to a halt outside the Neptune Grand, and we disembark. Jackie and Lilly move apart without noticing, sparring in low, venomous voices.

Logan helps me onto the sidewalk, then stands looking down, hands in pockets. He glances up from beneath a furrowed brow, and says, “You planning to shit-stir all evening? Or do you feel you’ve done your duty?”

“I don’t have a CHOICE!” I say. Screw him and his unfair adorableness, trying to soften my resolve. “I have to fix all this slipstream bullshit TONIGHT, before it’s too late! And I don’t want to fight either, Logan, but you’ll get STEAMROLLED if you stand in my way.”

“Veronica,” he says, striving for patience, “this evening is hugely important to Other You; also to Jackie and Lilly. And honestly, I’ve been forced to take cotillion classes for months, so if you screw it up? Prepare for wrath from all corners.

“Look, can you just…not completely lose your shit, for one measly hour? And then I promise, we’ll go wherever you want, and investigate or bang or argue to your heart’s content.”

“Whatsoever,” I say, because I don’t want to lie, but neither will I slow my roll. “I’d like to point out at this juncture, though, that I HAVEN’T taken any classes. And I’m what you once charmingly called trailer trash. I doubt I can skate through some Miss Manners cesspit without a single faux pas.”

“You can if I help.” He offers an elbow, which I reluctantly take. Together we walk into the ballroom, a gleaming-floored space draped in white gauze, fake gold, and metaphorically, money. “It’s not that complicated. This ball is ostensibly for charity. Your mom, Celeste and Jake donated a SHITLOAD to the Neptune Children’s Hospital, to secure spots for you and Lilly. Lianne and Celeste are both on the sponsorship committee, which has been…colorful; and Lianne convinced MY mom to join, when she learned she was outgunned. Everybody’s currently tense as fuck. If this was a soap opera, tonight would culminate with Lianne and Celeste slap-fighting, until they fell into a pool.”

“So, business as usual,” I say, and he laughs.

“This is an elaborate formal event,” Logan continues, handing our tickets to an usher. He smirks as we’re allowed past a velvet rope. “Akin to a wedding, there will be flower girls and pages and arcane rituals. All the honorees, except you, of course, will wear white gowns with kid gloves and pearls. They’ll be introduced individually to the audience by my mom; as the local Oscar nominee, she’s been tapped to emcee. You’ll be walked across the stage by your dad, who’ll present you for your curtsey. He’ll then hand you off to me, at which point, we will waltz. Have you got any clue whatsoever how to curtsey, Mrs. R? Or dance?”

I give him a ‘you’re crazy’ look, and he sighs. “MONTHS of lessons,” he mutters. “Lessons I LOATHED. Get Lils to show you the curtsey, she’s got it down to a science.”

“I was in a situation like this once before,” I offer, pissed that I feel insecure. “I’D never been
surfing, but the body I was inhabiting had. It knew what to do.”

“GOD, I hope that’s true,” he says. “The fragile détente between my mom and yours depends on you acting convincingly thrilled.”

“They’re allies because of me?” I ask, as he hands me into a chair, and leans against the wall alongside. “They paid zero attention to each other, in my reality, even when we were friends. So they must have joined forces for a specific purpose, right? Namely, screw Celeste?”

“Got it in one.” He smiles. “Celeste was the immovable object. She’s the Grande Dame of this committee, and she demanded a male escort for Lilly. Veronica convinced mom that equal rights stances play well in Hollywood, and convinced HER mom this was her big chance to one-up First Wife. So the three of them teamed up to bypass the edict. Mom chose those diamonds, by the way, and took you shopping for the gown. The fact that you stood up for Lilly almost brought her to tears. Of course, there was WAY too much Botox going on there for her to actually cry.”

He sounds proud, and again I feel this weird sense of disconnect. MY Logan could give a shit about high society; he hates people as much as I do. MY Logan just wants to surf, taunt Weevil with potential fisticuffs, and provoke me until I kiss him. Public appearances bring out his inner jackass, and he almost always misbehaves. “Other Veronica’s a real go-getter,” I say, not without acid.

Logan smiles. “True,” he says. “Much like you, only she has different goals. Her parent-manipulating skills are first-rate, too, which will work in our favor this evening. You should be grateful.”

So they’re a team, these days? Logan and this other me, who is not, in fact, me? To the point where he’s hinting I should THANK her for smoothing my way, while chiding ME for social ignorance?

If he thought he was in the doghouse after that aborted orgasm, he’s gonna cringe at how much deeper he just dug the hole.

“Well, she certainly seems to have done a number on Dad,” I say. “MY father would have come after you with a shotgun by now, for the long-term living-in-sin.”

He crosses his arms. “That was a dig, right? That was you stirring the pot? Because you KNOW your dad’s just as anxious to separate us as your mom is to lock me down. Ronica fields HIS lectures about not getting too serious, and HER hints about engagement rings and babies, on an almost daily basis.”

I make a frustrated growl-huff, because ugh, my mom. “I REALLY hope all my important genes are paternal.”

“Which is why we’re never having kids,” he agrees, beating his favorite dead horse. “There’s no statistical way it won’t end in grief.”

“For the last TIME,” I say, teeth clenched, because I am SO SICK of this argument. “You will be ECSTATIC about Peanut! I’ve SEEN it happen! And just FYI? I’m not the only one in this conversation picking a fight.”

I rise and sweep away, my dress rustling satisfactorily. I may be failing spectacularly on every important front, but I still know how to make an exit.

I wade through the well-dressed, perfumed crowd, looking for a place where I can quietly hyperventilate. Spot Wallace, by a wall of paintings, cursorily chatting with Shelly Pomroy. She pats his shoulder and heads off towards the bathroom, and he slumps morosely onto a chair.
I approach and sit beside him; if anyone can talk me down from a mood, it’s my mellow and non-judgmental BFF. “Hey, Mr. Easygoing,” I say, smiling across the space between us. “BOY am I glad to see you!”

“Veronica,” he says, mustering a smile. It’s about as wan as mine. “Not sure that nickname fits tonight, but I guess it’s better than ‘Buzzkill’.”

“Looks like you’re getting along well with Shelly,” I probe.

“She’s okay,” he says, unenthusiastic. “It’s not like I got better things to do than help her out, and Dick and Logan were taking cotillion classes anyway. Plus it makes my mom happy; she thinks fancy manners will up my game.” He gives a faint, tired head shake, and I grin. Picture the Three Musketeers drinking daintily out of teacups, and try not to crack up.

“Still no movement on the Jessica front?” I ask, because why the fuck not. I’ve been digging my own grave all evening.

“Not unless backwards counts as movement,” he sighs. “I’m officially forbidden to date her, on account of Rashard’s hit-and-run. Her dad has a six-months-with-no-bad-press rule. She SAYS she can talk him around, since I spent the whole accident passed out in the back seat. But all evidence points to her being wrong.”

“Hey, if she won’t choose you in the teeth of her family, she doesn’t deserve you, Papa Bear,” I say, patting his arm. Because I learned my lesson about secret relationships the day I discovered I was Duncan’s concubine.

“Veronica I don’t WANT her to choose me in the teeth of her family!” He shakes his head, exasperated. “I’m a nice guy who was raised right, and I’d like her folks to APPROVE. Five or ten years down the line, I might get SERIOUS with this girl; but that won’t happen if they see me as a loser!”

He huffs in frustration and stands, checking his watch. “Listen, we need to start lining up for the ceremony. I got to find Shelly. Make sure she’s worked out the kinks in her curtsey, so she doesn’t trip on stage like she did at rehearsal. I’ll see you later, a’ight?”

I nod; he walks distractedly away. I slouch lower in my chair and wonder who’s left to piss off.

At which point, I notice Norris Clayton towering over the crowd, ignoring Angie Dahl, and glaring my direction. Great, I think, avoiding his gaze. The evening only needed this.

“Look who got all dressed up to start shit,” Dick says, from my left. I startle upright as he slumps into the next chair, pulls a flask from his tux pocket, takes a sip. He offers it to me, and I drink deep. Maybe if I get wasted, I’ll have an excuse.

“Insulting me right now? Not your best move.” I hand the bottle back. “I’m surly at the moment, and kind of a loose cannon.”

“Yeah, Carrie saw you throw down with Logan. You pissed off Jackie, too. Gotta hand it to you, Ronnie. Nobody stirs up trouble and walks away smirking like the shortest Mars.”

I snort, and hold out my hand for the flask. He passes it over. “Look who’s talking. Madison Sinclair’s standing by the fountain with a champagne glass, giving us the evil eye. Did you insult her dress? Or make a late-night booty call to a girl you wouldn’t date, AGAIN?”

He laughs. “Like I’d admit to touching other ladies when Carrie’s your second-best friend? Nice try,
Rons. Go practice your detective skills on someone who hasn’t met you.”

“Oooh, is this the malcontents’ table?” I turn right to see Jackie lounging in the next chair, mile-long legs crossed. “Because that’s where I belong. Pass me your bottle so I can drain it.”

I hand it over, she drinks deeply, and says, “Smart move bringing the good stuff, Dick. I hope you have more in the car. Thanks to Veronica here, Lil is on a tear. She just laid into her dad about that sanitarium, and he was talking to a SENATOR.”

“Sorry I pissed her off,” I say half-heartedly, appropriating another sip. Mostly because I feel like I should.

She eyes me, the hint of a smile lurking. “No you’re not,” she counters. “You said exactly what you wanted to say. If you’re gonna be a bitch, own it.”

“God, WHY is everyone calling me a bitch tonight?” I demand. “So I’m in a bad mood. It’s not a capital crime!”

“Is that Madison Sinclair glaring like we killed her dog?” Jackie wonders, idly.

“Dick’s banging her on the side, but won’t admit it,” I opine, and Dick shoots me a look. “Sorry, Dick’s ALLEGEDLY banging her on the side.”

“She just can’t let go,” Dick says, with a shrug. “I was her first love or whatever. Happens to me a lot, ’cause I’m rich as fuck.”

I flash back to the surfboard charm in Boat Reality, Madison’s nervous fondling. I wonder if she actually has FEELINGS for Dick Casablancas, and then reject the thought because ew. MADISON.

“Maddie’s also loaded, to be fair,” Jackie says. “And likely to get richer, since her father passed that incorporation measure. Dad says our house value’s doubled. He seems weirdly excited.”

So much for Beaver’s get-rich-quick real estate plan. No wonder Kendall decided to steal from the Sorokins.

“So what’s Stepmommy Dearest up to these days?” I ask Dick, while the topic’s fresh in my mind. Cross my legs with a swish of skirts. The bourbon’s taken effect, and I feel a pleasant warmth creeping through me. “Found another teenage dreamboat to latch onto like a lamprey?”

“Whatever, Rons. Logan never boned Kendall, he totally loves you. I don’t even get why you’re raging tonight. I mean, Jackie’s, like, going toe-to-toe with the establishment. And my life’s shit. But your worst problem is a dog who won’t sleep in his fucking basket.”

“Shows what you know,” I say, because I don’t feel like explaining.

“Dude, you’re not in jail, Manning’s dead, and your dad got BETTER. Meanwhile, my girlfriend’s doing life for killing her pop, my brother supposedly offed himself, MY dad’s a fugitive in, like, Brazil, and my mom emancipated me by MAIL. I win.”

“Wait, your brother SUPPOSEDLY killed himself? Does that mean you think he didn’t?” I sit straighter, ears perking. This is the first I’ve heard about Beaver, or any of his crimes, since the night Dick got that phone call at the beach.

“No body,” Jackie offers, with a shrug. She looks relaxed, but she’s watching me in a focused, penetrating way I’ll have to think about later. Like this is the first time since we’ve met that I’ve done
“Which makes his disappearance a hot topic for gossip, no offense, Dick. People are whispering that the Sharks Curse is a killer, not a suicide pact. And that Cassidy’s in hiding, to protect himself.”

“Yeah, well people suck. He’s a VICTIM.” Dick sneers, unwilling to play the hope game. “Logan told me the note Marcos Oliveras left might be a forgery. I just need one piece of proof the Beav was offed, and I’ll take out that piece of shit Dohanic myself.”

“Justice League,” I remind him, alarmed. “Do it the LEGAL way. If we discover someone’s murdering Woody’s victims, I GUARANTEE I’ll make them pay.”

“Luke’s freaking out,” Jackie confides. “He got drunk and admitted to Lils that Woody chased him in junior high. Tried to get him alone, talked about his potential, you know how creeps operate. He’s terrified the killer will think Woody succeeded.”

“Luke’s ALWAYS freaking out,” Dick opines, draining the flask. “I don’t even know why he hangs with us, he’s got NO taste for danger.”

“Folks are starting to congregate, over by the stage,” Jackie says, not moving. “We should get in line for the guillotine, before someone comes looking.”

“I’m not going ‘til they make me,” I say. “Wallace reminded me that Shelly fell over, curtseying. There’s no way in hell I’ll manage.”

“Rons, you were on dance team,” Dick reminds me. “And Shelly was smoking out in my car before rehearsal, she didn’t fall from natural causes.”

Jackie jerks her head to indicate Lilly, gesticulating wildly off in the distance. “That’s my cue. Thanks for the liquid courage. It’ll come in handy.”

“I don’t think you need it,” I say, because she’s sticking up for my best friend; she deserves my support.

She stands and looks down at me, faintly smiling. “I like you in black,” she says, instead of answering. “You look less perky and smug. Give me a ring if you need help fixing your real friends’ legitimate problems. It’s nice to know you’re not just coasting along, making symbolic gestures and trading favors with snobs.”

Jackie strides off towards Lilly, unruffled, and Dick toasts her with the empty flask. “Hey, if you want real problems to fix, you could get Kendall out of my face. I forgot until you mentioned the Justice League. She accused me of stealing her money yesterday.”

“Kendall had money?” I ask, because this is new information.

“Yeah, that’s what I said. She lost her shit, though; her whole rant made, like, zero sense. I THINK she found one of my dad’s accounts that the IRS didn’t? And she was, like, living on it or something, until it turned up drained. I mean that’s whack, right? The cash isn’t even in the country, Dad probably just transferred it somewhere. But she’s all ‘Well, your brother’s dead, and no one ELSE knows where the skeletons are buried’. So maybe, since you’re still hot for revenge, you could use that piece of data to drag her off my fucking back?”

“Drag who off your back?” Carrie asks, emerging from the crowd with Logan in tow. She’s dressed in Grace Kelly-esque white gauze, delicately detailed in gold. And looks far too elegant to be dating the likes of Dick. “And what are you doing back here in a chair? The ceremony starts in four minutes.”
“Ronnie needed liquid courage.” He smirks, tossing the flask on a side table, levering himself upright. “Come on, babes, Logan can wrangle her from here.”

He leads Carrie off, and Logan gazes down at me, hands on hips. “Debutante?” he says, like he’s reading words off a marquee. “Or reform school girl? She’s a sweet-looking blonde who’s bad to the bone.”

“I’ve been smoking cigarettes in the bathroom with the other delinquents,” I say, tossing back a lock of hair. “Next up is a rousing drag race down the mean streets of Neptune.”

He extends a hand; I take it, and he tugs me to my feet. Pulls a pair of velvet gloves out of his pocket and busies himself unfastening my bracelet. “I wish you didn’t have to perform tonight,” he says, not looking at me. “I know it’s been a rough day, and this isn’t your scene.”

“Enh, nobody’s shooting at us. We’ve coped with worse,” I say, on a sigh. “Look, it sucks that I turned up in permanent-crisis mode, and ruined your golden moment. I’m sure it would be better for everyone if Other Veronica was here; SHE doesn’t destroy everything she touches. It’s just…I do my best, but I’m so spent, Logan. And I have to put my host in a coma to even REST.”

“Veronica,” he says, looking up, intent. “I’m in awe of you. You’re a fucking hero, whom I will help in any way I can. And no matter HOW big a blast radius you create, you’re still my favorite girl.”

I feel the tears come. See his hand, limp on the gearshift. Watch the spill of blood spread. Blink that image, and the moisture, away. “God, I don’t ever want to lose you,” I say. “I don’t want to know what I’d turn into, if someday you were gone.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he says, grimly. He takes the gloves back, helps me don them, and refastens the bracelet. Strokes a hand up my velvet-clad forearm. “Except onto that stage. So cowboy up, Mars, ’cause you’re about to be a star.”

“Then I guess I’m ready for my close-up,” I say, with a hoarse laugh. He tucks my arm through his, and leads me across the room.

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Dad and Alicia skirt the edge of a milling crowd, watching white-gowned girls and tuxedoed boys toast each other with champagne. Dad still looks frail, but moves more confidently; his face is wreathed in smiles. Alicia is radiant in a green sequined dress, grinning up in response as they banter. She only has eyes for him.

“Whoa,” I say, grabbing Logan’s bicep to halt our progress. “Look at all that happy. Are they DATING? Did our nefarious plan actually WORK?”

“Um,” he says, mouth quirking. “They haven’t officially said. But they hang out together twenty-four-seven. He found a house he likes over on Golden Dawn, and she’s helping him fix it up, since he’s still not a hundred percent. I wouldn’t be surprised if she winds up moving in. Dick has taken to calling you, me, and Wallace the Waltons.”

I cast my mind back over Hearst Reality, where Alicia still owns a home. There was no sign of a girlfriend at Dad’s place, yesterday when I packed his bag—no toiletries in the bathroom, or couple-photos on the wall. But she DID show up to babysit me, groceries in tow, which implies a certain… familiarity?

I’m excited for a minute, thinking Hearst Dad might have found true love. Then I remember he’s probably dead, and my moment of joy evaporates.
“Veronica!” Dad calls, spotting us, and makes his way carefully over. He grins down at me, holding my arms out to my sides to examine my outfit. “You look unconventional, but lovely. I approve.”

“I never was one to follow the crowd,” I say, shrugging, and go in to hug Alicia. “My only concern is managing the curtsey, without dragging us both down.”

“You’ll do fine,” Alicia tells me, straightening Logan’s bow tie while he holds still, obedient. She gives his shoulder a pat. “You practiced for months. Now, I’m just going to quickly make sure Wallace hasn’t eaten in his tux, they’ve got shrimp with cocktail sauce on the buffet. I’ll see you three after the ceremony.”

Logan presses a kiss to my forehead. “I’d say break a leg, but that seems inopportune,” he tells me, with a smirk. “Just hang on to Keith, and I’ll meet you center stage.”

“What a comedian,” Dad says, as Logan bounds off to take his place in a different line. “How are his college plans progressing? Has he gotten any acceptances?”

I shrug, because I have zero clue, and Dad shoots me a penetrating look. “What about New York?” he asks. “Given any more thought to that?”

Okay, what the HELL is going on in New York? I wish I could yell the question; because a New York argument caused us to miss the boat, right? The line’s moving now, though, Dad and I are shuffling forward, and I’m supposed to be aware of all my own problems. “Nope,” I say instead, hoping a brief answer will draw him out.

“It’s a great opportunity, Veronica,” he tells me, sure enough. My ears perk, because I know what that means. College, job or internship, some achievement that makes him proud. And removes me from the orbit of my live-in boyfriend, as a bonus.

Maybe Improved Past Dad isn’t so different, after all.

“All right kid,” he says, leaning on me slightly as we mount the stairs. “It’s go time. Remember, little mincing steps, so it looks like you’re floating.”

I grimace at him and he grins, both mocking and proud. Then Lynn Echolls steps up to the podium in a stunning turquoise gown, and the lights dim, except for her spot.

“Those of you who know me realize I wasn’t a debutante,” she says, flashing the disarming grin her son inherited. She looks lovely, lips deflated to normal dimensions, longer hair in a feminine up-do. She’s dripping with green jewels, more ostentatious than the ones she gave me, but the effect’s chic instead of gaudy. “I was a quiet girl with a stammer, who fell in love with the family business. I wasn’t lucky enough to have the advantages that tonight’s accomplished young ladies enjoy…my parents were famous and larger-than-life, but very, very poor. I HAVE been fortunate in other respects, however. First, I was smart enough to settle in the amazing town of Neptune. Second, I’ve made dear friends; together, we’ve supported the Neptune Children’s Hospital, an invaluable asset to our community. And third, I’m thrilled to be a part of the committee that selected tonight’s deserving honorees. I’d like to ask for a big round of applause for the Neptune Women’s League, which organized this special event. Specifically, I’d like to thank the ladies of the committee, without whose efforts a ball would not have been possible. Ellen Sinclair, Lianne Kane, Jessica Fuller, Deborah Dahl, Marielle Rakes; and of course, Celeste Kane, president of the organization, and a former Neptune Women’s League deb herself. Ladies, please take a bow, we’re grateful for all you’ve done.”

Enthusiastic applause ensues. I wish Weevil was here, to help me mock the self-congratulatory
bullshit. But I’m part of the herd, now; I’d be mocking ME. And that realization brings home how far I’ve slipstream-traveled from my own shores.

“So without further ado,” Lynn continues, “it’s my pleasure to introduce an amazing group of young women. Ladies and gentlemen of the Neptune Symphony Orchestra, if you please.”

The quartet beside the stage begins to play, and Lynn taps a stack of notecards on the podium.

“Escorted by her father Winston Bishop, Miss Carrie Michelle Bishop. Carrie is an Honor Roll Student and aspiring musician, who models with the Ford agency part-time. She’s involved with the Neptune Rocks! Charity, a music school for the underprivileged community, and is a National Merit Scholarship finalist. Carrie has been accepted to Hearst, Berkeley, UCLA and Julliard, and is considering her options.”

I lift my eyebrows, impressed, because Julliard? Who knew Carrie had talents other than gossip? Dad elbows me, grinning, as Carrie floats across the stage, and curteys like an angel. She smiles serenely at Dick, who winks and leads her away.

“Escorted by her father Tony Dahl, Miss Angela Delilah Dahl. Angie is a VERY accomplished student and class Valedictorian, whose many interests include…”

I tune Lynn out as Dad says, “See, your friend Carrie’s going to New York. It’s not like you’d be lonely.”

“IF she wins the scholarship,” I guess, because Carrie’s a working stiff. Probably she’s up on stage today because of Other V’s machinations. “If not, she’s staying right here in sunny CA.”

“Veronica, very few people actually get accepted to Columbia,” he says. “Even fewer have the chance to live in a Manhattan penthouse, paid for by their stepfather. Is this really an offer you want to refuse?”

“Sabrina, like Angie Dahl, was Valedictorian of Neptune High in 2005, and currently attends Stanford University…” Lynn’s voice filters into the silence, managing somehow to sound interested.

“And what about Logan?” I ask, even though I already know the answer. “Surfing’s important to him, and he’s important to me. There are plenty of good colleges nearby, where we could both be happy. Berkeley, for instance. Or Hearst.”

“Escorted by her father Jake Kane, Miss Lillian Jean Kane,” Lynn intones, warmth creeping into her voice. The audience goes nuts, making all kinds of conflicting noise. “Lilly is attending Berkeley College this year, but is considering a move. She’s deeply involved in volunteer work for the Helping Hands Association, which assists abused children as they recover and thrive; it’s an organization my son and I also support. I know Lilly well—she’s a dear friend of Logan’s—and I can’t overstate how pleased I am to see her accomplishments recognized.”

Lilly dimples at Lynn, then at the audience, performs a curtsey which I scrutinize closely (because of course it’s flawless). She grins widely as she takes Jackie’s hand. The noise in the audience grows louder, deafening, but at least half of it is positive…and Lilly clearly doesn’t care.

I study Celeste, whose face is wooden, but whose eyes promise retribution. Then glance at my mother, who looks smug. It’s obvious she has no clue what’s coming.

“Veronica….” Dad begins, like he wants to continue our New York discussion. But it’s our turn, so he’s got to smile, and lead me across the stage.

“Escorted by her father…our former Sheriff and my own personal hero, Keith Mars…Miss Veronica
Anne Mars. Veronica is an Honor Roll Student, as well as Class President at Neptune High. She’s been accepted by Hearst, Berkeley, and Columbia Universities, thus far. Veronica’s the debutante dearest to my heart, for obvious reasons…” she pauses here to let the audience titter; grins at Logan, who’s standing near the podium. “I frankly adore her, and her brilliant mind, and her amazing sense of style. I hope the recognition bestowed this evening makes her bright future even brighter.”

Dad lets go of my hand, and I stand center stage, the angst-blurred shapes of Neptune’s hoi polloi ranged below me. I hold Lilly’s curtsey in my mind, and try to copy it; I don’t know how well I manage, but at least I don’t fall. Logan takes my hand, kisses it, and whispers, “You’re a champ.” Leads me off the stage, then pulls me into his arms.

“Why is facing down murderers a piece of cake?” I murmur, into his sternum. “But a stupid curtsey is my Waterloo?”

“We have a lot more practice with the former,” he soothes, stroking my back. “Come on, let’s get in position for the dance. That’s your last big hurdle. After, we do the mandatory schmooze, and then we’re out of here, I promise.”

“Logan Echolls schmoozes of own free will,” I say, nestling my cheek into his shirt front. I let him lead me onto the floor. “Film at 11:00.”

“Only for Veronica Mars,” he says. “If anyone else asked, I’d laugh.”

“Dad just told me about Columbia,” I say, meeting his eyes. “Is that causing friction?”

“No yet,” he denies, gazing down. “For the moment, I’m playing along. But Columbia’s a reality you haven’t seen, right? So all sources point to it somehow not happening.”

“Berkeley, Hearst and Stanford, thus far,” I agree. “And I’m pretty sure Stanford got paradoxed out. One of the future yous told me I didn’t get accepted.”

“That’s bad,” he says, grimacing. “Stanford’s Veronica’s favorite. And the option most likely to keep the Columbia Nightmare at bay. But at least there’s still Berkeley, right? Which is the outcome YOU want.”

“I’m not sure WHAT I want, anymore,” I say. “Every choice I make seems to end in tears.”

The band strikes up the Blue Danube Waltz. Logan dons a plastic grin that involves gritted teeth, and says, “Prepare to be amazed by my Alicia-mandated footwork.”

“Can’t wait,” I say. I close my eyes, and let my body remember how to do the job.

It feels like I’m floating, one long, gliding spin…so far removed from our dances in MY life, it’s like we’re not the same people. He grins down at me, I grin back; then we’re whirling rapidly in circles, because Logan’s graceful as hell. I can feel his muscles flexing under the broadcloth of his tux, as it dampens from exertion. I laugh, a rusty sound. At least here we’re alive, and this feels GOOD.

I start to slip.

Reality twists sideways, the quality of light changes, the air smells stale. My body gets lighter and tenser, my feet aren’t touching the ground, but I DON’T WANT TO GO. I’ve had ENOUGH. I’m so tired, and Hearst Reality hurts, and right here, right now, I feel safe.

The world settles around me, with a jarring thump. I’m still dancing in my black dress to the Blue Danube.
I can feel the hovering future, teasing the edges of my consciousness; but with a burst of elation, I realize I’m fighting it back. My mind flashes to Logan in the car, before everything went to hell—he said, ‘I need you to focus, so you don’t slip’.

I forgot, because the visit ended horribly…but those were his words, which means he KNEW. He understood something about the slipstream I hadn’t figured out, and gave me a hint that helped me ride it.

Hearst Logan was telling the truth. He DID remember things I still haven’t done.

“I can control it,” I murmur, and Logan tilts his head closer, to hear me above the noise. “I can CONTROL it! The slipstream! It just tried to take me, but I managed to stay!”

He stumbles a step, recovers; his whole body tightens, alert. “Are you serious?” he demands. “Like, could you hang around indefinitely? Or is it trying to yank you, and you’re struggling?”

I cock my head, considering. “It’s there,” I say. “The other reality, I can feel it. We’re outside, on a grey day. You’re spinning me, kissing me goodbye, and I’m…sad. But I don’t have the sense, right now, of being out of control. The future’s just….waiting. It’s like when you’re exhausted, but you force yourself to stay awake? Even though you know you can’t do it forever?”

He nods, but he’s distracted by something over my shoulder. A harsh male voice, raised in argument, and a lighter, quippier female response. “Veronica,” he says, low and serious. “Lilly and Jackie are being harassed.”

The music stops. Logan bows, the world’s most perfunctory gesture, then leads me by one hand in Lilly’s direction. I pick up my skirts and hurry. It looks like the conflict is heating up…and of course, Lils is giving no quarter.

XXXXX

Tad Wilson, decked out in an extra-small Men’s Wearhouse tuxedo, has bellied up to Lils on the dance floor, his partner Ashley in tow. Several of his cronies surround them. Jackie stands just behind Lil, clutching a margarita, and looks to be rapidly losing her shit.

“What seems to be the problem here, officer?” Logan asks as we approach, resting a comforting palm on Lilly’s shoulder. He inserts himself between her and Tad in the process. “This is supposed to be a fun and festive occasion.”

“I just think she owes me an explanation,” Tad says, sullen but unrepentant. He’s wearing the same surly face as when I showed him the Seth website, and I want to put my fist in it. “She was MY date to this thing for MONTHS, and she threw me over to make a SCENE?”

“I’m not the one making a scene,” Lilly says, unrepentant. “I have zero interest in jumping your bones, Tad, and you’re embarrassing yourself by not giving up.”

“Awesome, is this a FIGHT?” Dick materializes behind Logan, Wallace and Carrie in tow. His grin tells me he’s drunker than I realized. “Just when I thought the evening was gonna suck.”

“Lilly, you KNOW this thing with Jackie is a fling,” Tad pleads, ignoring him. “What I feel for you is REAL. It’s LOVE. How can you keep refusing to give me a chance?”

“I swear to God, if you whip out a boom box and start playing Peter Gabriel, I’m smashing your face,” Logan says. “Speaking as the one guy Lilly DID love, you’re lucky she’s letting you talk. Just go treasure the memory. Let her ruin someone ELSE for other girls.”
“She was supposed to come here with ME,” Tad insists, mulish. “And she’s leaving with me. If she doesn’t, I’ll make a scene so big it’ll hit the PAPERS.”

“You need to back off,” Jackie says, stepping forward. “You need to take your tiny little self elsewhere, because right here, you’re not wanted.”

“Sure, like I’m gonna listen to YOU,” Tad scoffs. “Everybody knows you’re just dating her because she’s rich. You don’t love her, deep down. I CHERISH this girl!”

Jackie shows unhesitating and spectacular aim as she throws the margarita in his face.

Tad bristles, lip peeling back from his teeth, and raises a hand. At which point, Dick plants a fist in his face, and he goes backwards like a sack of sand.

Logan huffs exasperation. “Jesus, Dick, what have I SAID about hitting first? This is a HIGH PROFILE EVENT. There is PRESS here. The cops can bring charges based on VIDEOTAPE.”

One of Tad’s wrestling team buddies tackles Dick, and manages to get him in a chokehold. Wallace takes off his jacket, hands it to Carrie, and bends the guy’s wrist backwards until he squeals and lets go. “You need to do the right thing, my friend,” Wallace tells Dick’s assailant, fixing him with the frown he’s been wearing all evening. “Starting a fight with girls because your buddy feels jilted does not qualify.”

Tad’s got a hold of Lilly now, and he’s dragging her towards the door, while she slaps him repeatedly in the side. Logan rolls his eyes, ducks his center of gravity under Tad’s, and gently flips him to the floor. “Just stop,” he says, shaking his head pityingly down. “You won’t impress anyone by acting extra pathetic.”

Lilly laughs, which is more than Tad can stand; he promptly goes crazed-opossum nuts. He grabs Logan’s ankle, bites, and when Logan tries to yank away he clings. Logan falls, somehow managing a martial arts landing, which flips Tad face down. Gets his thumb on the hinge of Tad’s jaw, presses. Tad lets go with a howl, clamping his palm to his cheek.

I extend a hand to Logan, but he springs up without my help. Relinquishes Tad to Wallace, who plants a foot on the back of his neck. “Jesus, I need a rabies shot,” he says, examining his ankle. “The guy baffled me fight-wise out of sheer spastic incompetence.”

“Serves you right,” a voice behind us growls. “YOU don’t play fair, Echolls, so why should anyone else?”

We turn, and there’s Norris, surveying the chaos grimly. He cocks his head, mouth twisting into a humorless smile. Then his fist swings, a blur of motion, and plants itself in Logan’s eye.

The next twenty minutes are pandemonium.

Logan has no choice but to defend himself. Even in his stiff tux, his movements have the kind of poetry that spawns clichés; he feints and kicks with brutal efficiency. But Norris has improved, too, since they went head to head a year ago, and seems motivated to publicly humiliate. Like he’s waited for this chance too long to consider letting it pass.

The wrestlers converge en masse around their fallen leader. Wallace has his hands full fighting them off, while keeping Tad secured. Dick wades in with relish, and Lilly follows with an empty champagne bottle; she’s got her skirts rucked up and clutched in one fist, and she cuts a wide swath.
Attendees are converging from every corner of the ballroom, drawn by the ruckus. I spot Celeste, stalking murderously closer with security guards in tow, and the cameraman from Channel Nine, yanking his tripod free. Action needs to be taken, before this hits the news. So I grab a bowl of punch from the nearby buffet, and throw it on Norris and Logan, like dogs.

They separate, spluttering, and I shove between them, facing Norris down with gritted-teeth rage. “What the HELL do you think you’re doing?” I demand, stretching as far into his face as I can manage. “You spent YEARS cleaning up your act, post Junior High, but you’ll throw it all away for THIS? I won’t love you instead if you beat up my boyfriend, you idiot!”

“I owed him a sucker punch,” Norris says sullenly, backing up a step before my wrath. “You’re a girl, Veronica. You wouldn’t understand.”

“You know me BETTER than that,” I hiss. “You need to keep your nose CLEAN if you want to go to college. And prove to your dad you can control yourself, if you want paid trips to Japan. You have a lot of potential, Norris. You could be a martial arts instructor, or a stuntman, or a cop, or even Special Forces, but this is NOT how you make that happen. Be a bigger person. Take ten deep breaths and walk away.”

“I wish you hadn’t tased me,” he says, crossing his arms. He looks like a pink-stained, dripping, cranky mountain. “I still don’t understand why.”

“Because I’m ride or die, Clayton. And Logan’s my guy.” I give his shoulder a light shove. “Now LEAVE, before you end up on TV.”

He glances at the approaching cameraman, nods, and stalks off, leaving a trail of punch behind him. I turn to look at Logan. He’s rubbing his abraded knuckles absently, punch dripping from his nose, but the look he fixes on me is adoring. The corner of his mouth curves in an intimate smile, and he brushes back a lock of my hair.

“You’re not in trouble because you didn’t have a choice,” I say, as Jackie offers him a stack of linen napkins. He wipes his face. “But just FYI, that guy used to put people in the hospital for fun.”

“Good thing I had you to protect me, then,” he says, moving closer, with sublime disregard for everyone watching. “All five delicate feet of you in your pretty satin dress.”

“Don’t let the packaging fool you,” Jackie says, accepting the mass of wet napkins, and handing him a stack of dry. “Veronica made that poor guy TREMBLE.”

“It’s a talent at which she excels,” he agrees, curving a big, bruised hand around my cheek. I stroke over Logan’s eye, which is red and beginning to swell, and he flinches. Lilly hands me the half-melted highball she set down while rumbling, and I press it to Logan’s war wound. “Sugar lumps, what you’ve got here is a Rocky-Balboa-sized shiner,” I say. “I’ve seen enough of them on you that I can guesstimate by color. Tomorrow it’ll be swollen shut.”

“Your dad’s gonna be pissed,” he informs me, as Lilly and Jackie start canoodling, and Dick and Wallace haul off a struggling Tad. “This is JUST the ammunition he needs to sway Veronica towards Columbia.”

I clock Dad, who’s joined forces with Lynn to block the cameraman’s path, and smile. “He just wants me to be happy,” I counter, softly. “And Other V MUST be. I mean, you took COTILLION lessons for her. The comedy factor alone there is heartwarming.”

“Ronica,” he says, tugging me close. “I’m SO glad you’re here.”
“You want to dance?” I ask his chest. “Before I lose control and slip? That way, when I disappear, at least I’ll be in your arms.”

“For whatever time we’ve got left,” he says. “I’m all yours.”

“Yeah, you are,” I agree, and lead him across the room.

“I don’t even know why you bother with romance,” he says as we assume the position, grasping my waist between his hands. He spins me in a circle, to the strains of ‘My Love’, and I realize the quartet’s packed up and gone. “You ought to be all about escaping the slipstream. Navigating relationships with multiple Logans has GOT to be a nightmare, yet you keep trying and trying and trying.”

“Because you and I, we’re epic,” I say, and twine my arms around his neck. He sniffs—I hope his nose isn’t broken—and curves about me, pressing his cheek to my skull. He smells like sweat, coppery blood, and sickening-sweet strawberry. “Remember?”

He laughs. “I’m never gonna live that down. My favorite fantasy had just been fulfilled, cut me some slack.”


He pulls back to study me. His right eye is, in fact, swelling shut. “While I basically agree, that sounds…rehearsed.”

I smile, stroking the arch of his brow. “Why do you think I laughed? You recited that speech to me once, at a party almost as messed up as this one. It was your grandiose way of making your move. I said, in response, relationships shouldn’t be that hard. And you said, no one writes songs about the ones that come easy.”

He laughs. “Oh, man, I’m SMOOTH. Did you crack up, or storm off? Or maybe secretly love it, in your darkest heart of hearts?”

“I ran,” I admit. “But I came back. I’ll always come back to you, and your bruised knuckles, and your drunken flowery speeches. Because you’re MINE.”

“Why Veronica Mars!” he whisper-taunts, his hands tightening on my waist. “I’m beginning to think that deep down, you’re ROMANTIC.”

“Yeah, not in the same league as you,” I murmur back, rising on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. “You were blackout-wasted, and maybe a little terrified. Yet you went for broke, with your heart in your eyes.”

“I love you,” he says, dark gaze fixing on mine, so hot, so magnetic, I’m sucked under. “If you had any idea how much, I’m afraid you’d run again.”

“Nah,” I say. “Ride or die, remember? You’re stuck with me.”

He grins, winces as his injuries twinge, and I touch his cheekbone. “You want to go home, baby cakes? Put a steak on that eye?”

“Nah,” he repeats. “I want to finish this dance before you leave. Whatever the DJ plays next is officially our song.”

My head tilts: and over the cacophony of the chattering crowd, I can just make out the opening notes.
of ‘Sway’. I snort with silent laughter, because fucking fate.

He smiles back, though there’s no way he could possibly be in on this joke. Presses his forehead to mine. We turn lazily in circles while the music plays. And even though the world is imploding around us, for this moment, I feel all right.

The familiar tugging-summoning kicks into high gear, and I know, this time, it won’t be ignored. “I’m slipping,” I say, stroking his mouth with my thumb. “Thanks for loving me, penchant for mayhem and all.”

He curves his hand along the back of mine, kisses my palm. Grins gamely down, despite the pain. My heart aches with tenderness. “‘Til next time,” he says, and winks with the undamaged eye.

I go spiraling through the wormhole, and out the other side.

THREAD THIRTY THREE

I’m in the passenger seat of my Boat Reality Porsche, with—Jesus, a CIGARETTE in my hand—when the spin settles. Through a haze of smoke I see Weevil, wearing a one-piece grey coverall; he’s wiping down the hood with a chamois cloth, and lifting skeptical brows.

“What do I think happens?” he asks, like he’s parroting. He leans his weight on one hand, studying me via the gleaming windshield. “Shit, V, I don’t know. I mean, I went to Sunday school, but I don’t have personal experience with being dead.” He tosses the cloth away and climbs into the driver’s seat, eases it back with a sigh. “I’ve heard people go down a tunnel of light or whatever, and there’s some long-lost relative, waiting.”

I fan away the bitter haze, open my ash tray to crush out the cause. The compartment’s packed with butts, plus an array of stems and seeds; which means I have multiple problems, and possibly rotten lungs. “You’ve seen people you love die, though,” I say, because seriously. He wants to chat, and the topic’s relevant. “I’d guess you’ve given the matter thought.”

“Repeat this and I deny it,” he says, crossing his arms over his chest. “My family thinks I’m a good Catholic. But I don’t believe there IS anything else. This is it, right here. We make or break our big chance while we’re still breathing. When we’re dead, it’s just…done. Then we only live if people remember us.”

“Aw, quit with the sunny optimism,” I say, and he smirks. “At least we both excel at remembering. Sometimes I worry it’s the ONLY thing I’m good at…justice for the dearly departed. Or vengeance. Whatever.”

“Father Fitzpatrick has a speech for people like us,” he says, examining the gauges on the dash. “If you want an expert opinion on dying. He used to hasten guys along to their heavenly reward, now he’s the one who says prayers. Means ‘em, too. He’s not the usual brand of hypocrite.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I say. “If the guilt someday gets too heavy.”

“It’s not so much guilt for me as, I’m just so damn tired.” He shoots me a brief sideways glance. His hands curl around the wheel like he’s imaginary-driving, and he leans back against the headrest. “I keep getting back up and fighting, after they knock me down, because that’s what strong people do, you know? But after a day at this dumb-ass job, I go back to my shitty one-bedroom, put up my bum leg. Eat a whole pizza, pass out in front of the TV, rinse, repeat. I feel like all this trying should buy me more.”

I smile, because truth. “At least you’re not in jail.”
He snorts. “For now. I’m an ex-con, and also too brown to suit the local cops. If I was layin’ odds, I’d bet against myself.”

“You should be your own boss,” I say. “Work with people you respect. Bike shop, maybe, or luxury car repair. If you need a silent partner to provide start-up funds, I’m your girl.”

“How’d you plan to pull that off?” he asks, lifting a brow. “You gonna knock over a convenience store? I told you before, I ain’t taking Echolls’ money, even as a loan. Which he knows, he didn’t bother to offer. He and I, we do better when we don’t owe each other.”

“And here I thought you two rocked an idyllic bromance.” I mess with the latch to the glove box, avoiding his eyes. Because don’t I have a Jake-Kane-supplied trust fund? My parents are (presumably) alive in this reality, and I haven’t seen evidence of a falling-out. “Color me disillusioned.”

He smirks. “I understand the guy better, since the day his sister jumped,” he says. “In some ways, I even trust him. And he takes care of you nicer than I thought he would, back when he was the sun at the center of Neptune High. But there’s a lot of water under that bridge, V. We ain’t ever gonna be friends, not the way I am with you.”

“Too bad the cash from your parents didn’t pan out,” I murmur, blatantly fishing. Because if it had, no way would we be sitting here. “You could crash through that glass ceiling on your own dime.”

“Yeah,” he says, drily. “It’s a damn shame. Turns out Napa’s a lot like Neptune, in all the ways that count.” He taps a fingernail on the window. “Chardo tried to get a job there, at the vineyard, I tell you that? He’s desperate as fuck, because my aunt finally cut him loose. It didn’t work out; ma said he’s in New Mexico now. Probably making meth.”

I snort. “Come on, Weevil. You know Chardo’s not smart enough to make meth. He’d blow up the lab.”

The corner of his mouth twitches as he fights a smile. “You’re gonna be late to meet Echolls at that Pooh Bear Magical Music Festival,” he says. “And you know how he frets, when you turn up tardy.”

“Understandably,” I say. Because the last time I was late, all Logan’s friends died. “Stellar job with the detailing, by the way. I count on quality work at this fine establishment.”

He laughs. “You want it done right, go to the experts.” He hauls himself out of the car, leans into the open door. “Must be why you’re here every Friday.”

“Must be,” I say, climbing over the center console, gunning the engine. “Later, sunshine.”

“See you next week, V.” He slams it shut, and, hands in pockets, saunters away.

I drive around the block to the Sac-and-Pac, grab the local events paper ‘Neptune On the Go’. The festival’s called Eeyore’s Birthday Party, and it’s held at the outdoor theatre where greying Boomers hang.

The drive is long, which I appreciate; I so rarely get quiet moments. I’ve sunk past tired and unhappy to an ugly, creeping numbness I recognize…namely from sophomore year, when things got so bad I checked out. Logan named it to Luke, a few days ago—dissociation-- and I’m living the dream. If I turn up in Hearst Reality and he or Dad is dead, I’m not sure how I’ll cope.
Weevil seems, in this reality, to be just as lost as I am. Which I guess is how it goes, when the contact who finds you jobs becomes a directionless dropout. He’s got no girl, no money, a shitty boss, can’t even afford rehab for his limp…and I seem to be using him as an unpaid shrink. Lilly’s retreated, here, into a brittle, Celeste-like shell, Logan’s a needy drunk. Maybe I turned up in Boat Reality today because it suits my mood?

My hands flex on the wheel, and I lean back, striving to relax. The heavy face of my watch slides towards gravity, drawing my gaze down. It’s the guy-style specimen with a thick black band I favored in junior high; I thought I’d lost it at the beach. I flash back to Hearst Logan’s watch-related warning. Was he telling me, in code, not to LITERALLY miss the boat?

Maybe trying to prevent the cruise was wasted effort. I should get proactive, instead. Put security in place, so someone’s equipped to fight. Stop as many friends as possible from boarding, give the rest bullet-proof vests. I need a plan of action, and I need to implement it tomorrow, no matter what else goes down.

I have zero way of knowing when I’ll next show up in Improved Past. I might not even be PRESENT, graduation day. Everyone on the Nautilus needs to prep for disaster, and that includes Other Veronica.

Damn it, I’ll have to grill Logan again; not just to make sure the HOWS haven’t changed, but to nail down the WHENS, so I can dream up countermeasures. If I need to yell my questions over an arena concert, so be it.

And maybe, just maybe, if my gamble pays off, I can both save the day…and ensure Logan knows I love him, by saying the right words. Thus preventing Hearst Reality, so the car wreck never happens.

I drum my thumbs on the steering wheel, scanning the roadside for the arena sign. Speaking OF unlikely scenarios involving my college years…there’s something hinky about Other V’s Columbia scheme.

I’ve been told, MULTIPLE times, that I’m way less studious in Improved Past. My grades aren’t great, my motivation’s low, and Logan Echolls managed to beat my test scores. Other V didn’t even get into Stanford.

So how did she gain admission to a super-elite, out-of-state Ivy League school? Short answer; an adult with money pulled strings. Likely the same adult who offered her keys to his Manhattan penthouse. Jake Kane.

According to her deb ball introduction, Lilly was considering a move as well; to Vassar, maybe, consistent with other realities. Was she doing this in solidarity, so I wouldn’t feel lonely? Or did Jake want his daughter and stepdaughter out of town?

I know something’s going down with Duncan and the asylum. Maybe it’s scarier than I realize, a pending public scandal. But the Kanes shielding Lilly from bad press, while leaving Duncan in danger, doesn’t track with what I know of them. Their first priority would be to rescue their son, which, as of today, hasn’t happened.

Clearly something’s gone down with Jake, though, between the debutante ball and now. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be poor and freeload ing off Logan, the way Weevil hinted. Reality’s shifted, subtly altering the big picture, and I’m not sure how, yet. Or why.

Jesus, no wonder I’m a fucking mess. My life’s a ten-thousand-piece puzzle, and parts change shape
twice a day.

I text Logan when I arrive at the stadium. He writes back, “On hill by flagpole. Bring blanket in trunk, had mishap.”

I lift my brows; but dutifully grab Jessica’s green Target throw, plus a large, commercially-prepared picnic basket. The food shows an unexpected level of foresight. Does this mean Logan and V are coping better, here? Have I fixed their lives, in ways a Weevil conversation wouldn’t reveal?

I hike across the grass, dodging sprawled groups, aim for the flagpole and the small figures beneath. These resolve, as I approach, into Logan and Carrie; they’re huddled together on one corner of a blanket, which sports a large, singed patch dead-center. She’s giggling around the joint pressed between her lips…he’s sprawled sideways laughing, spewing great gouts of smoke. Clearly, they’re not enemies, here. Instead, they’re comfortable and flirtatious in a way that makes my stomach knot.

“Ronica!” Logan calls happily, when I struggle into view. He leaps up, all grace, to relieve me of my load. There’s no tension in him, just loose-limbed relaxation, and the kiss he gives me is sweet and unhurried. “We had a very small fire,” he confides, near my ear, with the glad-to-stare-at-you smile I could never resist. “Carrie was intrepid, and beat it back with my shoe.”

“She must’ve been a girl scout,” I say drily, as Carrie pinches the joint carefully and waves.

His eyebrows wing upward, but he shoos her off the blanket without comment and crumples it; spreads the new one, theatrically flicking his arms. He gestures for us both to sit, flops between us, takes the roach from Carrie, and inhales in a satisfied way.

I make a face and shake my head, when he offers me a drag, because EW. This time, the arched brows are more deliberate. His gaze sharpens, despite intoxication, becomes both amused and knowing.

Which earns him my most sardonic glare. Because why’s he here playing slacker with Carrie, while Other V seeks comfort from Weevil? He’s supposed to be helping her get BETTER, not playing that girlfriend-what-girlfriend game I HATED in college!

The corner of his mouth quirks. He hands the joint off carelessly to Carrie, and stalk-crawls behind me, pulling me snugly into the vee of his legs.

“Whatcha been up to, Mrs. R.?” he asks, mouth brushing my cheek. “You’re making that steely-eyed investigate-y face that gets me all tingly.”

“Chatting with Weevil,” I murmur, watching Carrie close her eyes, tilt her head backwards, and expel a plume of smoke. I’m not surprised she models for extra cash. She’s got that Kendall Casablancas super-polished brunette sheen, and I’m uncomfortably aware she and Logan have fooled around. “Apparently it happens every week, on the sly, while you entertain my female friends.”

“Only in the ways any gentleman would,” he chides, kissing my temple. “But thanks for the data point. It’s not like this’d be the first time Navarro’s tried to steal my girl.”

“Who’s trying to steal your girl?” Carrie asks, crushing out the butt in the grass. She leans forward, elbows on knees, intrigued. “How would that even work, when you’re rarely out of each other’s sight?”
“Logan’s teasing me about the car wash guy, because I take my Porsche to be detailed every week,” I say. “He used to perv on Lilly during pep squad fundraisers, so the fantasy’s etched into his brain.”

“Mmmm, those little green shorts,” he agrees, reminiscent. “They filled me with Pirate pride. And in other news, SINCE we’re discussing losers with dead-end jobs. You should hear Carrie’s latest theory on the Boat Killer. She was laying it out for me earlier, and I have to admit… it’s plausible.”

“Do tell!” I rest my head against his solid shoulder. He smells like both kinds of grass, and sweat. “This is the best news I’ve heard all day, because my current suspect count is zero.”

“Have you ever met Stuart Cobbler?” Carrie makes her archest ‘I’ve got a secret’ face, and digs into the hamper. “Creepy, shifty, hygiene-impaired, works at the comic shop on Lago Vista?”

I grimace, and Logan shrugs. “We buy our drugs from a higher-class entrepreneur,” he tells her. “Or at least a reasonably clean one. Cobb’s the black-eyeliner art-crowd version of Friedrich, pumpkin. Carrie combed through the old papers you got from Lloyd, and she found a link.”

“The ONLY link I’ve seen, so far.” Carrie locates a bag of smoked almonds, tears it open. “We know Lilly hired four companies to work the party. That awful band The Heavies. Security Solutions. The crazy Chinese pyrotechnic outfit Dick wouldn’t shut up about—what was it called? Big Bang? Plus Martha’s Kitchen, the caterer. NOBODY has ties to both Neptune High and those companies except Cobb. He’s in our grade, and he passes canapes for Martha part-time.” She pops a nut into her mouth, chews. “Plus he fits the profile, Veronica. I mean, EVERYTHING about him screams Latent Psycho.”

I remember Lilly saying we wouldn’t recognize the killer’s name, and nod. “OK, but what’s his motive? Just general rage, because he’s unpopular and dysfunctional?”

“He wants to gain access, via drugs, to our crowd.” She settles on one side, and Logan skirts around her to rummage in the basket. “I think he’s trying to steal Sean’s business. He also has a THING for Madison Sinclair; he’s constantly tracking her with this horrible, unblinking stare. If he were publicly rebuffed, by important people with dollars? I could see the guy snapping.”

“ANYBODY can snap, given the right set of conditions.” Logan pulls a sandwich out of the hamper, offers me half.

I accept, since who knows what garbage Loser Veronica last ate? “Before we run away with this theory, we need to check the guy’s alibi. If we can’t place him at the scene, why waste our time investigating?”

“We can do both at once, if we conduct a FIELD OPERATION,” Carrie says, gleeful. She grabs a jar of olives from Logan, closes her eyes as she eats; she must be high as fuck, to voluntarily consume food. “Let’s corner Cobb in his evil comic book lair, and force him to admit all. We can bring Madison along, to provide incentive.”

“Why would Madison agree?” I ask, around a big bite. The sandwich is good, pancetta and pesto, and I savor the taste, chewing slowly. “She seemed gung ho to help. But I doubt she’d enjoy being pimped out to a killer.”

“Oh ye of little faith.” Logan grins at me and flips his phone open. “I whistle, she’ll come, guaranteed. Besides, we’re not pimping, we’re distracting. Nobody’s leaving her alone with the guy to be creepily harassed.”

He dashes off a text, investing very little effort, and unwraps sandwich two. He smirks when his
phone beeps three bites in, and Carrie bursts out laughing. “We’re meeting at Celebrity Body Fitness in an hour,” he says. “Which is good, because I’m starving, and Ronica skipped breakfast.”

“Oh my God, there’s Brett!” Carrie quickly closes the olive jar and stuffs it back in the hamper. “I need to talk to him about our gig Friday at the Trident Pub. Back in a flash! No adventures without me!”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I say, as she hurries away.

“You’re plotting our escape as we speak, aren’t you?” Logan asks, flipping onto his back and resting his head on my lap. He gazes up at me with his smiling, dilated eyes; ready to do my bidding, trusting that we’re a team. The contrast with MY Logan, who’d be steeling himself to get dumped right now, is jarring.

“Are you kidding?” I chirp, clasping my hands prayer-style. “When she’s provided us with our only lead? I’m planning a PARADE!”

He snorts, and I stroke his messy hair back from his forehead. “Why IS Stuart Cobbler our only suspect? There are SO MANY awful people in this town.”

“Ah, you’re forgetting,” he says. “We took most of them out. The Fitzpatricks are in jail, so are Goodman and Meg Manning. Thumper’s dead. Stewart’s dead. Chardo’s off who knows where, probably doing crimes.”

“Albuquerque,” I supply, booping his nose with one finger. “What about Duncan?”

“Securely locked up,” he says. “And as a reminder, he offed Aaron in self-defense.”

“Hmmm. Well, there’s the Sharks Killer.” I lean back on my palms, gaze up at the clear, hot sky. “Was he ever caught?”

“Nope,” Logan says, with plosive emphasis. “But there haven’t been any known victims since Rick Braxton, and that was like a year ago. The cops were sure Lucky was responsible, but they never had enough evidence to formally charge him.”

“Lucky?” I glance down at him, surprised. “Not Beaver?”

“Beaver’s DEAD, Veronica,” he says. “Is he NOT dead, in other realities you’ve passed through?”


“Well, they found his body here,” Logan says. “Or part of it, anyway; washed up on the beach. It… came apart at the joints, from being in the water so long. But they called Dick in to ID what was left, and he said it was definitely Beav.”

“I flop onto my back; stare at the clouds in stunned silence. “Then he and Lucky must have been partners. Because Cassidy was TAUNTING me, Logan! I KNOW he was involved! You didn’t see him on the rooftop of the Grand the night he blew up the plane, PLAYING with me to maximize my pain. But you were there when he nonchalantly drugged that drink. So you must realize he was pathological.”

“Hey, I’m not arguing.” Logan digs a hand into the basket, removes an apple. Takes a bite. “Maybe he offed a bunch of people before he bought it. Maybe Lucky was his stooge. But the fact remains; zombies only cause boat massacres in gory pulp fiction.”
“Fine,” I snap. “Let’s move on to Lucky. He lost it at the community pool, as I recall, and chased you with a big knife. He went off on Beaver, too, that day at the car wash. The guy’s batshit nuts, and he fits the profile better than Cobb…military training includes rifle assembly and explosives. He also hates Neptune High, because they canned him.”

Logan shakes his head. “Lucky committed suicide by cop, Veronica, a week before school ended. Or rather, by security guard, due to a bad case of itchy trigger finger. On the plus side, after he died, the Sharks deaths stopped. Like they would, if he was responsible.”

“Ugh,” I say, defeated. He hands me a consolation turnover, and I sit up to take a bite. “So much for ghosts of murderers past. Let’s go ahead and follow Carrie’s plan. At least that way we’re sort of moving forward. I do have one more extremely left-field question, though.”

“You?” he presses a palm to his heart, widening his eyes. “Is this the seventh sign?”

“Oh ha ha,” I say. “Here goes; was I wearing a watch, the night of the boat party?”

He taps his lips with the apple core, thinking. “Unlikely,” he decides. “I mean, I’m not ABSOLUTELY sure. But you cut down on accessories when we started Justice-Leaguing regularly. Guy grabbed you, almost ripped an earring out, and you decided maybe style was secondary.”

Ouch. I press a palm to my ear, an instinctive flinch. “Do you remember what time we were supposed to board?”

“Oh, yeah. Five thirty.” He sits up, tosses his core in the basket, and brushes crumbs diligently off my chest. “You insisted on staying ‘til the end of graduation, because it was your ‘duty to support the whole class’. I waited in my car for like half an hour, then we fought when you finally made it out. I mean, I wasn’t sure something bad could still happen; I convinced Lilly to hire ex-Navy-SEALs as guards. But I wanted to be on board, just in case.

“Veronica was in no mood to fight fair, though. She started screaming at the top of her lungs about our unspoken issues, then pulled the car over so she could yell more effectively. After which, we segued into…you know, making out. It took a while to surface.”

“But that last half hour…you have no idea what she was doing in the gym?”

He shakes his head. “I assume watching the ceremony. I could ask, when she shows back up. But that does us no good today.”

“I just find it odd that Veronica would be blasé about a party thrown by Lilly.” I say. “In her honor, no less. Even if she’s mirroring my stated dislike, she’d RSVP no. She wouldn’t passive-aggressively delay.”

“There’s nothing passive about any version of you, honey buns,” he says, smirking. “And she WANTED to go. She was excited about the fireworks.”

I make a face, because I’m also a fan. “I just wonder if something happened at graduation you didn’t see…something that really upset her.”

He shrugs, and I start cleaning up our trash. “So, remind me, just in case it’s changed; how many people died?”

“Twenty-four,” he says. “Eight class members, the rest employees and crew. There were a handful of those firecracker guys below decks. They escaped in an inflatable motorboat before the hull blew.”
“And of the students present, the survivors were Lilly, Madison and Luke?”

His jaw clenches, but he keeps it together. “Yeah.”

“And when was the last time I showed up, playing detective, and made you answer all these awful questions?”

“That would be last Friday,” he says. “When we rode around in a red Cadillac terrorizing the countryside, and had world-class sex in the shower. Best afternoon of my entire year.”

I elbow him, because that statement is so sad, I’m not sure how to respond. He elbows me back, grinning. “Well at least I haven’t shifted to another branch of the slipstream,” I say, finally. “Since you remember my most recent visit. Which means we haven’t changed anything significant; I just goaded Lilly into planning a spectacle. On Friday, no one mentioned Navy SEALs. Or fireworks.”

“Lils went all out, trying to impress you,” he says, smile turning cynical. “She spent a month, planning.”

I shake off the fear that Lilly might be frozen, now, because she thinks the disaster’s her fault. “OK last question, because I see our intrepid co-conspirator heading back. Does Carrie know, here, that you’re aware of the slipstream?”

“Absolutely not,” he says. “She’s a PARTY friend. And regardless, I’d never tell anyone about you. They’d lock both of us up in that hospital with Duncan.”

“Good,” I say. “You’ve got a nice thing going now, with the coping, and laughing, and leaving the house to have picnics. Nobody’s crying, or wasted, or staring at the wall, which is a huge improvement. Don’t undermine that progress for slipstream business, it’s not worthwhile.”

“It’s BECAUSE of you and the slipstream that things are better,” he says, smiling faintly. “You lit a fire under me with your speech; it helped, to know you still had faith. And like you said, investigating is good for Veronica. It gives her purpose. I’m even a little glad she’s talking to Weevil, because at least she’s confiding in SOMEBODY.”

“Yeah, but she has GOT to quit smoking,” I say. “It’s SO disgusting. You too, Bob Marley, if you want me kissing that mouth.”

“I’ll try,” he says, stroking my lower lip with his thumb. “But you know how the road to hell is paved.”

Carrie flops down beside him, flushed and happy, effectively ruining the moment. “Ugh, Brett is the BEST,” she says. “Super talented, and so APPROACHABLE! You guys HAVE to come to the show.”

“We’ll be there with bells on!” I say, making metal fingers. “You know how we love nights on the town!”

She snorts, and flicks my arm. “Come on, you two recluses. Let’s do some stalking.”

“Fine,” Logan says, reclining with a sigh. “But I’m not speaking directly to Madison.”

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I insist on driving Logan’s green Range Rover, because both of them are high. I feel jittery, like I could use a cigarette, but screw that. I’m not my mother.
“So when you were poring over those papers,” I ask Carrie, while Logan fiddles with the radio dial, “did you take your usual meticulous notes?”

She makes a ‘duh’ face, and pulls a Moleskine from her fringed suede purse, as ‘Can’t Find My Way Home’ begins to play. “That’s all of it,” she says, passing the book forward. “The first page is a list of everyone on board, the second and third are a timeline. After that it’s mostly logistics, when each person arrived, what the survivors saw. A few witnesses told their stories differently in the document you showed me, Veronica; discrepancies between the two are underlined in red.”

“That would be the police transcripts of survivor interviews?” Logan asks Carrie, flipping through the notebook. He turns it on its side to look at an insert. “Which we’re not supposed to have?”

“Oh, relax,” she says, waving a dismissive hand. “Veronica knows she can trust me. That’s a copy, by the way, with all the scribblings and cross-outs fixed. You can keep it, if you want.”

I’m touched, in spite of my native suspicious tendencies. I mean, I knew already that Carrie goes to the mat for friends—she trashed her own reputation to punish Rooks. If she turned down a spot at Julliard, just to help Other Veronica cope, I wouldn’t be ENTIRELY surprised.

Unless…she was dating Dick, when he went down with the boat. Which would make Carrie’s reasons for investigating this crime somewhat similar to mine.

“Hey, let’s celebrate Carrie’s achievement with a spirited read-through!” Logan says, extra-perky. “I’ll volunteer my dubious dramatic gifts, since you’re driving.”

I shoot him a wry look and he waggles his brows, which makes me grin. “Go for it,” I say.

He clears his throat, theatrical. “List of party attendees; Lilly Kane, s,” he reads. “I assume the s means survived?”


“Cindy MACKENZIE?” I demand. “At an 09’er party? I’m gonna need an explanation for that.”

Logan shrugs. “She was helping Casey not flunk physics. They maybe halfway stayed friends after the Dick fiasco, so I’m guessing she was his plus one.”

“Dick dated Mackenzie?” Carrie asks, disbelieving. “The computer nerd? How did I miss this? I thought he was all about Meg for two years!”

“He was,” Logan assures her. “Dick and Mac were more…video-game-playing friends with benefits, one summer. It didn’t last, because Dick.”

She snorts, and he resumes reading. “Service Providers on boat. Crew, Eli Norman, Sal Efisio, Bob Hutchinson, all d. The Heavies, Leo D’Amato, s, Danny Arne, d, Martin Casmir, d.”

I hold up a hand. “Leo D’Amato, s? How’d he get off the yacht?”

“I told you,” Logan says. “The firecracker guys took the inflatable emergency raft. And D’Amato’s the kind of rat who ALWAYS scuttles off sinking ships.” He assesses my expression and says, “Nah, I never told Lilly. She remembered me hiring his band once, and thought I’d be pleased. Okay, moving on. Security Solutions, Danny Campos, Bruce Reitman, Paul Munoz, all d. Big Bang,
“And the m is for what? Missing?” I ask.

“They searched for the last two bodies with divers, but there was a storm a couple days later. The Coast Guard had to abandon efforts,” Carrie says. “Neither has turned up, so they’re both presumed dead.”

“Okay, timeline,” I say, dismissing the loose end. “According to the papers, when did the first personnel arrive?”

Logan flips pages. “That would be….3:30. Security showed up, inspected the whole yacht, and stationed a guy in the…does this say engine room?” Carrie nods, and he continues, “There was a man in the wheelhouse, and one on deck, who checked names off a list before letting people board. Caterers and firecracker techs arrived around 4:30. Band showed up at 5:10. Passengers began arriving at 5:35, 5:30 was specified. Boat left at 6:00.”

“And when did the shooting start?” I ask.

“There aren’t any time stamps, because nobody who survived kept track,” Carrie interjects. “But a couple reporters pieced together a sequence of events.”

“Guys in the wheelhouse were chlorine-gassed,” Logan reads. “Ditto everybody in the galley. Security guy in the engine room was shot, followed by most of the people up top. D’Amato claims he saw the guard on deck hit the shooter in the leg, before he took a bullet to the head; but there’s no corroborating evidence. When Madison spotted our suspect in the hall, he wasn’t visibly wounded. The men in the motorboat took off, the ship blew and began to sink. The coast guard arrived right after, and rescued everyone they could.”

“So our killer must be someone on that list,” I say. “Part of the security team, maybe; those three had the necessary skills. Or he could have boarded as a guest or crew member, possibly using a fake ID.”

“Not necessarily,” Carrie puts in. “There was evidence of tampering with the security company’s email, he could have hacked and changed the list. I wrote a note about it in the book.”

“Then I’m doubly glad we’re talking to Cobbler,” I say. “He may or may not be a suspect, but he’s definitely a Martha’s Kitchen insider. He’ll know the employees who worked that night, and he can give us more details.”

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The gym Madison frequents is predictably trendy. Celebrity Body Fitness has a sanitized ‘urban’ aesthetic; cement-grey walls fake-tagged with graffiti, sleek, chrome-bright machines. The weight area resembles a boxing ring, and is enclosed in a wire mesh cage.

There’s a railed walkway instead of a second floor, which features rows of doors; they’re labeled ‘Soul Cycle’, ‘Cleansing Yoga’ and ‘Pole Cardio’. Beneath and to the right are dressing rooms, with pink marble entryways. To the left, the Celebrity Body Juice Bar displays photos of celebrities, beside drinks that bear their names.

“So where are we supposed to meet Madison in this monument to bad taste?” I ask Carrie and Logan, pocketing our guest passes. They’re reading the drinks menu and snickering, talking shit about the people on the list.
“She’s taking a Pole Cardio class,” Logan says, straight-faced, which makes Carrie crack up again. “You want to watch while we wait?”

“There’s almost nothing I’d enjoy less,” I say. “Let’s spring for an overpriced beverage, we’ve got a clear view of the stairs.”

“Fair enough,” Logan says. “Which liquified vegetable would you like to consume? The Rupert Grint—carrot-ginger--contains the only two menu items I’ve ever seen you eat.”

I sigh, but thumbs-up. He lifts his brows at Carrie, who pretends to barf, then saunters to the register to order.

“So it’s you, right?” Carrie asks, as soon as Logan’s occupied. “FutureGhost Veronica? Swooping in to save the day?”

I shrug, and she laughs. “Sure it is,” she says. “You wouldn’t get high with us, and you took away Logan’s keys. The Veronica I know is a lot less judgmental, these days.”

“My father was Sheriff,” I say. “I got my first civic-responsibility lecture as soon as I understood words.”

“What’s MOST interesting,” she continues, disregarding this, “is that LOGAN seemed to recognize you, too. He shifted the conversation to the Boat Tragedy, right after you showed up; and believe me, that’s NOT something he enjoys discussing. You wouldn’t be keeping important secrets from your only confidante, would you?”

“Perish the thought,” I say. “When you tell me absolutely EVERYTHING. Like for example, where your REAL best friend Susan’s hiding, in this reality. And why you aren’t racking up bona-fides at Julliard.”

“I mention whatever might help Veronica,” she says, folding her hands. “Who currently has no idea how cozy you are with her boyfriend.”

“Does she know how cozy YOU’RE trying to get?” I ask, and her eyes widen in surprise. Then narrow, speculative.

“Sorry sugarpuss,” Logan says, sprawling onto the stool beside me, brows lifting as he recognizes tension. He picks up one of my hands, traces the lifeline with both thumbs. “No more ginger until they fly it in from Sri Lanka. Try to contain your disappointment.”

“Never mind,” I say, fake-regretful. “I hear the clatter of Lucite heels on the floor above. It won’t be long before Madison makes her scantily-clad appearance.”

“You can’t sit here,” the Prana-shirt-wearing bartender interjects, approaching while drying a cocktail shaker. His frown hints the ginger contretemps got tense.

“Sure I can.” Logan drops my hand to spread his arms along the bar. “Observe me, sitting. Go polish your little cup and chant or something, we’ll be gone before you get to ‘ohm’.”

“Paying customers only,” the guy persists, just as Madison clatters down the stairs. She’s in hot pants and a halter, as predicted, a towel draped coyly around her neck.

Logan braces for argument, a martial light in his eye. I put a restraining hand on his chest and say, “He TRIED to pay. If you can’t produce a palatable product on demand, how is that our problem?”
“Oh, for God’s sake,” Madison says, extracting a plastic tag from the depths of her bosom and handing it to Prana. “Wheatgrass and cayenne, small. Why are you such a loser, Veronica? It’s not like it’s HARD to avoid picking fights EVERYWHERE YOU GO.”

“If God wanted me to play nice, he’d make the human race less shitty,” I say. “Please tell me you have actual clothes stashed someplace.”

“Duh,” she says, accepting a tiny cup, tossing back the contents like they’re booze. “Think you can refrain from trashing the gym while I put them on? Where are we going, anyway?”

“You’re bait,” Carrie says, crossing her arms and studying Madison critically. “We’re fishing for deviants in their natural habitat.”

“You have GOT to be kidding me.” Madison tucks the tag back into her bra. “Are the deviants RICH, at least?”

The Scroll and Lotus holds up one end of a dilapidated strip mall, in the low-rent part of town. Inside, it’s dingy and poorly lit, stuffed display cases shoved against walls; a threadbare couch sags, uninviting, near the door. On the far wall is the cashier’s counter, where packaged action figures and comics hang by clothespins from a wire. Three guys sprawl in lawn chairs there, arguing.

“It’s all about leverage,” a skinny, brown-haired geek is ranting. He fixes his doughy co-worker with an unblinking dark stare, long upper lip stretching further as he leans forward, intent. “Like Raven’s theoretically the most badass Teen Titan. But she can’t USE her psychic power, because it makes her vulnerable. Trigon’s always waiting to whisper in her ear, every time she gets upset or tired, every time she lets her guard down. And he eventually gets under her skin…manipulates her subconscious. He holds all her strength in his hands, because he relentlessly, patiently wears her down. Eric Forrester does it too. Raven can control anyone—she convinced Nightwing he loved her, she put her SOUL into Starfire…but Trigon mumbles a few words, and she just completely SHUTS OFF.”

“I don’t fucking read DC,” Dough-boy scoffs. He’s pale, with light brown hair and a perpetual squint. “DC is shit since Marv Wolfman left. You want me to agree with your hypotheses, speak to me in a language I understand.”

“How about Scarlet Witch?” the third guy offers. He’s an acne-scarred redhead, beak-nosed and too tall. “She’s mega-hot and powerful, but, like, Dr. Doom totally controlled HER.”

“Young, because she had AMNESIA,” Machiavelli scoffs, flipping back his greasy, chin-length hair. “She didn’t WANT to escape, so it’s not the same. If she doesn’t know…if she’s not fighting it…that’s not a real show of power. As soon as she regained her memories, she hooked back up with Vision.”

“THAT would make a good movie,” Dough-boy says, pointing at his audience. “Why don’t they shoot THAT movie, instead of fucking stupid-ass Fantastic Four?”

“Because super hero films SUCK,” Machiavelli says. “Like if you don’t count the X-Men, the last good one was what? Batman Returns? When I was FOUR?”

“I liked the Incredibles,” beak-nose says, and Dough-boy throws a wadded napkin at him.

“It’s a fucking kid’s cartoon!” Machiavelli spits. “Like for INFANTS!”

“There aren’t even any boobs,” Dough-boy adds.
“And speaking of boobs,” I murmur, trying to urge Madison forward.

She resists, adjusting the neckline of her turquoise sundress upwards. “No WAY,” she says. “That guy is like a total creep. He’ll never buy that I’d look at him. I mean obviously, I have STANDARDS.”

“You don’t need to DATE him, Madison,” Carrie says, dismissive. “Just get his attention, so Veronica can question him about the Nautilus. Ask his advice or something. Guys like that love thinking they’re smarter than you.”

Madison rolls her eyes. “You all SO owe me,” she says. “I’m only doing this for Dick. And HE wouldn’t even be worth it, if he wasn’t tragically dead.”

We move en masse to the desk, the dynamic trio’s gazes fixed upon us; one vacant, one suspiciously squinting, one avid and frankly scary. “Hi boys,” Carrie says, favoring them with her barely-there smile. “My friend could use a little help.”

“Won’t know what to help WITH until your friend asks,” Machiavelli says, gaze never wavering from Madison. This must be the illustrious Stuart; he LOOKS like a guy who’d blow up a boat, if he failed to secure a date.

Madison’s gaze flickers over him, into the rafters. She shrugs and poses, poorly faking ‘seductive’. I’m worried we asked too much of her, just for a second. But then she finds her inner bitch, and frosts over. “So, like, my little sister is a total geek.” She manages to look him in the eye, then shifts her gaze to her nails. “I got all the looks, she got the brains. And she’s way into comics. She’s a massive brat, but it’s her birthday, and I’ll totally be grounded if I don’t buy her something good.”

“We’re all out of Betty and Veronica here,” Cobb says, making Dough-boy snicker. Beside me, Logan shifts and gathers, the dark part of him that senses danger waking. “Maybe try Wal-Mart?”

“Oh my God, you’re so FUNNY!” I go full Amber, to complement Madison’s persona. “I recognize you now! When I walked in the shop, I thought, that guy looks SO familiar, and I JUST realized, because you made a joke. You’re a waiter, right? You work for the catering company that does Logan’s mom’s parties!”

“Sometimes,” he shrugs, gaze sliding to Logan (who’s got his arms crossed and is staring, in a faintly anticipatory way). He seems to be aware we’re dating, and has enough brains to steer clear. “When I need extra cash.”

“Veronica,” Carrie chides, putting an arm around Madison, blithely ignoring her look of startled loathing. “Have some sensitivity for Maddie’s feelings. That caterer was on board Lilly’s yacht, the night…you know.”

“Oh my GOD!” I reiterate, covering a big fake gasp with my hand. Logan’s watching me now, fighting a smile, but the Three Amigos are buying my act. “Maddie, I’m SO SORRY! I SERIOUSLY don’t want to traumatize you! Or you, either, Comic Shop Guy! Were you THERE?”

“I was supposed to be,” he says, settling back, like he thinks narrowly escaping gives him cred. “But I got sick. They had to call in a replacement.”

“You didn’t get sick!” vacant redhead protests. “You went to see the new Spiderman movie! I remember because I couldn’t get a ticket. And you only bought one, and wouldn’t take me.”

Cobbler gives him a look so malevolent he takes a step back. Says, “Yeah, that’s right. Donna was working at the candy counter, and I wanted to talk to her alone. Thanks for telling all these people
“You’re not gonna say anything, right?” Dave implores. “Like if he’d actually gone to work, he’d probably be dead.”

“Oh no WAY,” I say. I rest my hand coyly on Logan’s arm. “Those society parties are so BORING…sorry, baby…and you’re, like, totally the funniest when you’re passing the canapes. I would never!”

“I would,” Carrie says. “I mean, you basically sent that poor bastard who replaced you to his death.”

“Randy?” Cobbler scoffs; but his reptilian focus shifts from Madison to Carrie, and lingers. “He was a waste of flesh anyway. Never paid his bills on time, showed up for work maybe one day out of three. Trust me, the guy’s not missed at Martha’s Kitchen.”

“Compassionate!” Carrie says. “What, did he owe you money?”

“Sure,” Cobbler agrees, like he thinks he sounds genial. “But I cut him slack. I can be generous, with the right kind of friend.”

Logan uncoils from the fake-casual lean he’s been doing against a shelf. Cracks his neck, and says, “Hey Maddie, you think your sister might like to meet Kirsten Dunst? Instead of ruining her eyes, reading boring crap about mutants?”

“Duh,” Madison says. “If she doesn’t I do, and I’ll bribe her to come along.”

“Problem solved.” He waves a grandiose hand towards the door. “Let’s go somewhere interesting, just for a change of pace.”

He herds us out, a tense and lanky sheepdog, and sprawls in the front passenger seat, pressing a thumb between his eyes. Madison flops into her spot, crosses her arms tight, and says, “Oh my GOD! I need a shower just from TALKING to that guy.”

“I wouldn’t worry,” Logan says, not uncovering his face. “Carrie successfully diverted his attention. She’s now the probable victim of his upcoming murder/suicide.”

“Oh, whatever.” Carrie rolls down her window and lights a cigarette. “I can handle Stuart Cobbler. Besides, I got his full-of-holes alibi, and the name of his replacement, didn’t I?”

“No, RONICA learned his alibi,” Logan corrects. “And she did it in a skillful and entertaining way that didn’t draw focus. Also, he has a ticket and witnesses to back up his movie claim, so how is his story full of holes?”

“Because he could have walked into the movie theater, and right out the exit,” I say, driving away from the lot. “Then showed up at the boat with a Randy Johnson ID. The staff wouldn’t have been surprised to see him, and no one on board who knew the real Randy lived.”

“See?” Carrie says lightly, flicking ash. “I DID help.”

“Ballsy is good.” Logan leans back and closes his eyes. “But poor strategy is dangerous to everyone on your team. No wonder you and Dick hit it off. He never learned to control himself, either.”

“You know what?” Carrie demands. “I don’t have to listen to this. Veronica, pull the car over. I’ll go into that coffee shop and call a cab.”
“It’s not the best neighborhood,” I warn, but Carrie yanks her door open, so I park.

She sticks her middle finger in Logan’s face, grips the cigarette between her lips, shoulders her giant purse, and storms away. “It’s not like you could do this without my help,” she yells over her shoulder, turning her hand gesture on a car that almost hits her. “Show a little gratitude!”

We all watch her slam into the shop. Logan murmurs, “Mars, you have the most delightful friends.”

Madison reaches across the back seat, tugs Carrie’s door shut. “You leave me anywhere near here, Veronica, and I’ll say I saw you at the pharmacy buying Valtrex.”

“Wow, your dad gets elected Mayor ONE time, and you start throwing your weight around.” I ease out into traffic. “You helped, I provide cab service. Where do you want to be dropped?”

“Home,” Madison says. “I wasn’t kidding about that shower. And Logan’s right, Carrie’s an idiot.”

“THANK you,” Logan says, making a ‘see?’ gesture. “I wish you weren’t such a bitch, Madison, because you consistently agree with everything I say.”

“Get over yourself, Logan. We’re not in high school anymore.” She settles back, hugging herself tighter. “That guy did it, didn’t he?” she asks, after a long moment of pensive silence. “He’s the one who killed all those people, for, like, no reason at all.”

“Maybe,” I say. “Whether he did or not, though? He’s wrong in the head. Don’t buy anything from him, and stay off his radar.”

“Since when do you care?” Madison asks, looking out the window.

“Since you joined my team,” I say. “I don’t want anyone to suffer EVER AGAIN, just because they tried to help me.”

Logan turns to study my face, sensing something behind the words. He waits while I locate the street to the Mayor’s mansion, then says, “All of us who help you know the risks, Ronica. Give us credit for CHOOSING to do it anyway.”

“I’m not doing this because I admire either of you,” Madison says. She waits while I park, then opens her door. “I just don’t want to ever feel helpless like I did on that boat again.”

I turn to look at her, and a brief, wordless understanding passes between us. I’ve lived the same sentiment every day since Shelly’s party. It makes me who I am. “Thanks,” I say.

She nods, and disembarks. Heads rapidly up the sidewalk, and is let in by security. She never uncrosses her arms.

I meet Logan’s gaze, once she’s out of view, and he smiles, lopsided. “Are you still high?”

He shakes his head, and I say, “Switch with me, then. I want to make some notes in Carrie’s book before I slip, so you and V don’t neglect any leads. Make sure you read these, after I’m gone. They’ll focus your investigation.”

Logan nods, gets out of the car, drums a tattoo on the hood as he walks around. I climb over the center divider, and dig through my bag for a pen. He navigates the neighborhood smoothly while I jot ideas, then pause, tapping the pen against my lip.

“Cindy Mackenzie,” I say. “You know she and Madison were switched at birth?”
He glances my way, brows rising. “Are you serious?” He huffs a laugh. “Only in Neptune.”

“Was there ever any proof Mac was up to something nefarious?” I ask. “Because today is the first I’ve heard of her being on the boat.”

He shrugs. “I never heard yacht party details from other realities,” he says. “I remember you and Mac were cobra-mongoose for a while, but she wasn’t on my radar. Plus, Dick was still in free-fall, with Carrie along for the ride, when he hit the dust. You just saw an example of the drama she brings; he could NOT have handled side action.”

“Oh yes he could have,” I correct. “I doubt it was a relationship, per se, but he was definitely banging Madison. She glared at him the way Norris glared at me, throughout the debutante ball.”

“Ahh, right. The first of many painful public scenes that destroyed my credibility. Video of me dancing with a black eye, soaked in punch, aired nationally.” He smiles, thumb stroking the wheel; but unlike his other smiles today, this one’s bittersweet. “I don’t regret it, though. I enjoyed all my adventures with you.”

I start to make a quip like, yeah, adventure’s my middle name, and then it hits me.

The first time I appeared in this reality, he said, “At least we had our dance.” Like dancing was our last interaction, and a reunion came as a surprise.

If I’ve been missing from Boat Logan’s life since the debutante ball, it means graduation’s happening soon. Maybe tomorrow. And if I turn up here after that, well…I’ve failed to change his fate.

Logan figured out before I did that this is the moment of truth. And he’s showing his faith in my ability to fix things, by saying goodbye.

I think about telling him to steer clear of Carrie; to chase Weevil away from Veronica, and talk things out. I think about saying I love him, so he hears it one more time. That’s not what this Logan needs, though. If I make it harder for him to let go, he’ll suffer, once I’m gone.

I extend my hand, palm up, and he takes it, threading our fingers together. I press a kiss to his knuckles, and the tender corner of his mouth indents. “I never thought I’d respect anyone as much as I do my dad,” I say. “But then there was you.”

“Veronica, you don’t have to…” he begins, and I interrupt.

“Just let me, Logan, okay? While I’m able to get the words out, confessions aren’t my forte. I didn’t think I’d trust you, ever, because you can be violent and cruel. But you’ve been my partner in this slipstream insanity since before you knew the truth. You helped every time I needed you, and never disappointed. So just know… the faith I have in you is EARNED. I think you’re heroic, and your bravery’s intrinsic. It’s not due to me.”

He studies me, intent, and I add, “I’m going to search the time streams for Mac, now, so I can figure out what she’s hiding. There’s a piece of the puzzle missing, and I think maybe she’s it. But I want you to remember—most of the time, when things got tough, I couldn’t have coped alone. So thanks, belatedly, for always having my back.”

“It was an honor and a privilege,” he says, with a hint of his old bleak irony. “Now run along and save the world, angel face. I can handle things, here.”

I nod, squeeze his fingers, close my eyes. Ask whatever power it is that yanks me between universes to take me to Mac, before graduation day. To help me change our fate.
And with a wrench, the slipstream obliges.
Kiss Ass While You Bitch, So You Can Get Rich

Chapter Notes

Happy birthday to disdainfullady! Because you like banter, have the chapter where all the smart characters try to one up each other. :-) 

THREAD THIRTY THREE INVERTS

I’ve declared battle against something more enormous than I can comprehend.

It’s like getting lost in the ocean, struggling with the undertow; only the ocean is comprehensible, and this isn’t. I’m not a grain of sand against the slipstream, or even an atom. I’m a possibility. A quark.

I struggle, trapped by forces that buffet me, thrusting me towards a goal I can’t fathom or see. I think of Mac before graduation, with the red stripe in her hair, still showing hints of baby-face, looking to me for advice. I remember the moment she said, “I wouldn’t let VIOLENT crimes go unpunished”, and everything shifts sideways.

I’m steering suddenly, moving with the current, riding a wave. Not in control, but not about to be dismembered. I tilt and tumble, through a thousand possibilities heavy as graves. And with a lurch, land in the Neptune High Cafeteria.

Mary is slopping meatloaf with gravy onto the plate in my hands. Wallace is beside me with a dinner roll in his mouth. His tray holds two servings of everything, and cupcakes besides.

He jerks his head towards the door and I follow, wondering what happened to Pirate Points and digestive integrity. The sun outside is blinding-bright--it takes me a minute to scout my surroundings as we settle at a table.

Jackie and Enbom are present and living, as are Shelly, Ashley, Rams, Madison and Kate. No takeout’s in evidence, nor are Logan, Bodie or Dick. Wallace divides his food with Jackie, who smiles thanks; I set down the tray and dig for my phone, as he asks a question about France. He nods when I hold up a finger, and I wander off to the nook beside the stairs, so I can bitch out my boyfriend in peace.

“You’ve reached Logan, with today’s inspirational message,” my true love’s canned voice informs me, and I roll my eyes so hard my ocular muscles hurt. “Surfing is very much like sex. It always feels good, no matter how many times you’ve done it. Paul Strauch.”

Because of COURSE he picks now to fuck off with the idiot crew, when the fate of everyone we love hangs in the balance.

“So I just rode the slipstream here to play Cassandra; which, to speak your slacker language, was less easy than tow-in-surfing Jaws.” Anger crackles through my voice, and the words come fast, staccato. “Only you’re playing hooky, graduation’s got to be SOON, and best-laid plans, etcetera. God DAMN it, Logan!

“Look into a guy named Stuart Cobbler as a possible shooter, he’s in our graduating class. I’m
thinking he’ll bring a buddy along-- the killer was walking normally, after catching a bullet in the leg. Hire Navy SEAL security guards, and stock that stupid boat with gas masks. Warn the SEALs about chemical weapons, and tell them to watch out for hackers. Also, research two Martha’s Kitchen employees named Randy Johnston and Tamara Welch...they went missing, and their bodies weren’t found. Plus make sure MULTIPLE inflatable motorboats are on board, so we don’t end up re-creating Titanic. It’s too late now to prevent the boat party, babe. We’re moving on to damage control.”

I snap the phone shut and spot Weevil, leaning against a flagpole, drinking a Pepsi. I guess he couldn’t quit his cronies because they sprawl nearby, nudging each other and guffawing. He seems disinterested—not shunned, but not interacting. I wonder if he’s left the gang yet, or if he’s still trying to protect them.

I toss an acorn into his shoulder, jerk my head sideways when he looks. He approaches, amused. “You rang?” he asks, pitching his soda into the trash can.

“Your mother lives at a vineyard in Napa,” I say. “I don’t know which one. She’s senior enough to make hiring decisions, but no clue as to her job description. I have yet to hear back about your dad. The guy I hired to check angles may have disappeared.”

“I bet it’s The Three Brothers,” Weevil says, musing. “The vineyard, I mean. My grandma kept some labels in her kitchen drawer; I found them the other day, when I was looking for her pain pills. I thought she tried the wine at work and liked it, or something. I was gonna get her a bottle for Xmas. Go all out, you know? Since this might be her last.”

I nod, but I’m scanning past him…my time is limited, and he’s not why I’m here. “I don’t see Cindy Mackenzie, and I need to talk to her, pronto. Got any leads?”

“Is this the Cindy that tutors for cash?” he asks, scratching the back of his neck. “Cause she just helped me with algebra like fifteen minutes ago. She works lunches, at the far end of the court.”

“Bingo,” I say. “You’re a champ. I’ll check out the Three Brothers soon, assuming I don’t die. You deserve better than a lifetime of washing cars for minimum wage.”

“Assuming you don’t DIE?” Weevil asks, focusing on the wrong words. He follows me across the court, instead of fucking off back to his hoodlum friends. “Of what? Boredom, cause you been dating Echolls too long?”

I fake-laugh, but don’t slow down, because I’ve spotted Mac. She’s pocketing a wad of bills extended by Kelvin Moore, and gesturing for Caz to sit. He seems to be next in line.

“Tutoring’s lucrative during finals week,” I mutter.

“Tell me about it,” Weevil says. “She charged me fifty bucks for half an hour. But she explains real clearly without pissing me off…and you know I promised my grandma.”

FUCK. I stop dead. Algebra tutoring, cupcakes, France. Logan surfing, so he’s not around. And I’m stuck here at Neptune High, eating cafeteria food with Wallace and Jackie.

Lucky Dohanic committed suicide by cop a week before school ended, as Boat Logan just helpfully reminded me. And that must be when I am, now; meaning literal bullets are about to fly.

My thoughts narrow down to one-- protect Mac. Because I’m sure, my Spidey Sense INSISTS, that Mac turning up on the boat is critically significant. Somehow, Cindy Mackenzie holds the key. So I take off at a run for her table, and tackle her to the ground.
Weevil follows--much like Logan, he’s an overprotective idiot--then just stands there staring, like I’m a few bananas shy of a split.

“GET DOWN!” I hiss, making his eyebrows quirk. “Lucky’s headed over here with a GUN! Well, technically, it shoots blanks; but those things can kill too, if you’re close enough to the barrel!”

Caz staggers back, making angry-incredulous face. Beneath me, Mac snaps, “Veronica, what the hell? Have you completely lost it? Get OFF!”

Weevil crouches to help me sit, frowning as he scouts the yard. Shrugs eloquently at the lack of mayhem.

“You have gone NUTS,” Caz says, pointing an accusing finger. “I mean, even more than usual! This is exactly what happened to Sabrina. She studied for three days for finals, without sleeping, and at the end…”

Gunshots rend the air. Caz screeches, and dives belatedly behind a trash can.

I spot Lucky through the general chaos, climbing onto the 09’ers regular table; he’s waving a handgun and kicking trays, screaming about animals. I see Wallace behind him, shielding Jackie, Madison in the staircase nook, panting. Shelly, too scared for once to even scream.

An unearthly quiet descends, as everyone tries not to attract attention.

“You KNEW,” Mac whispers, breath of sound. “How the hell did you predict this? And why save ME?”

I press my finger emphatically to my lips. Wallace almost got shot, because Jackie made noise.

She raises her brows, as if to say, ‘we WILL be talking later’. At which point, my phone rings.

It’s Surfin’ Bird, loud and abrasive in the breathless quiet. Logan, probably, calling me back. Mac grabs the phone from my pocket and switches it off, but she’s too late. I’ve drawn the notice of the unhinged predator.

“This ain’t good,” Weevil mutters as Lucky approaches, eyes bugged out in a parody of curiosity. He’s got on head-to-toe denim—why didn’t I remember that?—and the jacket’s stained along the lapel. Looks like he’s indulged in some ultra-violence already.

“Veronica Mars!” Lucky says, voice cracking. “YOU know why I have to do this, right?”

“Because you helped Beaver kill the other Sharks?” I ask, making Mac do a double-take. “And you want to goad some poor cop into ending the guilt?”

“I DIDN’T HELP!” he screams, knocking Mac’s soda off the table. It sprays a whimpering Caz. “He framed me, but nobody SEES! Nobody CARES, because I killed so many people in Tikrit. I’m too dirty already to EVER get clean!”

Lucky gestures wildly with the gun, and Weevil jerks like he’s about to leap. I put a restraining hand on his arm. “There was supposed to be an APOCALYPSE by now, Veronica! He said it would wash away my SINS!”

“Stewart Manning is an insane person,” I say, softly. “If you’re not the Sharks Killer, you don’t HAVE any sins.”
“My life’s gone to shit,” Lucky says, instead of responding. He picks up Caz’s soda-stained notebook and waves it. “I lost my job, I lost my girl. HE’S dead, so nobody will EVER know what he did. And Goodman….” Lucky breaks off, begins to cry. “And I can’t stop seeing the incendiaries. The way Tucker burned up in that Humvee. I have a bullet hole in my ass cheek, did you know?”

“What did Beaver say to you at the car wash?” I ask. “What did he tell you that made you cry?”

“I’m next on the list,” Lucky whispers. “And I deserve it, because I’m unclean. And even though everybody might know SOMETHING bad happened to me, I’ll NEVER, EVER be able to tell my side.” He snuffles, throws the notebook. “I should have died in Iraq. I’ve been living on borrowed time.”

The sentence ends on a sob, followed by a sharp electronic beep. Mac’s pressing buttons on my phone.

Unfortunately, Lucky realizes this. The gun swings in her direction. “Who are you calling?” he screams. “WHO?”

“I’m letting the police listen,” she says, which strikes me as suicidal until she adds, “So they realize you’re innocent. So the plan designed to frame you fails.”

“You would do that for me?” he asks, gun wavering. “But no. I’m shooting at the school.” His grip firms, and he aims. “Nobody ever lives, once they shoot at a school. You should NEVER have…”

Weevil tackles him from my left, then, and the gun discharges. The bullet lodges in the rock wall six inches from Caz, who starts to cry.

“I hate to be a buzzkill, but those aren’t blanks,” Mac says grimly, as we watch the guys struggle.

It isn’t a fair fight. Weevil’s honed his skills on Logan’s face, and he’s not going down as easy as pre-Krav-Maga Wallace. He rolls quickly astride, and lands some good, brutal punches before Lucky bashes him in the head with the gun.

Weevil falls over, groaning, blood trickling from his temple; Lucky scrambles away. “YOU HURT ME!” he screams, struggling to his feet.

And that’s when the school security guard shoots him in the back.

Lucky gets off one shot into Caz’s backpack as he falls over, bullet through the heart, dead before he hits. A bubble of blood pops, releasing his last breath.

Then he’s gone. It was fated.

XXXXX

The cops clear the school, because Lucky’s rant involved bomb threats. We’re relocated to the YMCA down the street while they bring in the dogs, and the cops start taking witness statements.

Logan calls during the sleepy-eyed deputy’s briefing; I get dirty looks from all corners, and have to send him to voicemail.

Mac’s waiting her turn across the room, Weevil sprawled beside her, not really talking but clearly glad of the company. I decide I can’t afford delays. So I approach Becky James, as she ends her latest bout of counselling/book-research, and make with the fake sniffles.
“Hey, you mind if my friends and I wait outside?” I rub my nose hard, to make it red. “I’ve got a really bad mold allergy, and this gym must be TEEMING with it.”

“Do you need a nurse, Veronica?” she asks, in the smooth I’m-so-concerned voice that sets my teeth on edge. “Is this allergy anaphylactic?”

“Once I can breathe again, I’ll be dandy!” I flash my perkiest smile, and she sighs and relents; she doesn’t need me, because pickings are ripe. I reflect that as bad as the slipstream’s occasionally gotten, at least dad’s never dated HER, here.

Wallace sees me headed towards the door and follows, motioning for Jackie to join us. I gesture with my chin at Weevil, and he whispers in Mac’s ear. She smiles, somewhat sardonically, but lets him pull her to her feet.

Jackie immediately starts pacing the lot, arms crossed; she’s frazzled. “I couldn’t reach Lilly,” she says. “God, I’m still shaking. This is awful. I want a cigarette.”

“At least you were hidden,” Wallace says, leaning against the wall and rubbing his hands over his face. “Veronica ran off where I couldn’t reach her, then started an ARGUMENT with the crazy man. Thank God you’re OK, V, or Logan would have KILLED me.”

“Nobody was gonna die while I was around,” Weevil says, sitting on a bus bench and squinting up at the clouds. “I got experience dealing with this type of situation.”

“You should try out for the football team.” Mac settles beside him, nudges his shoulder. “That was a textbook-perfect tackle.”

“The guy barely even fought back,” Weevil says, dismissive. “I think he just wanted somebody to listen for once, while he talked.”

“I can’t believe Cassidy said such awful things to Lucky.” Mac shakes her head, planting her elbows on the back. “I mean, I knew he was having issues, in the months leading up to his death. But MURDER? I’d believe cutting, or suicide. Just not…Veronica, he was sixteen.”

“Some people are born bad.” I shrug, because this is one area where I’m not forgiving. “And they escape punishment because others give them the benefit of the doubt. Is that why you wouldn’t tell me about the Casablancas shenanigans? Were you protecting Beaver? Maybe because you saw him as a…friend?”

“No. I just didn’t like the way you ‘asked’.” She makes air quotes, not bothering to sit up straight. “Look, I swear I didn’t know anything about murder plots, I wouldn’t have kept that to myself. I thought all the crime in their house was strictly white collar.”

“Crime like Big Dick socking ill-gotten gains away in offshore accounts, which Beaver then pilfered?” I ask.

She purses her lips, studying me. “That’s one example,” she says. “Kendall had a hand in the cookie jar, too. Dick knew the accounts existed, but he didn’t raid them.”

And they all would have lived dysfunctionally ever after, I think…except Big Dick shifted the money. Thus forcing Kendall (back) to a life of crime for steady income.

Weevil turns towards Mac, suppressing a smile; the look of admiration in his eyes is unmistakable. “Little Dick cares about all the wrong things,” he says. “He’s never needed cash, so he thinks he never will. Some of us have more respect for the art of creative finance.”
“He’s rapidly learning respect now,” Mac counters, lifting her brows. One of her dimples indents, negating the coolness of her tone. “The family assets are frozen, and his trust fund’s not that big.”

“Man, is there ANYBODY in Neptune who’s not corrupt?” Wallace demands, sliding down to sit on the ground. “I wonder whether I’d be an optimist still, if we’d stayed in Chicago.”

“You’re ALWAYS going to be an optimist,” Jackie says, looking at him sideways. “You just can’t help yourself.”

“So if that’s one example of Casablancas corruption, what were the others?” I ask. “Because Big Dick’s pyramid scheme is pretty much common knowledge.”

“Well,” Mac says, “Kendall alone was a riddle wrapped in an enigma. I’m curious, though, Veronica. Why is it so important to you all of a sudden that we join forces? Because I figured you had me marked down for the role of evil nemesis. And I’ve seen how you act with scapegoats. The truth’s less important to you than making them suffer.”

“You have information I need,” I say. “And I won’t let a little bad blood prevent me from getting it. Besides, I never thought you were EVIL. You run scams to make a profit; you’re not a monster like Beaver.”

“He didn’t like you much either,” Mac retorts, dryly. “He never explicitly SAID so. But when he was around, conversations about you tended to turn nasty.”

Wallace winces, and I shoot him a silencing look. “Beaver liked to watch me suffer,” I say. “He was obsessed, and he played a long game. He tried to drug and rape me twice, and the attempts were a year apart.”

“He WHAT?” Weevil surges up to standing. Curls one hand into a fist, presses it into the other palm. “That guy’s lucky he’s dead.”

“Man, I SAW it,” Wallace says, giving Weevil a look of accord, which calms him enough to make him settle back down. “Beaver wasn’t even bothered. He just sat there eating popcorn, waiting for her to drink. I know you think Veronica’s a snob, Mackenzie…hell, some of MY friends are iffy. And I keep quiet on the topic, because V doesn’t want people up in her business. But it doesn’t sit right. This girl HAS to be careful who she hangs with—a lot of folks want to hurt her.”

“Some of your friends. Meaning me?” Jackie tugs her jacket more tightly around herself. “I wish you’d bothered to give me a hint, instead of letting Veronica and I spat all year. It wasn’t ‘til the night of the Deb Ball that I finally saw past the Mean Girl schtick.”

“I was a little preoccupied,” Wallace says, with a hint of sarcasm. “I got a new brother and a new dad in the space of a few months, and Rashard tried to frame me for his hit-and-run.”

Also, you stopped thinking with your big brain, when your eyes landed on Jackie, I want to add. But don’t, because stay on target.

“Did Dick ever tell you about Sally?” Mac asks, apropos of nothing. I turn to look at her.

“Is that another one of his girlfriends?” Wallace asks. “Because no offense or anything, but there have been a LOT. I don’t keep track.”

“She was a childhood friend of Cassidy’s,” Mac corrects, sardonic. “They reconnected in France, and some drug-related scandal ensued. I don’t know the details, but I’m pretty sure she died. It’s why he and Bettina left.”
“You know, I thought Senior Year was gonna be sunshine and waves, and hot surfers and good vibrations,” Jackie says. “But seventy-five percent of this town’s population gives me the fucking creeps.”

“Technically, Beaver’s part of the landscape, now,” I say. “But point taken.”

“They don’t get much deader,” Mac agrees. “Dick showed up at my house in the middle of the night, drunk off his ass, after he had to identify the body. He said it was more decomposed than your average late-stage zombie.”

Jesus, I will NEVER understand Dick Casablancas. I don’t care how badly he’s downward-spiraling, in the wake of his personal crises. Juggling Mac, Madison and Carrie Bishop is like drawing a bullseye on his chest and begging them to shoot. No wonder Berkeley Mac wasn’t convinced it was love.

“Good riddance,” Weevil opines. “Some people’s finest moment is when they turn into fertilizer.”

“All right, you know what?” Mac glances at Wallace, the faintest trace of amusement playing around her mouth. “Let’s stop with the testimonials, and declare bygones. I’m sure you only want information, Veronica, but that tackle you just did shows your heart’s in the right place. And it’s not going to HURT anything if I gossip about who? Beaver? Kendall? Big Dick? Or did you want details on the favors I’VE been doing, for people you’re too cool to help?”

“Wow, I get to choose?” I ask, to cover my shock. Because Mac’s big secret is that she’s doing FAVORS? Meaning we’re LITERALLY playing spy vs. spy, and I’m the bad one? “Indulge my curiosity, and tell all.”

My phone rings, Surfin’ Bird again, and I leave it in my pocket. No way am I interrupting THIS conversation.

“Hmm, well I guess we can skip the Rise and Fall of Big Dick,” she says. “Beaver told me once he didn’t hide his tracks well, so it’s no surprise he got caught. I can tell you Kendall was up to more than just trophy-wifing. Hiding out, maybe, or running some con. A guy called the house once looking for ‘Lacey’, and she acted like it was no big deal. But she changed the number afterwards, and invested in a security gate. Plus, as stated, she was ripping off anyone who ventured too close.”

“Was she stashing cash for a rainy day?” I ask. “Or using it for real estate speculation?”

“Oh, you heard about that?” She smiles. “No, that’s why CASSIDY was stealing his dad’s money. I’m sure the sideline would have ended in tears, if he’d lived to see Incorporation happen. As it stands, his properties are smack in the ‘Escape From New York’ region outside the city walls.”

“I’m sure Kendall cried enough for both of them, when the money dried up,” I say. “The sole emotion I know she feels is greed.”

“Good one,” Mac says. “Kendall’s no Mensa scholar, but she’s got a sharp eye for opportunity. She played on Beaver’s insecurities like a pro, too; I think she ENJOYED sending him into a tailspin. He mostly locked his door and got stumbling-blackout high after one of her petty mind games.”

“Stumbling-blackout high?” I ask, something queasy shifting in my gut.

“Yeah, I think he was taking roofies. Dick knew about it, he’s the one who told me—it distressed him that Beaver was so fucked up. And the Woody trial didn’t help…Cassidy read about it so much Bettina took him out of the country. I’m pretty sure he even hacked into the sealed evidence that
wasn’t released to the press. Dick felt sorry for him, so he kept the drug use quiet. Is this the stuff you want to know?”

So Beaver was a hacker. Well that’s one mystery solved…he must have sent the text from dad’s phone. “Is there more?”

“That’s all I know about Cassidy. But I can recover wiped internet activity from his laptop, if Dick brings it to me. Help you figure out what he was up to, right before he died.”

“Wouldn’t the cops have done that already?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “Doubtful. Beaver had skills. Unfortunately for him, my skills are better.”

I extract my phone, text Dick. Put it away without waiting for a response. “Signed, sealed, delivered, as soon as he and my wayward boyfriend return. Now, what’s all this you were saying earlier, about favors?”

“You’ll have to be more specific,” Mac says. “I’ve been doing this gig for almost a year.”

Weevil smothers a laugh with his fist, and I pin him with a look. “Sorry, V. But damn, I like a confident girl.”

“You just want free math tutoring,” Mac accuses, favoring him with a faint smile.

“I’m not saying I wouldn’t take it,” he allows, and I throw a wadded up napkin at him.

“Flirt on your own time,” I say. “We’re focusing, here. Namely, on whether any of Mac’s favors involve Lilly Kane’s upcoming boat party.”

Mac crosses her arms and sits up straight, studying me with dawning respect. “You know, I’m starting to think I’ve underestimated you.”

“Many do,” I say, flatly. “I’m just so darn adorable. Now, you were saying?”

“I have several clients who want to attend,” she tells me. “I can’t name names, it’s against my professional ethics. But I’ve secured them dates from the pool of invited guests.”

“Are you aware that someone called Logan, and threatened to murder everyone who showed?” I lie, through my teeth.

“Please say you’re joking,” Wallace demands, as Jackie leans forward, intent.

“I am not,” I tell them. “Go ahead and ask your BFF. We’ve been trying to keep this on the down low, and pressure Lilly to cancel the party. But she won’t budge. I’m not feeling warm fuzzies, at the moment, about the safety of those who show up.”

“This is why you were acting crazy,” Jackie says, fully focused now. “The night of the deb ball, in the limo. You’re trying to PROTECT people.”

“You saw Lilly dig in her heels,” I say. “Logan’s been working on her for a month, but she refuses to do more than hire security. I don’t have proof that something bad’s going down, but my instinct is to take this threat seriously. I don’t want anyone HURT, if some crackpot sneaks on board.”

I give Mac a pointed look, and she flushes. “You want the names of my clients.”

“I want the name of EVERYONE who might have a motive to make that phone call,” I say. “Be it
your clients, a service provider, an invited guest. I’ve had quite a few death threats in the last few years, and funny thing…NONE were hoaxes.”

“All my clients are women,” Mac tells me. “You said it was a guy who called Logan.”

“I’m chasing smoke,” I reply. “I can’t discard any information as worthless. Surely you, the queen of the logical conclusion, can sympathize.”

“I SERIOUSLY doubt these silly and not-too-bright girls are a threat,” Mac says. “But I DO know Luke Haldemann’s being blackmailed. And I hear he’s one of the lucky guests. If the person making threats isn’t one of your MANY haters, maybe Luke’s the target.”

“Does this blackmail have anything to do with baseball?” I ask.

Mac opens her mouth to respond, and her phone blares. She checks the display, holds up a finger, and wanders off to answer.


“You know the answer’s yes,” he says.

“Got a pen?” I call to Weevil. He pulls one out of his pocket and tosses it; I write the kittenfancy email across Wallace’s palm. “Send a message to this address. Write down everything we just discussed about the boat party threats and Luke Haldemann, and say I told you to send the mail. Can you do that for me? TODAY?”

“Piece of cake,” he says, studying the words. “Kitten Fancy. Why does this sound familiar?”

“Wash the address off your hand,” I say. “And don’t tell ANYONE.”

He nods, skeptical but willing. I pull out my phone to listen to Logan’s messages, before it’s too late.

I’m still navigating the automated menu when the Green Range Rover squeals into the lot. Logan, Dick and Bodie pile out, look around frantically; Dick spots us, points. Logan comes towards me at a run.

“Ronica!” he says, voice rough. He picks me up and spins me, gripping so tight it hurts. “Jesus, I heard on the radio. Are you OK?” He feels down my arms, as if checking for damage. “I’ve gotten six different phone calls. Lucky pointed a gun at your fucking FACE?”

“I’m FINE,” I say. “Jesus, Dick, check your texts, I wrote you like five minutes ago. Listen, Pooh Bear—I was just telling everybody about the ANONYMOUS PHONE CALL you got, from the asshole who threatened to shoot up Lilly’s party. They want to help. Mac says Luke Haldemann is being blackmailed, and she planned to sneak girls on the boat as your friends’ dates. And Lucky told us Beaver framed him for the Sharks killings, right before he got shot.”

“Ronica, slow down.” He cradles my head between both hands. “I’m still working my way back from blind panic. Thank God Weevil managed to tackle the guy. But baby, I have to tell you…”

I’m gritting and fighting with all my might. The slipstream doesn’t care, though, and it yanks me away.

THREAD THIRTY FOUR
I twist, tumble, and then I’m kissing Logan, laughing. He’s stumbling backwards towards the couch as I pepper his face with pecks, catching the arm so he doesn’t fall. “Veronica!” he manages, wheezing with laughter. “Just…normally this is the LAST activity I’d try to stop, but I’ve gotta tell you…”

I withdraw my lips, as it dawns on me I’m somewhere new, cast around frantically to orient. Howl’s, tanned-surfer-Logan, blue rock on my hand big as a geode. Obvious pregnant belly. Fuck, I’m in IDEAL Reality. The last place, at this current juncture, I really want to be.

“Now listen,” he says, flirtatiously admonishing. But I’ve already climbed off of him in search of my laptop. His expression shifts to a frown. “Hey, where are you going?”

I close my eyes, try to slipstream somewhere, ANYWHERE USEFUL, but nothing doing. Fuck, I’m starting to hate this place. I’m housebound, Logan won’t acknowledge me, and I don’t have TIME for this FEEL-GOOD BULLSHIT right now.

“I have to search the web,” I mutter, so he doesn’t assume I’ve gone insane. “I need archives of the newspaper from the day after graduation.” And then I need to get my time-travelling ass STRAIGHT TO THAT BOAT, so I can stop whatever’s about to happen.

“Veronica, you really need to listen…”

“I don’t have TIME right now, Logan!” I snap, rounding on him. “I’m not gonna endanger the baby and we can play kissy-face later, but this CAN’T WAIT!”

The doorbell rings, and in his most acid voice, Logan says, “As I was trying to explain. It’ll HAVE to wait. Because Weevil and Mac just arrived, to prep for the sting.”

I scream frustration and fling myself on the couch. He shoots me a look of purest exasperation as he answers the door. I cover my face in my hands, and take Alicia’s ten deep breaths so I don’t lose it.

There’s a gradual displacement of weight on the cushion, and my knuckles are licked. I peek between my fingers to find Loki inches from my face. He whines, paws my lap, climbs aboard.

I wrap my arms around him, bury my face in his fur. “I should make you get down,” I whisper. “But I promised otherwise, the day I had to leave you with Casey.”

“Max just helped out while I was getting through my finals,” Mac says over her shoulder as she sasshays in, one dimple showing. She smooths her short, wind-mussed hair with one hand. “He’s an understudy, if you will. It’s not like he’s constantly here, lurking, making bedroom eyes at me.”

“Good.” Weevil saunters in after, hands in pockets. Jerks his chin at me in acknowledgement. “’Cause I’d have to rearrange his face, if he tried to lure you into some side action.”

Logan, behind them, rolls his eyes, but it’s pretty clear to me Weevil’s kidding. Which I guess Mac realizes, because she snorts. “Yeah, right. I mean he’s smart, and cute in a geeky way. I admire his ingenuity. But after living with you for six months, I’ve lost my taste for nerds.”

Weevil holds out his hand; Mac removes her femme motorcycle jacket and hooks it over his fingertips. Logan clocks me cuddling the dog on the couch and puts exasperated hands on his hips.

“Down, Loki,” he says, pointing. The Husky creeps away and climbs in his basket. “Seriously, Ronica,” he adds, with a head shake. “Who would have predicted I’D be the disciplinarian?”

“Sorry,” I say to Loki, who’s curled in a ball, watching Logan closely for a relaxation of vigilance.
“Looks like the man managed to keep you down once again.”

“Echolls’ particular talent,” Weevil mutters, as Mac sits and crosses her legs. He sprawls beside her, spreads an arm along the loveseat at her back. He’s in jeans and a black summer-weight crewneck that looks like cashmere, an expensive watch gracing his wrist. The hoops in his ears are silver.

Man, I’m starting to get REALLY curious about this guy’s parents.

“No talk of social injustice before coffee,” Logan says absently. His gaze is fixed on the dog, watching for signs of insurrection.

“But after coffee it’s ON?” Mac asks. “Because I’ll take a double espresso.”

Weevil barks a laugh, and even I smile, because that’s MY Mac, peeking out. Logan flattens his brows and lips, points at her. “I knew you were trouble the day you walked in,” he says, with mock severity, but heads off towards the kitchen. Calls over his shoulder, “Everybody else want the usual?”

I watch Mac settle, lean into Weevil’s shoulder. She’s more slender and toned than ever, poised, even; she’s dressed to the nines in black, the way she was at the café. Her heels are sky-high, her skirt’s a severe pencil cut, and she’s wearing a soft, expensive cowl-neck that slips off one shoulder. Pricey highlights brighten her short, Mohawk-y hair, and six discreet gold hoops march up each lobe. Her hands are bare of rings, including the Justice League monstrosity; but there’s a gold motorcycle pendant at her throat, and both the wheels are diamonds.

These two are fascinating together, a pairing I’d never have predicted. He’s not intimidated by smarts, she’s not fazed by brutal pragmatism. They’re formidable. Also, morally flexible in ways that zing my crime-dar, since they seem to have come into money.

I wonder how much that shared ethos played into their courtship. And whether the appeal of sticking it to Dick influenced one or both parties.

“You hanging in there, V?” Weevil asks, cocking his head and squinting, the way he does when he’s concerned. “Tell me you didn’t pull an all-nighter for your psychology final. ‘Cause you don’t look so hot.”

Yeah, my last thirty-six hours involved a deadly car crash, a fistfight/riot and a school shooting, I think but don’t say. Pet Loki with my foot instead, inspiring him to lick my toes. “Oh, I’m dandy,” I chirp, fixing Weevil with my fakest bright smile. “It takes more than a paltry test to knock ME out of the ring.”

Logan returns holding a tray of coffees, catches this exchange. Hands me a decaf latte, then sets down the rest with a ta-da gesture. He flops backwards onto the couch, crosses his feet on the table, and puts his arm around me. “Relax,” he murmurs, kissing my temple. “It’s just a brief strategy session; half an hour, max. Then you can change into pajamas, and enjoy trips down memory lane to your heart’s content.”

I give him a sharp look, because is he mimicking the way he told me to chill, at the debutante ball? Is he hinting that everything will work out fine? Or is he just a guy who survived HIS Boat Disaster handily, and thinks, in retrospect, it’s no big deal?

He winks at me, smirking, and URGH. Logan Echolls is the most frustrating human on God’s green Earth.

“So help me out, Mackenzie,” Logan says, turning the smirk on her. “I’ve been neck-deep in the
Palestinian Conflict for the better part of two weeks, when I wasn’t playing shirtless manservant to Cleopatra over there. I have no clue what the specifics of this case ARE.”

“Cut and dried electronic theft, you’d THINK,” she says, settling back…taking a long, eyes-closed gulp of coffee, which makes me hideously jealous. “Guy sends out phishing mails that install slow-down viruses; they also add popups, which advertise his ‘computer repair’ service. Marks bring him their machines, the ‘problem’ gets fixed.

“Months later, in a seemingly unconnected event, someone takes the mark’s credit card or bank account or stock portfolio for a ride…a perp who knows each and every password and access code. I figure the ‘technician’ has installed spyware.

“I can’t find the code on our client’s computer, though. And trust me, if it was present, I WOULD have. Our con’s cocky; he knows he’s got an untraceable method, he’s not even TRYING to stay under the radar. So we figured, to catch a thief, and set up a laptop that will spy on HIM. We’re going in as clueless, but of course rich, victims.” She finishes her drink, sets it down. “I just want to know what proof the cops need, to get this guy convicted.”

“Infiltrate his lair,” I advise. “Go low-tech; tap his phone, plant a bug, video camera trained on his monitor. He’ll be on guard against hackers, just like you would…but he’ll underestimate the abilities of computer-illiterate spies. Observe him executing his ‘fix’. Then remove your bugs and fingerprints, and take your who/what/when/where/how/why to the cops, presenting it as a theory. They’ll gather evidence legally to put your perp down.”

“We should split up,” Mac tells Weevil. “I’ll be the helpless victim. You can tail him after the handoff, and bug his home base.”

“I have a phone tap in my car,” he says. “V, you got one of those little cameras?”

Logan holds up a finger and hops off the couch, wanders back into the bedroom. “Can you even PRETEND to be helpless, Mackenzie?” Weevil asks, lifting a brow. “’Cause I’ve personally never seen it.”

“I’m not the actress Veronica is, but I’ll hold my own,” she says. “This guy’s methods are sloppy and unsporting-- I’m emotionally invested in watching them fail.” She picks up Weevil’s untouched coffee with a questioning glance; he nods, granting permission. “Everyone knows the RIGHT way to screw over arrogant assholes is to let them doom THEMSELVES, via their own venality.”

I make a face, remembering the purity test debacle, and the chaos letting jerks doom themselves caused. “I generally play up the blonde, make the mark think he’s smarter,” I say. “People don’t take me seriously because I look harmless, which I use to my advantage.”

“Yeah, but I’m less adorable,” Mac says, unfazed. “Helpless co-ed only works when you’re that girl dude-bros love. I’m thinking…bitchy music industry professional? Who doesn’t have time to do her own NAILS, much less unravel a computer problem?”

I nod—I can see it. “Treat him like the cockroach you actually think he is,” I say. “That fits with the persona. Plus it will inspire him towards revenge, and make the whole experience more satisfying.”

“Too bad I won’t be around to watch this,” Weevil tells Mac, smiling. “Half the reason I brought you in on this detective agency was, you outsmarting jerkoffs equals hot.”

Logan comes around the couch; tosses a boxed mini-cam to Weevil, who catches it one-handed. “Wait, why don’t I get to verbally eviscerate cockroaches? Come on, Ronica, I was BORN to play
“Sorry sweet cheeks.” I pat his chest as he sits back down. “I need you nearby to feed me bon-bons and ply the fan.”

“The sacrifices I make.” He curls a palm around his little coffee cup and sips. Settles a hand companionably on my shoulder, tracing my collarbone with his pinkie. “And while I’m fanning you’ll be…displaying your gratitude? Or furiously internet-searching the Nautilus while chugging hot beverages?”

“The NAUTILUS?” Mac asks, surprised. “Why would you want to dig up THAT can of worms?”

“Nostalgia?” Logan asks, drily. “A yen for the golden moments of yesteryear?”

“Did you figure it out, then?” Mac asks, sitting forward. “The identity of the guy in the hall? Because I’d like to remind you that Madison got a good look, too. She could definitely ID him from a full-body picture.”

“I might have a lead,” I hedge. “I want to review a timeline to make sure.”

“And speaking OF timelines,” Logan says, hopping up. Cutting off Mac’s response, and God damn it, I can’t tell if it’s by accident or on purpose. “Dick will be here at 3:00 to talk about the new T-shirt line. In the interests of residential harmony, I think it’s time for you two to skedaddle.”

“Cast from the 09’ers circle yet again.” Mac finishes Weevil’s coffee, brushes off her skirt, and stands. “However will we survive?”

“Most people weep a lot and beg for mercy,” Logan explains, helping me up. “And the adverb I’d apply to your survival odds is ‘barely’. But feel free to buck the trend and act stoic. If nothing else, I’d enjoy the novelty.”

Mac cracks a smile. Weevil shakes his head, the way he frequently does when Logan talks. “How ‘bout I buy you lunch in a jackass-free zone, Mackenzie? Since it seems like there’s a shortage of such areas, today.”

“Deal,” she says. “I’ll even let you eat a burger and talk about engines. Because that’s just the kind of supportive girlfriend I am.”

“You’re a pearl past price,” Logan agrees. He takes Loki’s leash from a hook and whistles, bends to buckle it onto the dog. “Want to walk the beast with me, Ronica, before you’re swallowed by unpleasant memories? Ten minutes, tops. Then you can haul your laptop out to the patio, while I throw his ball on the beach.”

I’m not sure I can spare the time; but he’s flashing that ‘I need reassurance’ look nobody but me seems to notice, and it’s a simple thing he’s asking. “Done,” I say, and search for shoes.

Logan leads the way into the lavish, bougainvillea-heavy front garden, Loki pacing, stately, before him. Weevil and Mac follow, his arm draped, companionable, around her shoulders. Mac’s here, back in my life, and that’s positive; but it’s obvious, from the way we’re interacting, that our relationship’s all business. I wonder if things will ever be the same. And what I’d have to do, to get us back to normal.

I’m standing in the circular driveway, brooding on slipstream problems and sniffing a rose not tended by me, when a red convertible tears around the corner. It skids to a sideways stop. Logan looks up, frowning, from re-adjusting Loki’s harness; I resist a crack about kids today and their hot rods. His
scowl deepens as he spots Victor, driving.

Victor leaves the keys dangling and storms out, hands threading into his wild, white hair—gripping there, like he wants to give a frustrated yank. He’s in tan cargo shorts and a red-and-white Hawaiian shirt, which whips flag-like in the wind around his skinny torso. He zeroes in on me with a focus that bodes ill.

“What the FUCK, Veronica?” he demands, in a voice so exasperated it does the gravelly version of a squeak. “I gave you that thumb drive WEEKS ago, and you couldn’t even make a few goddamned phone calls? Usually you leave the bodies of people who try to stop you in your WAKE. But here I find you, drifting around all Madonna-like in some garden, LITERALLY stopping to smell the roses?”

“I got grounded,” I say mildly, as he goes nose to nose; apparently, combativeness is genetic. “I passed out from playing detective too hard, and my friends took my toys away.”

Logan shoves between us, tucking me safely behind him, and plants his hands on his hips. “So you WANT Ronica to lose the baby?” he demands, in the over-enunciated voice I privately call ‘Logan gets Real’. “Because her doctor said she WOULD, if she didn’t take it easy. I won’t apologize for taking care of my family, man. And no one gets to yell at my girl.”

“Oh the DOCTOR said,” Victor scoffs, voice laden with sarcasm. He spins in an agitated circle, hands going back to his hair. “Of COURSE she did. Doctors are controlling pains in the ass, and believe me, I should know!”

“Who’s Ichabod Crane?” Weevil mutters in my ear. I glance back to see he’s taken a protective stance behind me, and smother a laugh. Echolls and Navarro, bodyguards for hire.

“Logan’s grandfather,” I say, sotto voce. “He wanted me to investigate the sanitarium where Duncan Kane’s living. But Logan had Mac here hide the files.”

“The sanitarium where Duncan Kane USED to live,” Victor corrects, hearing. A humorless smirk curves his long, thin mouth. “Until yesterday, when he DISAPPEARED.”
Let's Have A War! The Enemy's Within

Chapter Notes

Buckle up folks, it's Graduation Day. :-)

Trigger warning: as always, my policy is not to go graphic. But there's some gun violence, injury and death in this chapter.

THREAD THIRTY FOUR INVERTS

It’s like Victor’s words fling me out of Ideal Reality, with the force of some unspoken threat. I flip over and under, spinning, helpless. Then settle in a strange lumpy bed, my face pressed to Logan’s shoulder.

An alarm is blaring from his cell on the nightstand; his long arm flails out to silence it. He smacks repeatedly until it ceases, groaning.

“We never should have stayed up ‘til three watching ‘Farewell, My Lovely’,” he grates, in a voice like a rusty hinge. “I thought your dad, at least, had more sense.”

“You underestimate his love for noir.” I lift my head to survey him blearily, wiping away drool. “Wait, where are we? This is not my beautiful house.”

“Mrs. R? Oh, thank God.” He flops back on the pillows, covering his eyes with his palms. “You slipstreamed back just in time. We’re in Alicia Fennel’s guest room, Ronica, and it’s Graduation Day. She insisted we need a sit-down breakfast, instead of a long drive from the cottage at 6:00 AM.”

“That wacky Alicia,” I say, sprawling back across his chest. My heart’s hammering with a combination of fear and elation, because I FUCKING MADE IT. “Always taking care of people, and expecting nothing in return. It’s unnatural, right?”

“Never mind her,” he says, shaking his head at me. “I made a list. Of the bullet points in your voicemail, that is, and found answers. In case you managed to show up at some point, to save the day.”

“Pshaw,” I say, and he smiles. Sits up against the pillows to read.

“Okay, number one, Stuart Cobbler. He’s just some low-life who hangs with the art crowd, Ronica. He doesn’t have a record. Weevil broke into his house, said there weren’t any, like, assault weapons or insane manifestos lying around. Just a large supply of recreational narcotics, and a stash of cash. He works at a comic book shop, doesn’t seem to have friends.”

“Nor should he,” I tell him. “I met the guy once, and even MADISON got a bad vibe.”

He raises his brows. “Well, unfortunately, being personally repellent is not a crime, so all we can do is keep an eye out. Number two, Welch; she’s the little redhead who dated Rams last year, remember?” Off my blank look, he adds, “Nice boobs, sweet personality, marginal IQ? She’s not
your criminal mastermind. Dick has Social Studies with her, and says she’s been in class all week. Plus she’s on the Spirit Squad that’s decorating the gym for graduation. So she’s probably too busy today to plant explosives on a boat.”

I make a face, and he kisses me, his smile turning it sweeter and hotter. He breaks away, grins at my dazed expression, and resumes reading briskly, with a virtuous air. “I have no idea who Randy Johnson is, so I gave that one to Mac. And I researched chlorine gas; they combatted it with a wet cloth over the nose and mouth in World War II. Ipso facto, I put dish towels and bottled water, plus gas masks, in caches all over the boat. There are also plenty of inflatable rafts on board, although we need to decide who’s actually allowed up the ramp. Ummm...Mac convinced two of her clients not to attend, but said Madison might prove a problem. Oh! And Luke’s being blackmailed by a personal trainer, for steroids. Apparently the guy figured Luke was an easier source of income than dealing? Because Luke’s baseball career is at stake, if his cheating is revealed?”

“Oh, right,” I say, folding my arms; matching his all-business pose, albeit horizontally. “Yeah, that loser’s get-rich-quick scheme isn’t related to the Nautilus. The trainer’s buying his steroids illegally in Tijuana. Tell Veronica to fax a picture of him to Border Patrol; they’ll search his car and arrest him. No sweat.”

“Consider it done. So number three, security. Lils and I found a really good private contract team, ex-Navy SEAL’s, as specified. We plan to huddle with them after the ceremony...then decide, based on their findings, whether the party can proceed.”

“Thank you,” I say. “For reals. I’m eternally grateful that you took this threat seriously.”

“You know how I like to be thanked?” he asks, flinging the paper dramatically aside, and pulling me into his arms. “CONCRETELY. And we’ve got another fifteen minutes before we absolutely HAVE to get up.”

The snooze blares, just as we’re getting our kissing groove back on, and there’s a simultaneous thumping at the door. Darryl’s voice carries, muffled by the wood. “Mom says get your butt out here if you want breakfast, Logan!”

Logan sighs theatrically, grabs the phone, silences it, tosses it on a threadbare brown armchair. Yells, “Out in five! Save me a pancake!”

“That’s what YOU think, sucker!” Darryl yells back. I smother a laugh as footsteps pound away, top-speed.

“Nice to know you’re loved,” I tell him, trying for a straight face. He tackles me, kisses the tip of my nose.

“You know, it IS,” he says, into my ear. Caresses my ass, then pinches it. “Now go make yourself even more beautiful than you already are. It’s our BIG DAY!”

He does an overly-cheerful fake pom-pom wave, and crawls out of bed. Saunters his gorgeous, pajama-pants-clad half-nakedness over to the closet, and pulls out a navy-blue suit. Unceremoniously shucks his clothes and starts to don it, with a smirk at me when he notes my stare.

I toss a pillow at him, because Jesus he’s a tease, and get up; collect my own dress from the closet. It’s a brighter, jewel-like blue, splashed with red flowers, made of some silky, fine fabric that clings. I turn my back and head to the downstairs bathroom, because a girl can only handle so much temptation.
By the time I’ve showered and done my makeup, Logan’s gone. I can hear voices raised in cheerful disharmony, fighting over breakfast foods down the hall.

Logan’s sprawled in a chair at Alicia’s battered dining-room table, forking in eggs and sausage, looking edible himself. Wallace, opposite him, inhales food at the speed of light, also quite fine in a suit that’s steel-grey. Darryl and Bryson, both in pajamas, argue over a syrup bottle; Bryson’s covered in the contents, to the point where he’s dripping.

The mess doesn’t seem to be slowing him down any. It’s like I’m surrounded by starving wolves.

“How are the pancakes holding out?” Alicia calls from the kitchen as I snag a sausage link. Logan lifts his foot off the adjacent chair and passes me a plate. “Did you leave some for Veronica?”

“You’re kidding right?” Wallace calls back, winking at me. “You only made six!”

“One of you boys get in here and cook some toaster waffles, then. She’s got a big day ahead, she needs food, too.”

Wallace jerks his head towards the kitchen, giving Logan a significant glance, and Logan mirrors the gesture. They start kicking each other under the table, while I help myself to some eggs. Darryl shoves the last of his pancake into his mouth and squirts more syrup on his brother, and then there’s a knock at the door.

Alicia emerges from the kitchen at the sound, still in her bathrobe, hair escaping from a messy bun. But dad’s already let himself in, sporting possibly the largest grin I’ve ever seen. He holds aloft two white paper bags.

“Good morning, graduates!” he booms, cheerfully. “Thought I’d bring over some high quality sugar and fat, in donut form, to get you through your big day!”

I burst out laughing. Logan looks at me, eyebrows raised; Darryl grabs a bag and starts rifling, and Bryson screams, “DONUT DONUT DONUT!” at the top of his lungs. Alicia saunters over, takes a jelly-filled, and bobs her brows at Dad while she enjoys a bite.

Dad fake-scowls while I get the giggles under control, passes me a Boston Creme. “Hope you had a better night than I did, last time I slept on that futon,” he says. “You kids should move closer to town.”

“No point buying a house until we decide about college,” Logan says, with a significant glance at me. He accepts a lemon-filled, sinks in his teeth. “We’ve got some ideas brewing.”

“MORE DONUT!” Bryson yells, and makes a grab for Darryl’s bag. Darryl jerks it away. Alicia rests a comforting hand on Bryson’s head as she gives him a slice of bacon, then examines her palm, frowning.

“Why is this child covered in syrup?” she demands, as Bryson gnaws bacon enthusiastically. “Did one of you give Darryl unsupervised access to the bottle?”

Logan makes a ‘who, me?’ face. Darryl nudges the empty container surreptitiously away. Wallace quails under his mother’s stern gaze and admits, “There was a….pancake incident.”

She props one hand on her hip, and holds out her other. I pass the syrup over. “Logan, you get in the kitchen and finish cooking breakfast, you’re the only one I can trust not to burn it. Darryl, go find your DS, you’ve lost it for the day. Wallace, I need you to locate my camera, and have Keith take some pictures of you in that good-looking suit; then after that, clear the table. Veronica, eat your
breakfast, you can help with the dishes if Wallace takes too long. And you, my friend,” she tells Bryson, “are having your bath early.”

There’s a general obedient scramble, food shoved in mouths for the journey so nobody else can filch it. I find myself alone at the table. I fill my plate, and dad sits down next to me, shaking his head as boys fall in line. “I’ve seen crack SWAT units less well-run,” he observes, as Wallace hands him the camera, filches more bacon, and carries out a stack of plates. “My primary parental skill is affectionate sarcasm. I honestly don’t know how she does it.”

“She never shows fear,” I say, pouring myself a cup of coffee. “So you were just in the neighborhood, huh? And HAPPENED to swing by with donuts?”

“Total coincidence,” he agrees, taking away my full cup, handing me an empty. He gazes out the window, faint flush staining his cheeks. “But Alicia’s…pretty great, isn’t she?”

“She’s an Enjoli commercial,” I say. “There’s no possible way you could get luckier.”

He looks at me over the rim of his cup, eyes crinkling in his warm Dad smile. Says, “I don’t know about that. I’m pretty lucky you’re my kid.”

I elbow him, and he elbows me back. Drapes an arm around my shoulders and kisses the top of my head. “I can’t believe you’re graduating high school,” he muses, sipping. “Seems like only yesterday, YOU were the one in the high chair. Although you preferred to DRINK the syrup.”

“How goes the toddler de-syruping?” Logan asks. “It’s ten ‘til eight, Dick will be here any minute.”

Darryl points wordlessly upstairs, from whence the faint strains of Barney songs can be heard. He doesn’t look up from his Pokemon battle.

“I should take those pictures,” Dad decides, picking up the camera. “Don’t want to piss off the boss. OK all you usual suspects, line up against the wall.”

“Oh, ha ha,” I say, but do as he asks. Logan leans, slouching, beside me, arms crossed; essays his fake People Magazine grin. Wallace laughs at him, provoking a more genuine smile. I reflect that the friends and associates in MY reality have WAY more experience with mug shots.

We’re about five poses in when someone lays on the horn outside. Alicia comes down the stairs at a trot, carrying a Spiderman-Robe-clad Bryson, still in her now-soaked housecoat. “We’re going to have to meet you at school,” she says, relieving Darryl of the game and putting it in her pocket. “Wallace, you go on ahead with Logan and Veronica. I know it’s more fun to hang out with your friends on graduation day anyway.”

She dispenses kisses and cheek pats while Dad reviews the photos; then Logan hefts a duffel bag from beside the door, and gestures me outside. Lilly’s waiting for us in a gold Lexus SUV, probably
her mother’s, with Jackie riding shotgun. Dick’s sprawled across the second row of seats, and even from this distance, I can tell he’s a mess.

“Is Dick…staggering drunk at eight AM?” I ask Logan in an under-voice, as we descend the stairs.

“That’s his default, lately,” Logan murmurs drily, but with an undercurrent of worry. “He heard from this insurance company four days ago—Big Dick apparently took out some huge policy as a tax shelter. They informed him they aren’t paying because his brother committed suicide; he’s been drunk ever since.” He opens the rear door and lifts me into the third row of seats. Wallace climbs in on the other side.

“Surprise!” Lilly calls, as Logan slams the door shut. “Look who we found trying to shove his Jeep out of a ditch, right across the street from the gas station!”

“Dude,” Logan says, folding his arms, making a judgy expression I find highly amusing. “I thought we agreed no partying until tomorrow, in light of today’s looming catastrophes.”

“Whatsoever, Grandma,” Dick snickers, rubbing his eye with the heel of his hand. “Untwist your panties and chill, I’ll be totally sober by this afternoon. Besides, nothing bad will actually happen. It was just some asshole crank caller, and you overcompensated with Navy SEALs.”

Logan glances at me, exasperated; I flatten my palm, then lower it, so he’ll take things down a notch. He frowns, clearly disagreeing, but just says, “Better safe than sorry.”

“So who’s excited about no more high school?” Lilly demands. “And never having to tolerate ass-kissers again?”

“Oh come on,” I say, wrinkling my nose in her direction. “Let’s not be disingenuous. You know you loved every second of the ass-kissing, Lils.”

“Well now I’m a VERY SERIOUS FEMINIST,” she says, shooting me a laughing, over-the-shoulder glance. “And while it’s true I had fun? I’ll admit it was slightly exhausting, always having to be fabulous.”

“I’ll be glad to go home,” Jackie says, reflective. She’s got on a gold silk wrap dress with billowy sleeves, and looks peaceful but sad, gazing out the windshield. “Not that I won’t miss you guys. But turns out it’s true—you CAN’T get decent bagels, here.”

“You won’t have to miss us long,” Lilly says, patting her arm. “Only 23 days until College Tour ’06!”

“True,” Jackie agrees, with a vague smile. “Plus I guess there’s always the phone.”

“Man, I’m just glad I’ve got the decision making DONE, and the scholarship squared away,” Wallace says. “Y’all are all thinking WAY too much about what ought to be a simple choice.”

Lilly pulls into the Neptune High lot, starts circling for the best space. “Now Wallace,” she chides. “Surely if MY parents are harping this much on the importance of quality education, YOUR mom’s already covered the bases?”

“My mom’s just glad she doesn’t have to PAY for my quality education,” he says.

“MY mom’s glad I’m GETTING a college education,” Logan counters. “She was convinced I’d fuck off to Hawaii with Dick after Veronica left me for Columbia, and live in a beach shack, surfing while high. Not that she would have made a push to PREVENT that, mind you. But she might have
looked reproachful, and sighed a lot via Skype.”

“That would’ve been the BOMB,” Dick says, yanking on his tie to loosen it. “Sand, brews and babes. Tow-out big wave riding. No more talking about dead relatives, or Kendall trying to rip me off. But my bros are way too LAME, these days, to be down with the world’s best plan.”

“Your bros have LIVES, Dick,” Wallace says, rolling his eyes. “And if you think you’re prying Logan away from Veronica, EVER, without the aid of a crowbar, you really aren’t paying attention.”

Lilly cackles, backing in between a Porsche and a Ferrari with careless disregard. “Whooda thunk it, long ago in seventh grade?” she demands of the car at large. “Sweet little Sheriff’s daughter Veronica Mars, wrapping hell-raising Logan Echolls around her pinkie? We all thought he’d end up dead someday, not complacent and adorably domestic.”

“I still might, before the end of the evening,” he mutters under his breath, as we pile out of the car. Dick staggers free, doing battle with his door for dominance. He extracts a flask, finds it empty, and spots Mac getting out of her Beetle. “Mackie!” he yells, grin widening. Gives the blatant once-over to her simple grey sheath. “WHOO baby, looking FINE! Have I EVER seen you wear a dress? You’ve got, like, KNEES down there!”

“Yes, Dick, they allow my legs to bend.” She stands stoic under his hug assault, supporting his weight when he staggers. “Started the celebration early, I see.”

She directs a beseeching look at Logan, who hoists Dick off her, then calls, “BISHOP!” across the lot. Carrie, who’s smoking and chatting with Ashley by the school marquee, looks up; rolls her eyes as she takes in the situation, saunters nonchalantly over. She looks a little tired, but is covering well with makeup and attitude.

“You’VE been having fun without me,” she accuses, gesturing at Dick with her cigarette. “If I wasn’t still getting over that apocalyptic burrito, I’d be pissed at you right now for not sharing.”

“Baby, you can have anything I’ve GOT,” Dick leers, and Logan sets him down on the retaining wall. He sprawls backwards onto his elbows in the mulch; Carrie sits beside him.

“Can you manhandle him into the ceremony?” Logan asks her. “Since you’re B and he’s C? Wallace and I are in a different part of the auditorium, and he needs to be supervised.”

“No problem,” she says. “Is he just drunk? Do you know?”

“You could frisk him for contraband,” Logan says, dryly. “I didn’t, personally, bother.”

Carrie winks, and Logan drapes an arm around my shoulder, leading me away. Hands me a plastic packet that contains my cap and gown. “So since you’ve helpfully provided a solution to Luke’s blackmail-related angst,” he says, “I ought to let him know, before finding my seat. But I should warn you, first…after you accept your diploma? Go sit next to Ashley, on stage.”

“And….why would I want to do that?” I ask; because, yep. His eyes harbor an unholy twinkle.

“Tsk. You’re Senior Class President, Veronica, remember? You get to make a SPEECH!” he pats my shoulder, fake-solicitous, but can’t contain his grin. “I tried to find the written copy, before the pancake incident derailed me. But I don’t think Ronica brought it. Probably she has it MEMORIZED.”
He does the darn-it snap, and I frown. “So what, you’re just throwing me to the wolves? I HATED high school! I have nothing good to say to these people!”

“Then says something bad,” he quips, and yeah, he’s laughing at me. “Come on, Veronica. It’s not like you could create a bigger fiasco here than you managed at the debutante ball. Just use your innate verbal acumen to wing it. As Lilly pointed out, we never have to talk to these clowns again, which gives you a certain measure of freedom.”

He kisses me on the forehead and dances away towards Wallace, not even bothering to contain his snickers. Fulminating, I watch him go.

“Veronica?” Mac asks, from behind me. I turn, jerked out of my reverie, and she pats her messenger bag. “Can you quit relationship-obsessing momentarily, and give me five minutes? It’s almost time to take our seats, and this is urgent.”

“Let’s walk and talk,” I say. “We’re both M, so we’ll be sitting together anyway.”

“I haven’t found much in Beaver’s search history thus far,” she begins, right to the point as usual, because that’s my Mac. “Other than a disturbing amount of research on the effects of GHB. But I think I’ve figured out who phoned in the boat threat. And why.”

“Brilliant,” I say, as we enter the main hall. “Tell me more.”

“Logan asked me to locate dirt on a guy named Randy Johnson. So I did some digging, and it turns out he’s disappeared.”

I repress the twinge of jealousy ‘Logan asked’ causes, and focus on Randy. Because him going missing BEFORE the boat party is pretty damn significant. “Someone told me Johnson is unreliable,” I say. “Like he fails to meet his responsibilities, and spends all his income on pot.”

“This someone’s well-informed.” Mac digs through her bag and extracts a printout. It’s a photo of Martha’s Kitchen employees, including Cobb. She points at a medium-height, skinny, brown-haired guy—about the right size and shape for the boat killer. “That’s Johnson,” she says. “Slacker pothead, spotty work ethic, tendency to visit his brother in Seattle without warning. Nobody’s surprised when he’s not around. But he isn’t currently AT his brother’s, or anywhere else his best friend says he hangs. He also hasn’t shown up for work in a week.

“So I was pondering this conundrum, and I remembered what Lucky said,” Mac continues. “Right before he got shot, about it being ‘his turn’. I investigated the timing of the Shark deaths, versus when the victims played for the team. I think the killer’s been offing them in the order of…you know. Johnson was a Shark the same years as Beaver. So was Luke, by the way. Which isn’t the reason he’s being blackmailed, as far as I can discover--but maybe there’s a connection I’m not seeing?”

“Luke claims he wasn’t a victim of Woody’s,” I say. “And I’m positive his blackmailer’s not involved in this. Plus Luke’s…not a fan of violence, and he’s friends with the invited guests. If he wanted his buddies dead, he would have let the PCH’ers take them out last summer.”

Although…someone did say the killer got shot in the leg. And Luke WAS the only survivor of the boat disaster who sported a leg wound.

“No, I meant suppose Luke’s the TARGET of the threat, but for a reason unrelated to blackmail? What if Johnson is the Sharks Killer, and Luke’s next on his list?”

“We can’t make that leap, just because Johnson played Little League,” I say. “Woody coached for a
long time. There could be any number of now-adult victims, along with associated relatives, friends and enemies—assuming the killer’s even got a direct Sharks connection. But this information DOES give us a suspect; whereas before, we didn’t even have a THEORY. Can I keep the photo?”

She waves a hand, magnanimous, and I tuck it in my purse. “I hate to admit this, Veronica, but I’m sort of enjoying our investigation. It’s like we’re secret agents, checkmating Spectre before they blow up London.”

“So if I’m James Bond, who does that make you?” I ask. “Q, perhaps?”

“Felix Leiter,” she corrects, with a half-smile. “Bond’s counterpart in the CIA. Let’s hope, in the course of this investigation, the killer sharks stay metaphorical.”

“Is this where all the high school graduates go to get their diplomas?” Weevil calls from across the hall. He saunters towards us decked out in cap and gown, grins. “Cause I’ve gone to this school for six years, and I’ve never quite been sure.”

“This is the place.” Mac gives him a once-over, grins. “Congrats on that algebra-test A, by the way.”

“I had a good teacher,” he says, winking. “We should head inside, before they start without us.”

I follow them into the auditorium, which is bedecked with green and yellow paper streamers; I’m struck by a wave of nostalgia for the LAST time I graduated. When I strode up onto that stage, expecting pelting-by-tomato, and met with applause instead. I was so PROUD of myself that day—I was praised by people I’d helped, even saved. I felt like an alchemist, turning shit into gold. I felt like the unlikeliest of heroes.

“…gonna sit down, V?” Weevil asks in my ear, startling me. He gestures at a chair with my name on it. “I mean, most people aren’t this fascinated by stuff Madison Sinclair makes with glitter.”

I settle between them and they flirt across me, while my gaze canvasses the room. Logan and Wallace are in back, next section over, laughing at some joke that involves hand gestures. Dick’s slumped in his chair halfway up the next wedge, staring blearily at the ceiling. I’m not at all worried the slipstream will yank me before I’ve done what I came here to do, and I’m not sure WHY. It just seems like fate, today’s visit; like this is where the slipstream WANTS me. I felt this way when I saved Lilly…when I saved MYSELF, at Shelly’s party. I’ve turned up to be the eye of the storm. That’s my slipstream FUNCTION.

Clemmons climbs onstage, taps his notecards against the lectern, sets down a bottle of water. His lugubrious gaze meanders, searching out potential trouble. I smile. In a town full of unscrupulous adults, Van always managed to impress me. He’s just as sneaky as the rest of them, but his heart’s in the right place.

“No, that’s her,” Weevil tells Mac, pointing. I follow his gesture to Letty and Ophelia, sitting with a boy I don’t recognize. “She quit wearing the wig when she retired. She’s all ‘Eli, I don’t got to pretend I’m young and strong no more. And this thing itches.’”

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“So, question. Why DO you let people call you Weevil?” Mac crosses her arms and lifts her brows, DEFINITELY flirtatious. “Because Eli’s a pretty good name. Biblical, but not ridiculous. It wouldn’t get you teased on the playground.”

“Someday, maybe, when we know each other better, I’ll tell my secrets,” he says, playing it cool. “It’s an old story, and like my friend Felix used to say…”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Clemmons begins, clearing his throat; Weevil falls silent. “Welcome to the
2006 Neptune High School graduation ceremony. Now I suppose I could make a speech here, about the achievements of our students, citing sterling examples of Pirate Pride. I realize I have ten minutes blocked out, on the schedule. But I’m sure you’re all anxious to get to the after-parties, and I’m not that fond of the spotlight. So without further ado, let me introduce this year’s graduates. Alice Abrams…..Bobby Acevedo…Darren Allen…..”

There’s a commotion near the back door that makes Clemmons pause, frowning. I turn as two deputies station themselves at the entrance to the room; two more enter, working their way towards the exit. Vinnie Van Lowe, in full Sheriff drag, goes up to the stage to whisper with the principal.

Clemmons’ gaze lifts, lands on us. He nods, and Vinnie joins his cronies at the exit, leaning faux-casually. Sticks his thumbs in his gun belt like he’s Marshall Dillon.

Van resumes calling out names.

“You clocking this?” I ask Weevil, under my breath.

“Somebody’s gonna get arrested when they walk off that stage,” he opines, crossing his arms and settling back. “Somebody they expect to put up a fight, which rules out you.”

I turn to him, and he looks me in the eye, black gaze giving away nothing. “Tell me you bought Thumper a bus ticket to Minnesota, and packed him a healthy snack for the trip.”

“I put some of them baby carrots in the bag,” he confirms, mouth curving, humorless. “And a juice box.”

“Carrie Bishop…” Clemmons continues, in a drone. “Randolph Butler….Arthur Cameron….“

“I hope so,” I say. “Because his rich-kids kidnapping meltdown made a bad year worse, for some not-so-forgiving people. And you’re on the record as the last guy to see him alive. I warned you not to hurt him, because I was afraid this would happen. So I REALLY HOPE you listened.”

“Regardless of who iced him, it’s not on you,” he says, with a faint smile. “You called in the search, right? The day they blew up the stadium? With the fake Russian accent, that was a nice touch, by the way.”

I shrug, and he shakes his head. “Look, it’s not gonna matter what I did or didn’t do, V, you must realize that. If they got a body, I’m the guy they’ll send up. I’m the easy answer. In this town, no one’s gonna ask tough questions.”

“Especially not when friends of the Sheriff are involved.” I glance at smug, languid Vinnie with disgust. Stand in response to Mr. Daniels, who’s frantically waving. We file towards the aisle.

“Gotta hand it to Van Lowe.” Weevil’s voice is all edge. “He looks like he belongs in an eighties porno, and he’s got the morals of a roach, but he ain’t an idiot. He knows I won’t make a scene in front of my Grandma. And he knows I want that diploma bad enough to go quietly, once I’m holding it in my hand.”

“Logan Echolls,” Clemmons calls from the stage, distracting me.

The 09’er sycophants erupt into whoops as he saunters up the steps. Dick, from his position against the wall, sticks his fingers in his mouth and whistles, then screams “LOGAN FUCKING ECHOLLS IN THE HOUSE!” Logan grins, tips his mortarboard like a top hat, and moves along, diploma in hand.
“It never ceases to amaze me how much these people he loathes adore him,” I say, clapping because that’s my boyfriend. “Talk about an excess of charisma.”

“Hey Mackenzie,” Weevil calls across me, because we’re almost at the stage. Daring her not to snub him. She turns, levels him with a steady look, which makes him smile. “I used to get into the sugar jar, when no one was looking. That’s where my nickname came from. My grandma kept finding it empty, every time she tried to bake.” He shrugs, twisting his mouth sideways. “Don’t tell nobody. I got a rep to maintain.”

“I know,” she says. Like she’s abruptly realizing what that means.

“Michael Farmer….” Clemmons continues. “Wallace Fennel….Corazon Fernandez….”

I applaud for Wallace as we move up the steps. Weevil blows a kiss to his grandmother, who looks understandably concerned. Then abruptly I’m center stage, blinded by spotlights, accepting my diploma as the crowd erupts. Lilly’s high-pitched “WHOO, RONICA!” makes me smile.

Remembering my instructions, I move towards the row of chairs, sit beside a prim Ashley. Watch as Weevil receives his scroll, shows it to Letty; then walks calmly out the door, trailed by Vinnie.

I try to focus on composing a speech, while Clemmons continues down his list, and Ashley whispers snide asides. But really I’m stuck at the crossroads of change and fate. Because sometimes I manage a real hat trick—save a life, prevent a tragedy. But mostly I’m just a blonde in a hamster ball, bumping into things while I spin in circles. Trying not to make my future worse.

The specifics of my relationship with Weevil changed, over these last slipstream years. But despite that, he’s ended up in jail, same as it ever was. His future set in stone, just like Meg.

“And now, it’s my pleasure to present our Senior Class President, Miss Veronica Mars,” Clemmons says, gesturing at me, flashing an admonitory frown. “Who I’m SURE is about to make a wholesome and inspiring speech we’ll all TRULY enjoy.”

He gestures for me to stand, clearly apprehensive; maybe Other V’s not quite so perfect, either. Or maybe he heard about the debutante ball, and fears the mayhem, looming.

I cross to the podium, climb the little stool that’s been placed there. Study the audience with a jaundiced eye. Think about Weevil, and how he handles impromptu speaking assignments; decide to pay tribute.

“So my friends and I,” I say, gesturing at said friends, “we’re all misunderstood. They say we stand for nothing, and, uh, there’s no way we ever could. Like...we see everything wrong with the world and those who lead it. And we don’t think we have the means to...rise above and beat it…

“No, you know what?” I abandon quotation, curling my fingers around the podium, because honestly I’m blanking on the rest of the song. “That’s bullshit. I change things all the TIME. In fact I’m going to change my image right now, by telling you guys the truth. I HATED high school. I’m not the least bit nice. I NEVER cared about being normal, I just pretended because it made my parents happy. When I act cheerful, or bubbly, or perfect, I’m faking, because come on—how could I be? I fought off a freaking MURDER charge last summer, and most of you thought I was GUILTY. I have been waiting YEARS to leave this shithole school behind, and look—the day’s finally arrived! So my advice to the rest of you, for the future? Get out of Neptune, if possible. Be yourselves. Never let other people define you based on your zip code at birth. And NEVER believe you have to accept what fate throws your way. You can ALWAYS fix things, and make the people who cross you pay. And for anyone listening to this speech, who plans to mess with my friends?
Give up now, because I'll take you OUT.”

I smack both hands on the podium, notice the pretty gold watch around my wrist. Check the time. 12:15. I grin at Clemmons, who shakes his head in exasperation, and march off the stage to general pandemonium.

I’m wading through the audience, in search of Logan, when I’m enfolded by a blind-spot-originating Dad hug.

“Well, that was certainly the most…original graduation speech I’ve ever heard,” Dad says, frowning down. “Do I need to worry? First the debutante ball, and now this? I know the last thing you want when you’re almost grown is me belatedly butting my head in, but Veronica…”

“It was a joke,” I say, because really it WAS kind of funny. “Dad, why did Vinnie arrest Weevil? Did Jerry give you the scoop?”

He sighs. “Eli Navarro is a well-established criminal, Veronica. I was picking him up for vandalism when he was twelve, and he’s steadily escalated in the years since. After that whole murder-charge travesty, do you REALLY want to throw in your lot with him?”

“Did this have anything to do with Thumper?” I persist, instead of replying.

Dad makes exasperated face, folding his arms. “All right, but only because it might help you calculate odds. Yes--they found Eduardo Orozco’s body. It was buried in the cement floor of a parking garage in San Juan Capistrano, which had to be re-poured because the architect judged it unstable. He’d been shot, in the calf, same spot on the body as the wound Weevil suffered, and the crew’s foreman was a Fitzpatrick. Meg Manning’s testimony, as well as Logan’s and your own, Veronica, states you left Navarro holding Orozco at gunpoint, on the last day he was seen alive. So the odds are…not good that Weevil’s innocent.”

“But would Thumper’s offenses deserve DEATH, in Weevil’s eyes?” I ask. “Maybe if he really HAD killed Felix; Weevil believes in an eye for an eye. But I’m just not sure he’s RESPONSIBLE for this.”

“Honey, nobody believes the people they like would do something horrible,” Dad says. “But Eli’s a guy who carries a grudge. And Orozco did material harm to almost everyone Weevil protects—torture, assault, kidnapping. He indentured Eli’s friends to Liam Fitzpatrick. Frankly, after that episode in the warehouse, I’m almost glad the guy’s history.”

“Why’d they put an APB out on Thumper?” I want to know. “Logan mentioned it, during the, uh, standoff. He got picked up for questioning the day before, and that’s when he snapped.”

“Do you want me to find out?” Dad asks. He responds to Alicia’s attempt to wave him over with a single upheld finger.


“Then I will. Give me a few days to make calls. And hey, have fun at your fancy yacht party tonight. But don’t forget to give your old man a ring, before you leave on your trip.”

“I would never,” I say, and hug him. “In the meantime, I love you.”

“I love you too, Veronica. And I doubt I’m alone in that sentiment. Logan, congratulations.” Dad reaches across my shoulder; I turn to see him shaking Logan’s hand. “Wallace, your mother’s over there with her friend Sandy, and she’s giving the lunch-right-now signal.”
“That’s my FAVORITE signal,” Wallace says, shaking Dad’s hand too. “My stomach’s been making it for hours. You SURE you two aren’t coming, V?”

“Things to do, places to be,” Logan says, draping an arm around my shoulders. “We’ll grab a burger, and see you in a few hours.”

They fist bump. Dad reminds us we’re not twenty-one, and maritime laws are no different than land-lubbing ones; then the two of them make their way towards Alicia, joking as they go. I watch them, still musing about Weevil, which is NOT where my brain needs to be.

“So THAT was an interesting ceremony,” Logan murmurs, jostling me gently. He’s in jeans and an orange Sex Wax tee, the duffle slung over his shoulder. “Great job with the speech, it surpassed ALL my expectations.”

I punch his arm and he laughs, much more relaxed than he was at the debutante ball. I don’t know if he’s given up trying to impress people, or if ‘completely screwed’ is just his comfort zone. But either way, it’s nice, feeling like he’s in my corner. “I just noticed the time,” I tell him, displaying the watch on my wrist. “We should get going. Don’t want to miss our bitchin’ after-party!”

He presses his lips flat and shakes his head. “Always the comedian,” he says, and hands over the duffel. “Your Action Kitten gear is in here, pumpkin. Go change while I pull the car around. Lilly wants to huddle with the security guys first, then do a State of the Union.”

“Is anyone actually ATTENDING this shindig?” I ask. “Or will it be 100% paramilitary commandos in clever disguises?”

“Well, we have to make it LOOK like we are,” he says. “Regardless of what’s ultimately decided. Listen, just change. We’ll discuss specifics later, when there’s less chance of being overheard.”

I go on tiptoe and kiss his cheek, then head for the bathroom. Re-garb in a black-and-grey boat-neck tee, jeans, boots, and a butter-soft black motocross jacket I’d bet money Logan chose. Then I twist my hair into a bun, so it won’t get in my eyes; after which, my watch reminds me to move it.

I’m out the door, powering down the hallway, when a deep male voice calls out, “Hey, hold up! Veronica Mars!”

I turn, and holy shit, it’s Stuart Cobbler, acne-ridden, even skinnier and surlier than he was in Boat Reality. He shuffles up towards me with his hair in his eyes. “That’s you, right?” he asks, shaking his bangs back. “Nice SPEECH you just made.”

“Thanks,” I say, sizing him up, gears in my brain frantically turning. “It came from the heart.”

He snorts, patent cynicism, and says, “So you know Corny Bishop, right?”


“He had to take off, ‘cause their dad’s making them eat at Magic Wok. But he said Carrie wanted him to give you this.”

Cobb holds out a white envelope, gold around the edge, my name in elaborate cursive on the front. I accept it and say, “Gee, thanks.”

“Enjoy graduation day.” He fixes me with his creepy unblinking leer, then turns and ambles away.

I stare after him, mind racing; rip open the envelope. Inside is a page torn from a Moleskine; which,
in elaborate script, reads, ‘V—you need to keep Logan off the boat. Molly Fitzpatrick was bragging
today that her family’s not as down and out as people think. They’re pissed you turned them in to the
FBI, and plan to hurt you in revenge. I think THEY made Logan’s threatening phone call, and he’s
the one in danger.’

I stare at the page, mind whirring; remember Carrie’s gossip notebook and gold pen. Just an hour
earlier, when she took charge of Dick, she didn’t seem concerned. But if she dashed off a cautionary
note, these are materials she’d choose.

Also I’d lay odds Cobb knows Corny, at least as a highly-satisfied customer. So if this is a setup, it’s
at least plausible.

Plausible ENOUGH, in fact, that Boat Reality Veronica must have bought it. THIS has to be the
reason V missed the party. She didn’t know Stuart Cobbler from Adam—so she’d have no reason to
be suspicious. The unnecessary lingering at the auditorium, the fight she pulled over to continue, the
make-up/make-out session LOGAN had to end…those were STALLING tactics!

No wonder she turned her face to the wall, after the tragedy happened. She managed to save Logan,
but at the expense of everyone else.

On my last visit to the past, though, I told Wallace to email kittenfancy, and Wallace ALWAYS
comes through. I warned Logan Cobbler was a threat. Clearly Mac’s on the case, too, turning up
suspects left and right. Whoever ends up being behind this—Johnson, Cobbler, Father Fitzpatrick,
Satan—isn’t gonna catch us napping.

I shove the note in my pocket, take off at a trot, dodging lingering graduates. Push the door to the
parking lot open so hard, it clangs against the wall.

Logan’s idling in the Range Rover near the entrance, wearing jeans and deck shoes, topped with a
dark grey hoodie. “Right on schedule,” he says, grinning, as I climb up.

I toss the note on his lap. “Looky what Stuart Cobbler just handed me,” I say. “He CLAIMED it was
from Carrie, via Corny. I haven’t worked out the details yet—but that piece of shit’s involved
somehow in our looming disaster.”

Logan unfolds and reads the paper, the upside down v between his eyes indenting. “Veronica made
us late on purpose,” he says, locking me in the tractor beam of his stare. “Right? She was trying to
protect me, in the other reality. That’s why we missed the boat.”

“Looks that way,” I say. “But this time, we know better than to trust the messenger.”

“I can’t WAIT to get my hands around Cobbler’s neck and squeeze,” Logan says, gunning the
engine. We peel off, leaving a mark.

The Sound Seas Marina at Neptune Bay features a red-roofed, octagonal office, adjacent to the
guarded lot. It’s nestled in the V of two arterial walkways; these branch off into multiple dead-end
docks. Attached bays like parking spaces house the racing and recreational boats—little yachts, like
the one Berkeley Logan owns. At a distance from these lesser toys range the big slips, where the
multi-million-dollar pleasure cruisers live.

Logan leads me that direction by our linked hands, while I gaze doubtfully at the massing
thunderclouds. “Nice night for a disaster,” I say, which makes him smirk.
“Somebody up there decided we weren’t sufficiently challenged.” He points at a sharp-nosed behemoth two slips down and says, “Behold—the Nautilus. Jake Kane’s mid-life crisis, and perhaps our watery grave.”

The boat is white, with three levels, and a massive foredeck designed for entertaining. This thing would make Captain Nemo proud—it’s the most luxurious and modern ship in the marina. “That’s the wheelhouse,” he tells me, pointing towards the smallest deck, way up at the top. “The galley is immediately below that, on the windowed level with the cabins. And the engine room is below THAT, sandwiched between the storage compartment and the A/C room. I have a printout of the floorplan in my wallet, if you want to take a look.”

“Check you out, being all thorough.” I spot Lilly, leaning against a wooden railing alongside the boat. She’s texting furiously, while a man in commando black quarters the deck. “And look at HER, taking our safety seriously. Supervising in person, while the security team searches.”

“Enh, maybe half-supervising.” He nods at her phone. “Half generating-relationship-drama, at the speed of wi-fi. Listen, I’m gonna leave you two here for maybe fifteen minutes, where it’s relatively safe, and fetch food from the Snack Shack down the road. The order’s already been placed. I figure we’ll probably be busy later, so eating now’s smart.”

“Let’s see that floorplan,” I say, holding out a hand. “And pretty please, bring me a chocolate shake.”

“You got it, sugar plum.” He locates a creased paper, trades it for a kiss. “Back in a flash.”

I settle next to Lilly, who nudges me with her hip but keeps texting. Study the printout until I’ve got it memorized. Then I pull out my phone and dial Carrie, because Cobb’s note is preying on my brain.

“Save me,” she says, in greeting; she doesn’t sound so hot. “I’m at Magic Wok with my family, surrounded by flying knives. Dick and Corny are competing to see who can eat the hottest pepper.”

“Are you…feeling OK?” I ask. Abruptly remembering that stomach flu made her miss the cruise in Boat Reality.

“Bad burrito last night,” she says, morose. “A bunch of us went to see the Dandy Warhols, then stopped for dinner at Taco Heaven. I should have paid more attention to the food inspector’s notice—it was tacked up by the door.”

“Ew,” I say, because Taco Heaven is a favorite of the surf crowd; and I KNOW better than to touch their shrimp. “Hey, this creepy misfit guy just handed me a warning about the party tonight, and he claimed it was from you. What’s the deal?”

“Oh YEAH,” she says. “I was pretty wasted last night, but I vaguely remember writing that. Corny’s friends were talking about Molly going off, and I thought you should know. I mean it’s not like the Fitzpatricks are EVER happy with you, Veronica. But of course you wouldn’t want anything to happen to Logan.”

“True that,” I say. “So are you skipping the party, then? Due to illness?”

“I’ll bring the guys by after they eat,” she tells me, over an escalating background hoots-and-whistles ruckus. “And I’ll try my best to stay. But I’m currently carrying around a barf bag, which is likely to see use. So really, it’s anyone’s guess.”

“Be strong,” I say, as the chants of ‘EAT IT, EAT IT!’ behind her grow deafening, and hang up. Then wonder if I should worry about her and Cobb, cooperating.
Lilly sends off one more burst of text, growls exasperation, and stuffs her phone in her purse. “Ugh! I’m beginning to think Jackie’s lying, when she says she hates scenes.”

“Of COURSE she’s lying,” I say, because COME ON. “She LIVES for scenes. To be fair, though, you’re no slouch in that department yourself.”

Lilly cracks a smile at this, but still seems pissed. “ALL she’s done this ENTIRE week is avoid discussing Our Future. I mean, it’s almost summer! I have to choose a SCHOOL! And I’m the LAST person who wants to ‘define relationships’, or even TALK about relationships, honestly. But we’ll stay in a holding pattern forever if we both practice denial. Ronica, what should I DO?”

“You’re asking the wrong girl,” I tell her. “Denial is my chief coping strategy.”

“Ugh,” she mutters, hopping up to pace, because Lilly is incapable of sitting still when stressed. “This doesn’t even need to be an issue. I mean, it’s true her dad sold his house, then bought a smaller one. But his new place still has a guest room! She and her kid can live there! Only she keeps bitching about how she hates sunshine whenever I suggest that, and talks nostalgically about New York.

“I mean, sure, I could visit her on the jet every month. But let’s face it, that is NOT enough sex for a normal human with needs. And unless you guys come with me to live in Dad’s penthouse, I’m not giving up my whole life for a LOVAH! Because seriously; she’s my first girl/girl, and she’s not exactly what I’d call devoted. Plus, maybe I’ll decide after a while that I like boys better. Or what if the thing I feel for her isn’t love! I mean, am I even MEANT to be monogamous and settle down? ME?

“Besides, really, I’m NINETEEN, Ronica! I’m still not sure who I want to BE when I grow up! And it’s not the kid that’s the problem, I LOVE kids. But she keeps saying she doesn’t want her child exposed to angst, or getting attached to someone who’ll grow bored and leave. Which I totally understand, but FEAR’S not gonna make me commit. Plus, I don’t want to leave GRACE, not now when I’m finally allowed to see her again. She’s doing so much BETTER, too, Ronica! She goes horseback riding every day!”

I watch as a guy in scuba gear emerges from beneath the boat, climbs dripping onto the dock. Talks to the man standing on deck, who’s carrying a clipboard. The diver shoves his mask up his forehead, wipes his streaming face.

“My advice is, don’t rush,” I tell Lilly, patting her hand. “Like you said, you’re only nineteen. You fell headfirst into this relationship as is your tendency, because it felt dangerous and forbidden and hot. So maybe the solution, if you want things to be different, is to take it slow? Decide whether you have buyer’s remorse BEFORE you get in too deep?”

“Easy for you to say,” she pouts, putting an arm around me. “You’re HAPPY being in over your head with Logan. You keep swimming out DEEPER.”

“Lils, Logan and I work hard every DAY at staying together,” I say, exasperated. “Being desperately in love does NOT make relationships easy.”

A green Beetle pulls into the lot by the office as she studies me, first surprised, then considering; Mac climbs out, hauling a stuffed-to-the-gills backpack. “Sorry I’m late,” she calls, deflecting attention as she strides over. “My parents took me to that new vegan Chinese place all the way out on Loma Vista. Then insisted on staying for DESSERT.”

Lilly raises her brows at me and says, “I thought you wanted to DECREASE attendance to this party.”
I make a face. “Meet my competition in the favor-trading business. Lilly Kane, Cindy Mackenzie. I’m not saying this girl’s SMARTER than me, Lils. But she’s got a theory about tonight’s problem that we all need to hear.”

“Oh, I’m definitely smarter,” Mac contradicts, with her faint smile. “But she keeps up surprisingly well, when I explain things slowly.”

“We think this guy might be the one who called in the threat,” I explain, ignoring the incredulous looks Lils is flashing. I locate the printout Mac gave me at graduation. “Randy Johnson’s his name. Stuart Cobbler, the creep on the end, is also a possible concern.”

The clipboard-bearer is beckoning, and Lilly gestures at him with the printout. “Duty calls,” she says, with a last, dubious glance at Mac. “I’ll show him this paper, when he’s finished his Serious Grizzled Commando speech. Be right back.”

“So! Interesting graduation ceremony,” Mac quips, as Lilly sashays off--then puts her flirtatious moves on Buff Security Guy with an ease that makes me smile. “If that was the warm-up for our evening ahead, I have major concerns.”

“In my defense, I lost my speech,” I say. “And I was sick of being judged.”

“No, that part was actually HILARIOUS,” she tells me drily. “And extremely informative. The interesting bit was Weevil’s arrest. Do you think he really killed someone?”

I do brief battle with myself about whether to keep my mouth shut; but if she’s going to end up dating him, she deserves to know the facts. “Maybe? I’m genuinely not sure. Under very specific circumstances, he’s capable…but this doesn’t sound to me like his handiwork. Personally, I think Weevil shot Thumper in the leg, and left him at that construction site for the Fitzpatricks. After which, the Irish Powers That Be decided two birds, one stone. Weevil gave them a lot of grief, back when he helmed the PCH’ers, and they own the current Sheriff. It’s likely Vinnie will push to convict, guilt notwithstanding.”

“So you think he’s an accessory, in this specific instance. But not the actual murderer.”

“Weevil’s my friend,” I say, hedging. “He’s loyal to me, and I’m not scared of him. But fluffy, cuddly bunnies don’t end up leaders of motorcycle gangs. Those long-lashed cow eyes of his are deceptive.”

“It occurs to me I have a taste for problematic men,” Mac says, with a slight, sardonic head shake. “I guess it’s good I’ve learned this about myself young.”

“Well, I highly doubt Dick Casablancas would ever murder anyone,” I say, shrugging apologetically. “But if you’re looking for a guy who complements your noble side, or even just…doesn’t sleep around, I’m not sure he qualifies.”

She laughs. I find myself wondering why Mac is so changeable, across universes; my roommate in one, my arch-enemy in another. Dating, variously, Logan, Weevil and Dick, none of whom interested her back home. She always seems cool and unruffled, despite her wide range of flux--whereas Logan’s forever in alt, yet never seems to change.

Why does Mac, seemingly, HAVE no fate, but people like Meg can’t avoid theirs? Why do some, such as Lilly, just need to get past one critical juncture? How can I hope to understand and navigate a system this complicated? I’m not know as a quitter, but it seems like hubris to even TRY.

“Well, then. Guess I’ll just go stag for the time being, and stick to my strengths.” Mac clicks her
tongue, dismissing angst, “For the record though, my dark side isn’t all THAT bad. I’m really more about taking assholes down a peg, and making a profit, than I am about ruining lives.”

Carrie’s navy-blue Miata pulls in, crooked, beside Mac’s Beetle before I can respond to this; she, Dick and Corny pile out. The guys’ laughter suggests less-than-legal refreshments were enjoyed, on the ride over. She moves cautiously closer as they surge forwards, game face firmly in place, but she’s clearly the worse for wear. I’m touched, once again, by how hard she’s trying to help.

“I hope you have a bottle of Pepto in your purse,” I tell Carrie, as Dick yells “YO MACSTER, YOU CAME!” and lifts her into a hug.

Corny stops short, apparently just noticing the yacht, and says, “DUDE, this boat fucking ROCKS,” in awed tones.

“Pepto’s not cutting it,” Carrie sighs, essaying a failed smile, and sinks onto the wooden fence. “I’ve gotta go home and pass out. I should have listened to Cobb last night, when he warned me to chug whiskey. Maybe it would have killed the germs currently pillaging my digestive tract.”

“Oh yeah, do what THAT guy says. I’m SURE he has your best interests at heart.” I watch as Mac removes a hand-held video game from her pocket. She gives it to Corny, and Dick tackles him, trying to take possession. “Is Dick still blackout wasted? Or slightly more prepared to cope with reality?”

“I confiscated the pills in his pocket,” she says, patting her purse. “And he drank five Cokes with his lunch. But he managed to share a doob with Corny while I was puking in the bathroom, so he’s currently pretty loopy. Where’s Logan, anyway? Did he finally show some sense, and agree to stay home?”

“He’s fetching burgers,” I say. “As if Logan Echolls would EVER walk AWAY from flames.”

She sighs. “Dumbass,” she says, with affection. “Well, I TRIED to warn him. When he ends up in the hospital, I’ll be sure to send flowers.” She smooths her hands over her hair, curls them around the back of her neck. “If Lilly goes ahead with the party, you might want to send Dick home in a cab. Because you KNOW he’ll play faithful lieutenant, if there’s a fistfight. And in this condition, he’ll get his ass kicked sideways.”

“Noted.” I squint at the Range Rover, as it pulls into the lot, point to draw her attention. “And you can warn the dumbass yourself. He just returned.”

“Who wants burgers?” Logan calls, flinging his door open and standing up on the running board. “I bought a shitload.”

Wallace exits from the passenger seat, double-double wedged in his mouth, then pulls the back open for Jackie. She climbs out with arms crossed; she’s not eating, and she doesn’t look happy, either. Her gaze zeroes in on Lilly, flirt-chatting with Security Guy, and her frown deepens.

“Double meat, no veggies, chocolate shake,” Logan says, presenting mine with a flourish. Studies Carrie, brow furrowed, and flattens a palm against her forehead. “Guess I don’t need to ask if YOU want food,” he says. “Go home, Bishop. I’ll babysit your boyfriend, don’t worry.”

He kisses me on one eyebrow, hands me a cardboard basket of fries, and carries his box full of bags to Mac and Dick. “Grilled cheese,” he says, handing her a sandwich. “Strawberry shake. You guys want something, or you still full of stir-fry?”

“Man, you got fries?” Corny eyes the bags like he did the yacht. “I could TOTALLY go for fries.
No chocolate, though, brah, it cuts the buzz.”


Lilly approaches, leading Security Guy, and chirps, “Looks like the gang’s all here! How ‘bout you tell them what you just told me, so we can get this show on the road?”

Her conversational partner seems to be the man in charge—he’s buff, mid-30’s-ish, with a sprinkling of grey throughout his no-nonsense black buzz cut. His darkly-tanned face is craggy and expressionless, but there’s a spark of irritation in his pale brown eyes. “This is like half your guest list. You want me to run down security precautions in front of ALL these people?”


“This is the inner circle,” Lilly says, with dramatic emphasis. “I trust them all with my LIFE.”

The guy looks like he wants to roll his eyes, but chooses instead to comply. “You’re the client. So yeah, everybody, I’m Paul Munoz. I’ll be leading the Security Solutions team for this party. At this point we’ve been all over that boat, checked the engine for problems, sent a diver to examine the hull underwater. We even peeked in the air vents, as instructed. It’s completely clean; I would go so far as to add, lovingly maintained. If anybody wanted to sabotage this whale, they’d have to haul the gear on with them, and we’re not gonna let that happen.

“We investigated the phone threat and came up empty—nobody’s called Mr. Echolls in the last five months except his close friends and his mother. We’re thinking, at this point, that it was a drunken prank. So if any of you standing here is responsible, you might want to save us all some stress, and let your pal know.”

He waits for a minute; when everyone stays silent, he shrugs. “We did background checks on each person who’ll be present tonight, and I’ll say this…you’re a colorful bunch. But nobody raises red flags, from a security perspective. Danny over there,” he gestures at the guy in the wetsuit, who’s peeled it halfway down, and is chatting with a big, blonde, bearded Viking, “is gonna be up on deck with a list, which contains driver’s license photos. Nobody’s getting on board without a matching photo ID, and yes, we’re trained to spot fakes. The other guy, Bruce, is gonna patrol the ship. I’ll be in the wheelhouse, making sure we go where we’re supposed to, and return without incident—and FYI I’ve captained bigger boats than this, so I know the drill. Additionally we’ve got operatives undercover in all critical locations. So if anybody acts suspicious, we’ll be ready.”

Undercover operatives, I think. Leo. No wonder Lilly didn’t hire a more prestigious band.

“In my professional opinion,” Munoz continues, a faint note of sarcasm creeping in, “the only reason to call off this party would be the weather, which is looking slightly sketchy. We’re equipped to handle anyone who causes trouble…we could take down a SPECIAL FORCES team, if they roped in to play hide-and-seek. Plus, we’ve been thoughtfully supplied with a disturbing amount of protective equipment, should problems arise.”

He directs a look of suppressed amusement at Logan, and takes a big bite, apparently done. Lilly dusts her hands together, and says, “Welp! Crisis averted! Hopefully Paul’s speech settles your minds—and I didn’t sink five hundred grand into a graduation blowout for no apparent reason. You can go ahead and let the crew board, Mr. Munoz. Now, if you’ll all excuse me, I have a…discussion to finish, which should be easier without texts to HIDE BEHIND.”
She flashes a sparking look at Jackie, and saunters off, hips swinging. Jackie rolls her eyes, arms still angrily crossed, and follows. Paul, nonchalantly eating, watches them go.

“Did you find any signs of email tampering?” I ask him, waving my hand in his face to divert attention from Lilly’s butt. “In your back-and-forth with Lilly, over the last few days?”

“Per customer request,” he says, around a mouthful of food, “all communication with Miss Kane has been one hundred percent in person. It’s currently the most popular job on our duty roster.” He winks at me, waves with the burger, and heads off towards the boat, clearly unworried.

Mac moves to stand beside me, folding paper neatly around an uneaten half-sandwich. “You still think something’s gonna happen, right?”

“Yup,” I say, flatly. “Let’s call it woman’s intuition.”

“Then I’m sticking around. I’m not overly concerned about safety, with Rambo there in charge; and I want to see if I’m right about what ends up going down.”

“I’m staying too,” Wallace informs me, coming up beside Logan, snagging another burger. “If Logan’s watching YOU, I need to be watching Dick. Speaking of which, where the hell did he go? He was RIGHT THERE on the fence like two minutes ago.”

“Over by the boathouse,” Logan says, pointing with his shake. He pauses to enjoy a drink. “He took off with Corny, so just look for the smoke plume.”

Wallace groans and jogs away, and I look around. “Carrie’s missing, too.”

“She split,” Logan informs me. “Puked in that garbage can, while Munoz was making his speech, then drove rapidly away.”

“Guess it’s just us chickens,” I sigh. Try a mouthful of fries. “You game for this joyride, after the professional-opinion speech? Or you want to take another stab at sabotage?”

“I’d rather be on board where I can help, than on the dock, where I have to watch,” he says.

“Same,” I say, offering my hand, palm up. “All aboard the Titanic, then, I guess.”

He takes it, and our fingers entwine as we walk up the ramp. We’re the very first passengers.

Logan and I quarter the boat, matching visuals to the floorplan, meeting and assessing staff.

The crew is minimal. Gruff old Eli’s the captain, a man of few words in his sixties, with smoker’s teeth, tired eyes, and a full grey beard. Chubby, garrulous sandy-blonde Bob, the mechanic, knows his engines, but is otherwise maybe not the sharpest knife in the drawer. And Sal, aropy, athletic guy in his 20’s with a mermaid tattoo, doesn’t seem to have an actual job function—so I’m guessing, based on attitude, that he’s a security plant. These three arrive first, and begin working through a checklist, to prep the boat for launch. They’re lectured at length by Paul, while he eats a party-sized bag of M&M’s.

The Big Bang team arrives next, two middle-aged Chinese men with a family resemblance, and a teenager who looks sublimely bored. They haul pyrotechnics on deck in baskets, and set up base near the prow. The teenager translates for me when I approach, affecting politeness; but none of them seem interested in chatting.
Martha’s Kitchen employees have already showed when we make it down to the kitchen, all waiters and waitresses roughly my age; they’re cracking jokes, while desultorily assembling canape trays. The only familiar face is Elaine Santos, a quiet girl from my history class; she seems startled to see Logan and I among the peons. Leland James I recognize as a Pan High basketball player… the rest I’ve never met. Randy Johnson, strangely, isn’t present.

I approach Rams’ former flame, the red-haired Tamara, who’s slicing cheese in one corner, and ask why Johnson’s missing. She does a massive eye-roll. “Martha called his cell, and he SAID he was coming. But you know, he’s kind of… unreliable. Luckily Moses is new, and is picking up all the shifts he can. He agreed to fill in.”

I clock Moses Hamilton, sleekly athletic, confident and good-looking; think Paul could have made a MINOR effort to ensure his plants were subtle. He winks at me when he catches me looking, essays a wide, white grin. I shake my head, because THESE are the expensively-trained professionals.

We don’t bother talking to Leo’s band, since 1) we’ve met them, 2) we know which one’s working for Paul, and 3) Logan holds a grudge. Instead, we settle by the railing, watching the catering crew set up tables, while the Heavies assemble their kit.

“So we got interrupted this morning, before I was awake enough to talk cases,” Logan says, leaning back on both elbows, while the breeze ruffles his hair. The sun’s behind him—not low enough yet to paint the sky colors, but near enough the horizon to turn light gold. Logan’s zipped his hoodie, to combat the rain-threatening cool, and already he looks tired. “We’ve been crunching Sharks Killer data, though, Veronica and Mac and I; and we’ve figured some important stuff out.”

“You and Mac and VERONICA?” I ask, surprised. “You mean Other Me is IN on this?”

He rubs his nose, abashed, turns to study the water. “Yeah,” he says. “That’s what I was trying to tell you, the day Lucky got killed. It, uh, transpires that she’s been investigating Beaver since the beginning, and… neglecting to inform me. Whereas I have ALSO been investigating, and hiding it from HER; because the last time she found out, she got pissed and dumped me. Anyway, two weeks ago, I caught her snooping, and we had a slight… difference of opinion. Then decided, ultimately, to pool our information.”

The look he turns on me is sardonic, and I start laughing. “I KNEW it!” I say. Point at him, victorious. “I KNEW she was trying to catch him herself, while keeping you safe! It’s what I would have done, when I was her; before I fell into the slipstream and learned better, that is. Just how volatile WAS this difference of opinion?”

“On a scale of one to ten?” he asks. “Thirteen. She came around, though, in the end. And the solution she thought up last night is GENIUS.”

I make a keep-going motion with my hand. He says, “So the six possible murder victims thus far are Peter Ferraire, Michael Showalter, Lucky, Beaver, Marcos Oliveras, and Rick Braxton. All of them were on Woody’s little-league team for the same two years. Oliveras and Ferraire continued for a third year, and so did Beaver, but then he quit right after the season started.

“When we started cross-referencing this list against the guys who testified at Woody’s trial, though, we realized; Showalter and Braxton weren’t witnesses. And there’s no evidence they were ever, um, mistreated.”

He pulls the paper out of his pocket that he was reading in bed earlier, hands it over. “Here’s a list of the other team members, during those apparently critical two years.” He runs his finger down a column of names. “Of these, a couple guys, namely Applegate and Taylor, gave testimony in the
Goodman trial. But when Mac tried to hack into the court records, she found their depositions unreadably damaged. These three, Braxton, Kimmons and Acevedo, are the ones I saw Beaver investigating, that day in the computer lab I told you about.

“Ronica, the people dying aren’t necessarily Woody’s victims. They’re just guys who were on the TEAM. Five adult victims testified during the trial, and they haven’t been targeted. Which they WOULD have been already, if the killer had some creepy compulsion about going in ‘order’.”

“The murderer’s getting rid of WITNESSES,” I realize, snapping my fingers. “He’s killing anyone who might remember what happened to HIM. He hacked into their testimony and damaged it, erasing all records of his victimization. Which means…somebody on this LIST must be guilty.”

Logan nods, sober. “Ergo, Luke’s a suspect,” he says quietly. “So’s Randy Johnston. And you heard Tamara just now, Randy’s not dead—he answered his phone, when Martha called. I think Mac’s right, Ronica. I think Johnson’s the one who’ll show up with a gun.”

“Well, Lilly gave Paul his picture, and warned him to keep watch.” I lean into Logan’s side, tucking hands in pits against the chill. He drapes an arm over my shoulder, cuddling me close. “I guess now we just need to wait, and see if he shows.”

XXXXX

Logan steals sodas and a plate of chocolate tarts from the catering setup in progress. We fold ourselves into lounge chairs, where we have a view of the whole front deck. Leo and crew have moved on to sound check; Dick, Mac and Wallace are clustered near the stage, watching. Lilly and Jackie are nowhere to be seen.

There’s movement to my left. A twenty-something guy in black commando gear settles on the lounge beside me. He’s cute, dark-eyed and dimpled, spiky black hair messy and damp—probably he was under the boat, checking for bombs.

“You’re Veronica Mars, right?” he asks, re-knotting the lace on his boot. “The girl who thinks there’s a threat? I’m Danny Campos, uh, obviously I work for Paul.”

“Guilty!” I say brightly, shaking his proffered hand. “You must be the guy who compiled my dossier. This is my boyfriend Logan, he agrees with me. About the threat, I mean.”

“Tart?” Logan asks, holding out the tray. Danny grins and takes three.

“Best part about jobs like this,” the guy confides, tucking the first into his cheek and talking around it. “Free food. Listen, Paul thinks you’re nuts, in case you couldn’t guess. But my brother’s girlfriend’s in the FBI, and she told me all about you. Said you delivered the Fitzpatricks on a platter-then asked for an internship, so you could learn to be a profiler. She thinks you’re a real go-getter, and wouldn’t waste our time without credible suspicion.”

“Your friend in the FBI is right,” I say, with a glance at Logan…because, ally. “I’m not prone to histrionic nonsense, or flights of fancy.”

“Yeah, Vivian Morris is an excellent judge of character,” he says. “Except as regards my brother. But I gotta say, I’m curious WHY you think there’s a threat. Because you and I both know the scary-phone-call thing is bullshit. Unless one of your high-society friends is a lot more deranged than they seem.”

“Huh,” Logan says without heat, examining the pie he’s holding. “That sounded a lot like you calling me a liar.”
“It’s not my policy to judge clients,” Danny counters, biting into another tart. He doesn’t seem fazed by the implied threat. “You pay, we do what you say, that’s the job.”


“I think it’s scheduled for tonight, which is why I’ve tried my damndest to get this party cancelled. But Lilly won’t budge, for the same reason I can’t report this to the authorities…no proof. She hired you to placate me, because she loves us, but she’s not at all scared. So right now we’re just…trying to stay watchful, and hoping I’m wrong.”

Danny wipes chocolate from his lips with the back of one hand. “It’s good you called our company, instead of the cops. Neptune PD are a bunch of morons on the take. They did OK when your dad was in charge; but nobody took Sacks seriously. And now that Van Lowe’s running the show, things have headed quickly downhill.” He makes a stab at brushing crumbs off his vest, then points towards Logan. “You believe her though, right? Enough to fake that phone call, and bully Miss Kane into hiring security. You’ve been following your girl around since you came on board, too, acting like a guard dog.”

“Veronica’s telling the truth,” Logan says, mildly, setting down the empty tray. “She’s ALWAYS right about this stuff. It’s almost like she has precognition.”

I elbow him, and he smirks at me.

Campos eyes Logan, both amused and assessing. “You fight, don’t you? Think you’re tough. That’s why you assigned yourself to protect her.”

“Why, whatever do you mean?” Logan presses a hand flat to his chest. “Any guy with BRAINS would follow Ronica around. To enjoy the view, if for no other reason.”

Campos snorts. “You DO,” he insists. “You have that look. No fat, light on your feet, kinda crazy around the eyes. What’s your style?”

“Krav Maga,” Logan says, relenting. “Level 5 brown belt. I’m hoping to test for black in the fall.”

“No shit?” The guy raises his eyebrows. “Weapons training?”

Logan see-saws his hand. “I can dismantle,” he says. “And I can shoot. Only handguns though, basic urban self-defense.”

Campos quirks skeptical brows, and yeah he’s definitely suppressing laughter. “A real hotshot. You dive?”

“Nope,” Logan says, popping the p. “I surf, though, semi-professionally. And I can fly a plane.”

Danny gives in to his amusement, shaking his head as he chuckles. “You two are a pair,” he says. Then, raising his voice, calls to someone behind me, “Hey Bruce, get over here!”

Bruce proves to be the big, blonde Thor-lookalike; he’s older than Danny, maybe early 30’s, and I doubt much surprises him. He approaches, laconic, and sits on the chair opposite.

“Hey man, unload your piece and hand it over,” Danny says, gesturing at the gun on Bruce’s hip.
“Like hell,” Bruce scoffs, leaning back. “Do I LOOK like I want to get fired?”

“This kid does tricks.” Danny inclines his head towards Logan, who obligingly gives a finger wave.

Bruce makes a face. “I’m not giving my Sig to some kid to do tricks. Go play this game with Hamilton, he’s the fucking POG.”

“I won’t break it,” Logan says, calmly.

“See? He won’t break it.” Danny, clearly the shit-stirrer of the private security crew, thinks this is all hilarious. He extends a palm and beckons. “Dame lo.”

Bruce gazes at him for a minute, rolls his eyes. Unloads his gun and tosses it over. Logan turns the thing around in his hands once, studying intently; then dismantles it in four quick moves and hands the pieces back. “See?” he says, upper lip lengthening into his most obnoxious smirk. “Just like Jackie Chan.”

Bruce looks at Danny, who’s laughing pretty hard now, cracks a smile. Efficiently re-assembles and loads the gun. “Grow up,” he says, shaking his head, and wanders off to patrol some more.

“I like this kid,” Danny asserts, to no one in particular. “You ever decide you want to make a job out of that attitude, Echolls, you call my friend in the Navy. He’ll help you out.” He pats several pockets on his cargoes, extracts a business card and pen. Writes on the back, hands it over. Logan studies the name and number, then slips the card into his wallet.

“Gotta go stand by the ramp.” Campos hops up, stretching his neck sideways to prep for action. The bones align with an audible click. “It’s almost time for guests to board. But Bruce and I, we’ll keep an eye out for the guy in your picture, Veronica. He’ll help you out.” He pats several pockets on his cargoes, extracts a business card and pen. Writes on the back, hands it over. Logan studies the name and number, then slips the card into his wallet.

“Thanks,” I say, meaning it.

He shrugs. “And you.” He points at Logan. “Keep your girl safe.”

Logan salutes, which makes Danny laugh again; he wanders off, still chuckling. “Useful acquaintance,” Logan murmurs, watching him go. “Assuming we survive tonight, we should cultivate it.”

“That’s my sugar bear,” I say, patting his thigh. “Always playing the long odds.”

Casey and Luke are the first to arrive. They dutifully present their ID’s, Casey snickering throughout the process; then wander over to the stage where we’re congregated, watching the band play Third Eye Blind covers. “Well THIS sucks,” Casey observes, sprawling on a lounger beside Logan, initiating a bro-shake. “Couldn’t the Kane billions buy a DECENT band?”

“Could, didn’t,” Logan says, pointing out the stocked bar. “Lilly has her own mysterious reasons.”

“Dude, where’s Bodie?” Dick interjects, high-fiving an unenthusiastic Luke. “I thought he was catching a ride with you guys.”
“He has a DATE,” Casey says, directing a pointed look at Mac, who rolls her eyes. “MY girl cancelled, because I’m doomed to be forever alone, post-Darcy. But HIS is hanging on for dear life with all ten fingernails.”

“Ashley and Shelly were my clients who saw reason, when given incentive not to show,” Mac explains. “Madison is my client who wouldn’t, once she discovered I was attending myself.”

“Imagine someone not wanting to come to this thing,” Luke says morosely, watching Leo guitar-solo. “When it’s the must-attend event of the season.”

“Are you dissing my party?” Lilly demands, appearing from behind the wheelhouse cabin, Jackie in tow. “Because it’s not too late to toss your sad ass overboard.”

“Please do,” Luke says, sprawling back on his lounge and covering his eyes with one hand. “At least it would put an end to my suffering.”

“I take it you didn’t inform him the blackmailer’s almost history?” I ask Logan in an undertone.

“Couldn’t find him in the graduation scrum,” he says, smirking, then calls out, “Hey Luke! Cheer the fuck up! Veronica’s gonna fix your problem for you, bright and early tomorrow morning.”

Luke lifts his hand to look at me, and I toast him with my Coke. “I won’t even break a sweat,” I say, which cheers him enough that he sits back up and tries a smile.

“BO-DAAAAY!” Dick shouts, making me wince, and leaps up to meet his friend as he climbs the ramp. Bodie waves. He’s got his arm draped around Madison, who looks pissed off as usual, and is decked out in a miniskirt and heels. THAT getup will come in handy, when she’s fleeing for her life.

“This is everyone, right?” Wallace asks Jackie, examining his Dr. Pepper and finding it empty. “This is your whole guest list?”

“Enbom’s still missing,” Logan says, checking his watch. “And it’s 6:03. I say we leave without him. Maybe he’ll thank us for it, later.”

Luke suppresses a snicker, assuming Logan agrees about the lameness of the party. Casey pulls out his phone and dials. “Message,” he says, listening. “Enbom, you asshole, you’re missing the PARTY! We’re leaving without you, you’re gonna have to swim out to meet us.” He hangs up, grins, and Dick high-fives him.

Lilly wanders over to confer with Danny, and scout out the parking lot. A minute later, she throws up her hands, and he begins the process of retracting the ramp. He touches his chest and speaks to someone, likely relaying the all-aboard. Thirty seconds later, the engine fires up. The boat cruises ponderously out of the slip, and towards the ocean proper.

“For those about to die,” Logan murmurs, as the marina recedes behind us. Tilts his Coke at me, and I clink it with my Sunkist.

Fifteen minutes later, while Lilly and Jackie are dancing to the Heavies’ rendition of ‘You Shook Me All Night Long’, drawing all male eyes, the hatch to the lower deck swings open. Corny pokes his head out, hair messy and matted on one side, like maybe he’s been asleep. “Whoa,” he says, staring up at the stars, swaying slightly on the steps but clinging to the rail. “Big-ass boat on the MOVE.”

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It’s 6:23. The Nautilus has exited Neptune harbor, and is making its stately way into open ocean,
presumably to cruise in circles not too far from shore. The deck is arranged into restaurant-style groupings of elegantly-laid tables, fronted by a stage and dance floor. There’s a buffet heaped with exotic delicacies alongside, which Madison is devouring, locust-style. Waiters circulate with trays of champagne, while Leo’s band plays pop hits. My nerves are stretched tight enough to snap.

Logan’s over by the railing, watching his friends with an eagle eye and brooding. He chewed out Dick for a solid two minutes after Corny turned up; Corny’s not only clueless about what’s coming, he’s so wasted he passed out. Dick took this reaming with surly poor grace—then got surlier, when he noticed Casey, Bodie and Corny missing, post-lecture. He’s watching the band now, arms folded angrily, while Wallace entertains Mac a few chairs away. They seem to be hitting it off.

Lilly and Jackie danced and laughed until the Corny debacle, disagreement seemingly forgotten. But I guess Logan’s fight brought home the seriousness of the threat, for Jackie; now they’re up at the very end of the bow, out of earshot, arguing AGAIN, making the firecracker crew works around them. Luke’s chatting with Sal, the real-bodyguard fake-crewman, while sipping a Mai Tai. Based on his body language, he seems to be REALLY enjoying the conversation.

“Yo, Veronica,” comes a voice at my elbow, and I turn to see Danny Campos behind me, dry now but looking harried. “Hold out your hand, down low, keep it real casual.”

I do, resting it palm up against my hip, and he drops in a tangled mess of round objects and string. “You know how to use these, right?” he asks, moving smoothly away to acquaintance conversational distance.

I thumbs-up, and he smiles. “Don’t get me in trouble,” he says. “I gave you mics, just in case, but no shouting orders over the comms.”

He starts to walk off and I say, “Hey, one thing. Do you like private security? Do you find it rewarding?”

“I like the PAYCHECK,” he says. “It’s a helluva lot more money than I made in the Navy, for the same work. And I like the balance between freedom and structure. Most guys don’t get to do the things I do, on a regular basis. And most guys wish they could.” He gestures with his chin at Logan, who’s watching us, but not interfering. “He might enjoy it,” Danny says. “He seems like the type who needs structure. You though…I’m thinking you prosper in a more rule-free environment.”

I laugh. “You think right. Thanks for the security blanket.”

“Hope you have a boring-ass evening,” he says, winking at me. Stations himself by the hatch leading downstairs and stands at military-parade-rest, keeping everyone on the foredeck in view.

I wander over to Logan, who’s on the phone now; wedge myself between him and the rail. Use his bulk as a shield, while I insert the ear bud, drape the lanyard around my neck, and tuck the attached mic button into my bra. I drop the other set in his palm, and he makes a fist around it. “No dude,” he says, patiently, for what sounds like not the first time. “We’re out PAST the bay. I dunno if you can find a water taxi that will GO this far.”

He puts his hand over the mouthpiece and murmurs, “Enbom got his wires crossed and went to pick up Shelly. He’s at the Marina trying to order a water taxi, what do you want me to say?”

I squint out over the railing. All I see is rolling water, fading away into darkness. “Not spotting little boats anywhere nearby. Where’s the harbor?”

He points. “I can just make two out, by that row of lights. I can’t tell if that’s the public dock, or the
private beach off Hillcrest Drive. My binoculars should be in your messenger bag—take a look, while I try convincing him not to bother.”

He inserts his earbud in one ear and puts the phone to the other; I drape the mic around his neck, then dig out the binoculars and look landward. Yeah, I can see the little glowing chain now, along the peninsula by the bay. Two speedboats cross paths just beyond it, one headed towards a private dock, one headed out.

And whoa…just past the glare, a behemoth, unlit shadow hulking in the deep—an ocean-going vessel, anchored.

I yank the phone away from Logan, say, “Face it, Enbom, you missed the boat,” and hang up. Hand Logan the binoculars, point, and wave to get Danny’s attention. He glances at Sal, who’s still conversing, frowns. Quickly crosses towards us, as Logan curses under his breath.

“Hey Campos, I’d like you to look in the direction I’m pointing, and give your unbiased professional opinion on what’s happening,” I say. I nudge Logan, who hands over the binoculars. Danny bellies up to the rail.

He studies the little boats, industrious as bees. Says, nonchalantly, “Yeah, that’s trafficking. Good eye, Mars. Want me to alert the Coast Guard?”

“Are you thinking Fitzpatricks, Veronica?” Logan demands. “Specifically, the threats Molly made against me, which Carrie told us about, in her note?”

“Note?” Danny asks, and I say, “Yep. But before we go off half-cocked, I need one more professional opinion. You were a SEAL once, right?”

Danny nods.

“Good. Then say some bad guy…a trafficker, maybe…wanted to distract official attention from an extremely lucrative delivery, by just as an example, shooting up a boat full of rich teenagers. And say they sent professionals, such as yourself, to do the shooting. How would those professionals get on the boat unobserved?”

“I’d send swimmers,” he tells me, handing me back the binoculars. His face is suddenly grim. “Underwater that is, with SCUBA, to secure a ladder and take out the wheelhouse. I’d follow that up with an assault crew on a Zodiac…like, an inflatable boat. They’d approach on the swimmers’ signal, and disable the passengers, systematically.”

“And where, on this yacht, would those swimmers hang the ladder?” I ask, as Logan tenses and gathers, his hands curling into fists.

“Rear deck,” Danny says. “Because the party’s on the front, and the pilot’s looking this way. Motherfucker.” He presses the mic button fastened to his vest and says, “This is Campos. Anybody got eyes on the rear deck?”

“So the Boat Tragedy was a DISTRACTION?” Logan demands, in an under-voice. “All these people died to keep the Coast Guard busy, while the Neptune supply chain was replenished?”

“Maybe,” I murmur, as Bruce comes on the comm.

“Heading that way,” Bruce says. “What am I looking for? Kane and her hot girlfriend? Or are we checking to make sure those stoners didn’t fall overboard?”
“I have a sighting of big-league trafficking, about ten miles off to starboard,” Danny says. “Our resident profiler wannabe suggests a professional infil by swimmers, as a distraction. Proceed with caution.”

“Roger that,” Paul says. “Captain’s calling the Feds. Good job identifying the threat, Campos. Rear deck’s not illuminated, switching to NVG. Fuck! BRUCE, GET DOWN, GET DOWN, GET DOWN!”

There’s a sound like a car backfiring, twice; the rear glass wall of the wheelhouse explodes in a spray of fragments. Logan covers me, instinctive, taking me to my knees. Danny hares off running towards the chaos.

“GAS!” Paul shouts, over the comm, voice raw. “Canister in the wheelhouse, Captain is DOWN. Repeat, I am now the one piloting this boat. Masks on, people, then cover up the passengers.”

“Gas in the galley,” Hamilton says. “There must be two shooters. I got three kids in here with me, James, McGuire and Phillips, they need Med Evac pronto. Masking them now.”

“Copy that,” Paul says. “You’re right, Campos, it’s swimmers, I see the boarding ladder. They must have dropped their tanks, so they’re expecting a RIB. Consider armed and dangerous, engage only to disable. Evac of civilians is now your top priority.”

Logan sits up on his heels, trying to see around the wheelhouse to the rear deck--pulls a gun from the back of his jeans. I make a growl of protest, and he waves off my objections with one hand. “Try and remember the sequence of events, Veronica,” he says, eerily calm. “Gas in the wheelhouse and galley. What happens next?”

Gunshots sound from the rear deck, and Bruce says, “Got him. I repeat, shooter is down.”

Danny’s voice, out of breath. “Male, Caucasian, approximately 5’10” brown hair, green eyes. Spoke in some foreign language before he shuffled off this mortal coil. I don’t know which language, but it ain’t related to Spanish.”

Bruce says, “This guy’s not wet, man. Assume secondary assault team has achieved successful infil. I repeat, there are at least three shooters on this boat.”

“Next, the guy in the Engine room gets killed,” I say, closing my eyes to better focus. “That was probably Bruce, but he’s up on deck because of the warning. Lilly’s in a stateroom, changing into jeans. Madison’s puking up her binge in the john. You and I are waiting for the water taxi…”


“We have to get the people on deck under cover,” I tell Logan, opening my eyes. “Next comes the sniper.”

“Cover WHERE?” he demands. “We’re out in the open, and the enclosed second floor’s a wall of windows! It’s not like we have a nice bulletproof bunker to hide behind, while we ready the escape rafts!”

“Luke said the sniper shot from the railing above the tables,” I tell him. “I’m guessing that means the walkway to the left of the wheelhouse, because that wall only has the one small window. Get everybody as close as possible to the inflatable launch, and out of that area’s sightline.”

“Campos just showed up on level two,” Hamilton says. “We’re clearing rooms, so far nothing.”
They tied their RIB to the back of the boat,” Bruce says. “Fucking amateur, drug-dealing pieces of shit. I cut it loose. Sal and I are headed down to level one to clear.”

Logan and I make for the group near the stage; everybody’s milling around, not sure what’s happening. Leo’s band has stopped playing, and Leo’s up by the prow, yelling at the teenage Firecracker Guy. Mac spots us coming and shoves Wallace, who looks startled as he zeroes in on Logan’s gun.

“Was that crash just now shooting?” Mac asks. “It sounded like it. The security guys all started scurrying around, but nobody’s telling us shit.”

“It’s started,” I say. Grab her arm and drag her behind the bar, the only covered area I can see that’s close to the inflatable launches. Logan talks to Jackie, and she comes running after us, followed by Wallace, Elaine Santos, and Leo’s two band members. Just as Logan turns to Luke, a shot rings out.

Logan ducks behind a lounger, flips it on its side. Luke looks puzzled as he falls slowly backwards, blood arcing up from his thigh in a parabolic spray.

Jackie screams. Logan drags the lounger in front of Luke, then begins pulling both towards the cover of the bar. I hear the thunk of bullets, methodically sinking into the wood in front of me.

I decide, fuck getting Danny in trouble, this is life or death. I tap the mic button.

“This is Veronica,” I say. “Six of us are trapped behind the bar on deck, taking sniper fire from the wheelhouse walkway. We need someone to disable the shooter so we can launch a raft, and get off the boat.”

“This is WHO?” Paul asks. “Harbor sighted ahead. Who gave this girl a fucking comm?”

“Veronica Mars,” I say. “Myself, Wallace Fennel, Cindy Mackenzie, Jackie Cook, Elaine Santos…” I turn to one of the band members, give him a shove. He’s shivering as the bullets strike the bar, terrified. “Tell me your name.”

“Danny Arne,” the other band member says, putting a hand on his friend’s back. “I’m Martin Casmir.”

“Arne and Casmir. We’re all here. I can see Logan and Luke Haldemann, they’re under VERY POOR cover, trying to reach us.”

“We’re pinned down in the TV room near the second floor hatch, with the three gas victims from the kitchen,” Hamilton says. “We do not have a good angle on the sniper, repeat, we are NOT able to engage. Second level is clear.”

“Shooter on first,” Bruce says. “Sal just took one in the stomach in the engine room, it’s a soup sandwich down here. We found Bob Whatsisfutz dead in the hall. The blonde who threw the party is hiding behind a boiler, calling 911 on a cell phone. I’m hunkered down in front of her, until I can take this dick out and render aid.”


Logan appears behind the bar, Luke in tow; the wound on Luke’s thigh is gushing blood. Logan unbuckles his belt, rips it out of the loops, and hands it to me. Says, “Tourniquet him, the way you did my mom.”

I get the belt around Luke’s leg and yank it tight, pulling as hard as I can. “I need something I can
“TIE,” I say.

“Where the fuck is D’Amato?” Paul asks. “He’s supposed to be on deck, evac’ing the passengers. Leo, report!”

Wallace shrugs off his button-down over-shirt, holds it out. “Rip it in half,” I say, and he does. I make him hold the belt tight while I knot it above Luke’s wound.

“Luke Haldemann’s shot up here on deck,” Logan says, into the comm. “It’s bad, I think they hit an artery. We got him tourniquet-ed, but he needs a doctor SOON.”

“Is this the BOYFRIEND?” Paul demands. “Jesus, is there anyone on the guest list who doesn’t have a comm? Campos, you’re on my shit list, I know you did this. Who’s missing?”

“Bell and Welch from my crew,” Hamilton says. “Bell went Elvis on a trip to the bathroom, never came back. Welch I haven’t seen since right after the boat left dock.”

“She wasn’t on deck either, when the shooting started,” I say. “We’re also missing Casablancas, Bishop, Gant, Chang, and Sinclair.”

“The four guys were getting high in one of the cabins, before this ruckus started,” Hamilton says. “When we quartered the second deck, they weren’t there anymore.”

A sudden volley of shots comes from the vicinity of the wheelhouse, and the bullets thunking into the bar cease. “Got you, fucker,” Leo’s voice says, in my ear. “This is D’Amato. Sniper on the walkway is down. I think I hit him in the leg, but whatever, he’s not shooting.”

“D’Amato, where the fuck have you been?” Paul asks. “In case you’re not up on the lingo, ‘everybody report’ means you fucking report!”

“Sorry, man. I put the firecracker guys on an inflatable, got them off the ship, but I had to be quiet sneaking up here, so I wouldn’t attract this asshole’s attention. Anybody got a visual? Is he neutralized?”

Logan’s up before I can stop him, gun gripped in both hands. One breath, two, then three shots ring out in quick succession. I expect him to fall back lifeless, a bullet hole through his forehead—a high unearthly whine leaves my throat. But instead he says, “He is now,” and kneels slowly down.

I smack him on the shoulder, hard, after he engages the safety. He pulls me into a hug. He’s breathing really fast, terrified, and his grip on me is punishingly tight. I stroke his spine.

The hatch cracks open and Hamilton emerges, a limp figure over his shoulder. He’s masked, but I can hear him coughing over the comm. “Little help here?” he calls. Wallace jogs over and climbs through the hatch—emerges in a minute, carrying another victim. “Lay them out there by the bar. I’ll prep the inflatable, then get the captain from the wheelhouse while it fills.”

Wallace goes back for the last girl. Mac asks Hamilton, “Can I take the masks off?”

He nods, checking Luke’s blood pressure—he’s moaning, just barely conscious. Mac makes the gas victims comfortable, and Jackie asks, “Can we give Luke anything? For the pain?”

“Not until he’s stabilized,” Hamilton says. Then, into the comm, “What’s the ETA on that helo? This kid’s lost a lot of blood.”

“Seven minutes to dustoff,” Paul says. “I have a visual on the harbor.”
“Shooter in the engine room is down,” Bruce says. “I repeat, threat is neutralized. Another young white male. Sal’s dead. I’m headed up top with Kane.”

“I just found Bell,” Danny says. “In the A/C room. Looks like he tried to take cover behind a unit, then got shot through the slats. Gonna clear the rest of this level, then I’ll be up.”

The raft on deck begins to inflate with a rip of a cord. Leo appears, limping, just as Hamilton heads for the wheelhouse. “Hey, Veronica,” he says, abashed, favoring his right side heavily. “We need to get your friends on that raft and off the boat.”

“Your four missing stoners just emerged from the rear hatch,” Paul says. “They’re back there trying to inflate an escape boat. I don’t know how you fucking missed them, but that’s two strikes, Campos.”

“Yeah well, we may not live long enough for you to punish me,” Danny says. “I just figured out why they had us pinned down in the engine room. Big wad of C-4 on the port fore hull, with a remote detonator. I’m trying to defuse.”

Remote detonator, I think. C-4. Beaver. But Beaver’s DEAD. And this job’s being done by foreign-language-speaking MERCS.

Lilly bursts out of the hatch, followed by Bruce. She runs to Logan, Leo, Wallace and I, while we load injured passengers onto the inflatable. Logan wraps her in a hug, then hands her over to Jackie. “I’m so sorry!” she says, into Jackie’s shoulder. “I should have listened! I’m so SORRY!”

Jackie rocks her. Leo helps Arne, still in shock, into the boat, then says to me, in an undertone, “These things only hold six, and we need to get the injured out first. I’ll go with them, I’ve got first-aid training. Bruce, help me lower it, yeah?”

Leo climbs in, and Bruce uses the winch to drop it carefully into the ocean. Releases the hook with a snap. “Injured passengers away on a launch. Inflating second boat now.”

He gets the second raft hooked up to the winch, then pulls the cord, just as Hamilton returns with the Captain. “I make eight here,” Hamilton says, laying him down. “You put six on this raft, and I’ll go get the stoners, bring ’em back. We don’t want them chilling on the rear deck when the shooters try to get back to their RIB.”

“I know where Madison is,” I tell Bruce, as Hamilton heads off. The boat finishes inflating, and he tests to make sure it’s correctly filled. “She’s bulimic. She probably went downstairs to puke, and got trapped in the john.” From whence, I think, she just watched a shooter walk down the hall.

“Coast Guard ETA twelve minutes,” Paul says. “Helo ETA two minutes. You’re gonna have to risk a flare, so they can lower the cas-evac board to you, D’Amato. Get as far as you can towards the harbor first, in case the ship blows.”

“I have to go with this boat,” Bruce tells me. “And I have to do it now. The captain needs an immediate Med-Evac by helicopter. I can take four, maybe five other people with me, depending on weight. The rest of you need to go with Hamilton on the next boat. Your boyfriend’s gonna prep it for launch, I just showed him how.”

I turn to Logan, and he says, “I’m not getting off this yacht until we save everyone, Veronica. That was the deal, right? Change our fate.”

“Then I’m not either,” I say, grabbing his hand and squeezing. “Ride or die, remember? You and I have comms--we can be of the most use here, if we stay behind.”
He manages a wink, which boggles me, and Lilly says, “Ronica, NO WAY am I leaving you…”

“Yes you ARE,” I say, cutting her off. “I’ll be right behind you on the next boat. You go NOW, because I CANNOT cope with my best friend being dead, Lils. BELIEVE me.”

“I’ll stay,” Wallace says. He moves up beside me, puts a hand on my shoulder. “Logan and I, we’ll keep her from getting all crazy, like you KNOW she does.”

I laugh, and hug Lilly and Jackie. Mac says, “Use good sense, Veronica, because I’m just beginning to not hate you.” Then, tender moment apparently over, she gets on the raft.

Logan flips the lever to send the boat downward, and Bruce says, “I’m away with the Captain, plus Mackenzie, Kane, Cook, Casmir, and Santos. Moving to safe distance now, then I’ll send up a flare for cas-evac.”

“By my list,” Paul says, “We still have on board; myself, Campos, Hamilton, Echolls, Welch, Mars, Fennel, Casablanca, Chang, Gant, Sinclair…and, if these people follow military protocol, one to three more shooters. Their plan’s probably to head to the rear deck, retrieve their RIB and exfil; then blow the boat with the remote, once they’re at a safe distance. So who’s covering the hatches?”

“Nobody’s come out the front one since Bruce brought up Lilly,” Logan says. He’s finished unwrapping the final raft available on the front deck, and he yanks the string to inflate it. Pulls the gun out of his jeans, hands it over to Wallace. “You two get behind the bar again, and watch the hatch. Bear in mind, these assholes may also break a window, then come out the side. That’s what I’d do.”

“Whoever made this bomb has a twisty brain,” Campos says. “There are false identical wires. We need a fucking bomb squad up in here.”

Abruptly there’s the sound of shooting, lots of automatic weapon-rounds from the back of the boat. I lock eyes with Wallace across the length of the bar; he looks as scared as I feel. A man’s yell comes echoing across the water; it escalates in pitch, turns into a scream, then abruptly cuts off.

“I make our four surfers taking fire on the back deck,” Paul says. “No sign of the two girls. The guys have taken cover behind the raft they were trying to inflate. I’m guessing that one’s useless now as a flotation device. Hamilton, report.”

Silence. So I guess we know who screamed.

“Boat’s ready,” Logan says, as he attaches the winch. He looks over at me, very serious in the dark. “We need to go collect our friends. The two mercs left on the yacht are busy.”

In the distance, I hear a helicopter approaching, rotors churning. A red flare shoots up into the sky, which means it takes half an hour to reach safe distance. Probably longer than we HAVE, if the bad guys are already storming the deck. There’s still plenty of shooting going on, back there.

Logan holds out his hand for the gun; Wallace gives it back. He says, “V, take out your taser.”

I do, turn it on. It arcs briefly in the dimness. “The asshole shooting at Dick and Case must be in the rear hatch. I’m gonna get the drop on him, then bring the guys over here.”

“What about Madison?” I ask. “And Tamara?”

“I’m NOT sending you down to look,” Logan says, waving a flat, negating hand. “There’s clearly at least one shooter on the second floor, and neither of you even has a GUN.”
I lean in close to Logan and whisper, “We know Madison lives.” This is bullshit, sure, but maybe it will convince him. “If I’m with her, I’m safe. It’s the rest of the people on this boat that aren’t supposed to be here.”

“Veronica,” he says, softly. “YOU’RE not supposed to be here. Look, at least wait to go down there until I take this guy out. Your watch still working?”

I nod, as a second red flare goes smoking up into the sky. “Meet me back here at this raft in five minutes, no more. Got me? Five minutes, or I come looking for you.”

“Done,” I say. “And as a wise man once told me, keep your head down at all times. Watch where you’re going.”

“I love you Veronica,” he murmurs, and kisses my forehead. Holds his hand out to Wallace, who pulls him into a hug. “I wouldn’t have made it without you either, man,” he says, softly. “Thanks for always having my back.”

“Hey, you saved my life once.” Wallace manages a smile. “This is my way of saying thank you.”

Logan grins. Then he secures his gun in his jeans, turns, and hops the railing. Starts climbing up the boat towards the roof.

“What is this fucking kid doing?” Paul asks, on the comm. “Why did this kid just go right over my head?”

“He’s getting the drop on the shooter,” I say. “Then Wallace and I will rescue Sinclair, while he brings his friends back to the inflatable.”

“Sinclair’s NOT on the second floor, Mars,” Campos says. “I CLEARED the second floor. She’s probably down here on first, and she may be a hostage. Or dead. You get your ass off the boat, and leave the search and rescue to the professionals.”

“All casualties on the helo,” Leo says. “Bruce is going with them to the hospital.”

“Here come the Puddle Pirates. Coast Guard boat is approaching,” Paul tells him. “Light a yellow flare, they’ll pick up the rest of you. Anybody know where the fucking firecracker guys’ raft went?”

“Negative, haven’t spotted them,” Leo says. “But theoretically they can motor right into the marina and drive home. Which is what I’m currently doing, with my remaining passengers. The Coast Guard has more pressing problems.”

There’s a volley of shooting from the rear, Dick’s voice clearly yelling “FUCK!” and Logan saying, softly, “Got the bad guy.”

“Aaaand the kid just jumped off the roof,” Paul says. “I think he might be even crazier than you, Campos. FYI kid, I don’t know where you found that gun, but it needs to get conveniently lost overboard before the Coast guard shows.”

“Roger that,” Logan says. “This inflatable’s full of holes, but we’re gonna use it as a shield while we come around the side. Dick took one in the arm, doesn’t look too bad. The other three are fine. High as fuck, but fine.”

“That’s our cue,” I say to Wallace, who looks confused. I remember he doesn’t have a comm. “Logan’s got the guys, they’re safe. Let’s go.”
We grab the gas masks Mac left on the deck, and put them on, just in case; then leave the safety of the bar, and creep towards the hatch. Climb cautiously inside.

The area past the door is luxuriously appointed in dark wood and pale leather. A conversation nook with big screen TV is set up in front, after which comes a kitchen, then a hallway leading to the staterooms beyond. It looks weirdly normal, considering it’s recently witnessed so much fear and violence.

“OK,” I tell Wallace. “There are six bathrooms, one adjoining each stateroom, so every second door is a john. I take left, you take right, and we watch for any movement coming up from the lower hatch.” I check my watch. “We have three and a half minutes. Go.”

We move quickly down the hall, painfully cognizant of how exposed and vulnerable we are, sporting no real defensive weapons. I move into the first bathroom, check the shower and the stall—then, after reflection, the cupboard under the sink, because that’s where I would hide. Nothing.

I emerge into the hall, and Wallace comes out a second later, shakes his head at me. The mask makes him look like a very serious elephant. We move on to the second doors.

This bathroom is a mirror image of the first. I do the same search—and when I open the sink cabinet, there’s Madison, wearing a gas mask and fear-panting, trying to get the lid off a can of Mace.

“It’s me!” I hiss, as loudly as I dare. “It’s Veronica! I’m here to take you off the boat!”

“Veronica MARS?” she asks, voice weirdly distorted. “God, I’m surprised you’re still alive. If anyone would run at these people Geronimo-style, screaming ‘NOT MY PARTY!’ it would be you.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I say. Then into the comm, “I found Sinclair. She’s OK. Danny, you forgot to check under the sink.”

“Who are you talking to?” Madison asks. “Have you finally gone crazy?”

At the same time, Paul says, “How does an adult human being fit under those sinks?”

“Who says she’s an adult?” I ask, as I extend a hand to tug her out.

She staggers, feet apparently asleep, just as Wallace bursts into the room. “V, you OK? Oh, thank God, you found her. Maddie, you seen Tamara Welch? She’s the only one still missing.”

“Have I seen WHO?” Madison asks, and then the shooting starts.

It sounds like it’s coming from our left AND right…which means it’s between us and the exit hatch that leads to the inflatable. “Shit,” I murmur. “We’re cut off.”

“They blew out the window!” Logan calls, over the comm. “There’s two of them, they’ve got us pinned, and this inflatable’s becoming useless as a shield. I made everybody carry a life preserver just in case. We’re gonna have to go over the side.”

“Logan this boat may be blowing up in the near future,” I hiss. “You can’t swim to a safe distance!”

“So you’ll have to come and pick us up in the raft,” he says, soothing. “Don’t worry Ronica. We’re all surfers, we can handle a few waves.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” I say. Conveniently disregarding the fact that I don’t know how to
escape this bathroom. Because, details.

The shooting slows, ceases. Wallace says, “The bad guys are probably on deck, trying to spot Logan in the water,” and goes to open the door. I grab his hand, stopping him. Say, “Unh-uh, buddy. ALWAYS look where you’re going.”

I ease the door open, a bare inch, and there’s a figure in the hallway, all in black, face covered by a gas mask. Whistling “Boys of Summer” while he disassembles a sniper rifle. He’s medium-height and muscular, his hair is blonde, and I’ve never seen him before in my life.

Another figure emerges from the bedroom on the other side of us…this one’s in a skullcap, but the shape looks female. She asks, “Are you sure we got him?”

The blonde guy shrugs, and in a faint surfer drawl, says, “If we didn’t, he’ll drown. Or blow up, when the boat does. Now we just need to get rid of whoever’s driving this thing, and we can climb in our raft and go home.”

The woman points her machine gun up, matter-of-fact, and starts shooting through the roof. She does it until the ceiling’s peppered with holes, and the boat slows. Begins to drift. “Your problem is, you think too much inside the box,” she says.

“You know, you can be a real bitch,” the guy tells her, and he doesn’t sound like he’s kidding. “Let’s not forget, I’m the one in charge, here.”

“Maybe I like to be on top, sometimes,” the woman counters, unaccommodating.

“And maybe I DON’T like that,” he tells her. “Maybe I think you should just shut up, lay back, and enjoy my decisions, while you’ve still got the odds in your favor.”

“Let’s go get on our raft and blow this thing,” she says, turning dismissively towards the back hatch. “We can argue semantics later.”

Shaking his head, he follows.

“We need to move,” I murmur, easing the door shut. Remember what Logan said about shooting out the windows, then jumping. “But not down the hall. As soon as they figure out their boat is missing, they’re going to go around the side and try to steal ours.”

Carefully, I open the door connecting the bathroom to the suite. It’s empty; and there’s a gaping hole through the glass from all the shooting. I kick away the jagged edges, as best I can with my boots, and the three of us climb out.

I know that woman’s voice, I think, as I help Madison jump down—make her kick off her shoes, when her heel breaks on landing. That voice is familiar, in a fingernails-on-the-chalkboard way. But from where?

“Danny,” I say into the comm, as we run around towards the foredeck. “We’re about to get in the inflatable and take off. The last two shooters are on the back deck, looking for their missing escape boat, and I think Paul’s dead. You coming?”

“Get the hell out of here before they take your raft away, Mars,” he says. “Once I get this bomb defused, I’ll do like your boyfriend and dive over the side. I can swim for days.”

“Good luck,” I say.
He laughs, but not like anything’s funny. “You tell the FBI I think you’re a natural.”

The raft’s still sitting there, inflated and unattended—so the three of us climb in, and I release the winch. I guess I do it too fast, though, because the boat jerks, and then falls.

We land on one rim, then thankfully splash bottom-down. Wallace goes sprawling across the floor, manages to catch a handle. Madison grips tight to the metal rail at the back. The only reason I don’t go over the side is, she grabs my jacket and yanks me close.

I sprawl across her lap, staring into the black, seething water. Gasping for breath, because stormy, dark seas are my biggest nightmare come true. I’m IN IT, now. Not parked safely on the edge, in a bikini, watching. Not surfing the smallest waves near shore, carefully supervised by patient Logan.

The ocean is a ravenous fucking organism that wants to devour me. And this tiny motorboat is the only thing now keeping me safe.

I look gratitude at Madison; she shoves me upright, retreats. “You saved ME,” she says, defensively. “This makes us even. It’s not like I LIKE you.”

Wallace starts the engine, and I say, into the comm, “Logan?”

There’s no answer for a long minute. Danny says, “These earbuds short out when they get wet.”

“Move beyond the range of light from the yacht,” I tell Wallace. “Then cruise around the prow to where Logan and Dick jumped, as fast as you can. Those people we saw have guns; and they seem to enjoy cold-blooded murder.”

“Life preservers are decorated with reflective strips,” Madison says, hugging herself to fend off the cold, dark, ominous quiet. “Or at least the ones on my dad’s boat are. Look for glow-in-the-dark flashes.”

I nod. The engine purrs quietly. As we motor past the ship’s nose, it starts to rain.

“Fantastic,” I murmur. We veer right, swinging over the crest of a bigger wave than I’d surf.

“Hey!” a voice calls from my left. Madison points and says, “There!”

I turn, see a hand waving, a flash of orange. We approach to find Bodie and Casey linked together by the arms, bobbing under and up again every time a wave washes over. Wallace reaches out to pull them in. Madison says, “Veronica, get over on this side, so they don’t tip the boat.”

I do, as Wallace hauls Bodie up. He sprawls on his back gasping. “I thought I was gonna die,” he says.

“The night is young,” I say, tugging him towards me. Wallace pulls in Casey. “Where are the others?”

“Don’t know,” Casey says, glancing up from beneath a fall of hair. He’s slumped lotus-style, arms braced limply on his knees. “It’s all black out here, and we were really high. My sense of direction’s fucked. Plus Logan told us not to make noise, so we wouldn’t get shot.”

“I see something white,” Wallace says, pointing way off into the distance. “Maybe it’s just a tablecloth, but maybe…”

“Go look,” I tell him, gritting my teeth so they don’t chatter. “Follow every lead. We don’t look, we
won’t know. And we can’t leave them alone, floating in this water.”

“Would be headed towards the back of the boat,” Wallace cautions. “Isn’t that where the people with the guns went?”

“Go LOOK,” I reiterate. “We’re NOT leaving without Logan.”

He motors that way, as we all grip the handles silently. The white resolves into a cushion from the loungie, sprawled atop which is a bleeding Dick. He moans as we approach, forcing his eyes open. Parts his lips to speak. Then a voice that’s not his says, “Veronica.”

That’s when I see the hand clinging to the edge of the cushion. And Logan’s wet head, held just above the waves.

“Oh my God,” I murmur, as we swing alongside; Wallace and Casey haul Dick in. His arm promptly bleeds all over the floor of the boat and I say, “Somebody remove an excess article of clothing, and apply pressure to that wound.”

Logan hauls himself on top of the cushion with a tremendous effort. Which is when I realize he’s not wearing a life preserver. My heart starts to thud, quadruple-time. “Had to get him out of the water,” he says, exhausted, as if in explanation. “He was attracting sharks. Saw the cushion, swam for it.”

It takes all three boys to get Logan in the boat, because he can’t help much. He’s shivering, from cold and fatigue, and maybe adrenaline letdown. I press up against him, wrap my arms around his waist; faintly, he smiles. Says, “I knew you’d find us,” which breaks my heart.

“You seen Corny?” Wallace asks, scanning the horizon. “There’s a big ship, headed this way.” He points, and yeah, that’s the Coast Guard craft Paul mentioned, finally visible. “Little boat over there with nobody in it, too.” Wallace indicates what looks to me like nothing. “But that’s all I can make out.”

“Corny had one of those round life preservers,” Casey says, raking his hair back. “Logan’s. He didn’t put his vest on right, and it floated away after we jumped. It was yellow and white…the round thing, I mean.”

“What do we do?” Madison asks. She’s taken off the sequined shrug she was wearing over a tank top, turned it inside out; then fashioned it into a crude field dressing for Dick. She makes Bodie press on it, while she rips a strip from the bottom of her skirt. Uses that to tie the bandage. “I can’t see ANYTHING out there, much less one tiny life preserver.”

A steady stream of cursing in Spanish comes over the comm, and I say, “Danny still hasn’t defused the bomb. We should move out of gun and explosion range, then send up a flare for the Coast Guard. They’ll be here momentarily, and they’re a lot better at search-and-rescue than we are.”

“I dunno Veronica,” Bodie says, from where he’s still lying on the floor. “Seems to me like you’re doing a pretty good job.”

Wallace starts the engine and, squinting against the rain, moves towards the approaching Coast Guard ship, swinging wide enough not to collide. “There’s an emergency kit just under the rim of the inflatable,” Logan says, not opening his eyes. “It’s attached. Flares are in there, and they’ll work in the rain.”

Casey finds the box, starts fumbling it open. I say, “We have to get to a safe distance first. Anybody know what yacht-exploding range IS?” I tap the microphone. “Danny? Yacht-exploding range?”
The cursing escalates, but he doesn’t answer. “I’mma just keep going towards the rescuers,” Wallace decides. “We have a better chance of not sinking on that big Coast Guard ship.”

“Wise plan,” I say. Then there’s a horrible ripping, grinding noise, and the motor dies.

Our little boat drifts sideways over the waves in the dark, as rain drizzles down. Logan manages to make it to a sitting position. Says, “Something’s caught in the rotors. Hold my legs while I check.”

Casey pulls a small flashlight out of the emergency kit, hands it over. Logan turns it on, and the beam glows red. He puts it between his teeth, then leans over the side, fumbling amongst the blades while Casey and Wallace grip his ankles.

With a wrench, he jerks something free, examines it with the flashlight. The motor makes a whining sound, then a pop, and goes silent again.

Logan tosses the object on the floor of the boat, and slumps back on his elbows, covering his eyes with his hand.

It’s a round yellow and white life preserver, gnawed and ripped. There’s a dark smear across the unchewed quarter, which looks like it might be blood.

XXXXX

We watch in silence as the Coast Guard boat steams closer, Danny’s curses a chant in my ear. Like Novenas, like pleas. Slumped against me, Logan says, “I should have watched him more closely. I was worried about Dick, because he was losing blood and consciousness. But Corny was so wasted he actually passed OUT for a while, and I didn’t even THINK…..”

I stroke his back, and say, “You did more than most people would have or COULD have done. You saved almost everybody. Thanks to you, most of our friends didn’t die.”

“WE’RE going to die, if that bomb blows up,” Wallace reminds me. Dick rouses enough to say, “Dude, there’s a BOMB?”

“This evening just keeps getting better.” Casey slumps back and shuts his eyes. “Does the Coast Guard know there’s a bomb? And that we can’t get out of range?”

“I think the security team commander told them, before he got shot,” I say. “He was in the wheelhouse, so he was the only one who could communicate with them.”

Nobody has a comeback for this; all of us understand our peril. We sit silently in the rain, and wait to see if we’ll get rescued.

“So I’m not one for public declarations,” Logan starts, murmuring in my ear.

“Yes you are,” I interrupt. “That’s your favorite kind. Accompanied by grandiose hand gestures, so your minions know the score.”

“But,” he continues, ignoring this. “I want to say…just in case…you did what you set out to do. You solved the mystery, rescued our friends. And I’m proud.”

I kiss his cheek, rest my head on his shoulder. He puts an arm around me.

“How about you?” he asks, after a minute. “Regretting your choices, now? Because I don’t know, Veronica…if you die here…I don’t know how the slipstream works, or if you’ll be able to wake

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I cover his mouth with my palm. Gaze into his eyes, and it hits me.

This is it. This is the moment. The point, on the Nautilus, where Logan became sure I loved him. That critical interlude I thought I’d negated, by the difficult choices I made.

I start to laugh, because I never pictured it going down this way…in the stormy dark, bomb about to explode, while Madison Sinclair glares nearby.

“Are you cackling in the face of fate?” he asks, amused.

I shake my head. “I don’t regret a minute,” I tell him, flattening my palm against his cheek. “I’d rather die with you than live without.”

He pulls me into his arms, displaying a renewed burst of strength; squeezes me painfully tight. Then a search light kliegs down over us. A voice on a loudspeaker calls, “This is the United States Coast Guard. Hang in there, folks. We’re gonna get you out of the water right away.”

“Jesus, Mother Mary and Joseph,” Danny says in my ear, and his pants sound like sobs. “I’m never gonna miss confession again. Bomb defused, Veronica. Tell the Coast Guard, as soon as they get you on board.”

XXXXX

When the rescue boat docks at the marina, it’s a hive of chaos. Lights from emergency vehicles flash across the lot; there’s a traffic barricade. Just inside, a knot of relatives huddles, anxiously waiting.

Dad, tensely gripping the confining barrier, bursts into tears when Logan, Wallace and I walk down the ramp. Beside him, Alicia sucks in a deep breath and holds it; doesn’t release until Wallace is in her arms.

“Jackie said you three stayed on the boat,” Dad greets us, enfolding Logan and I in a hug. “She said you wouldn’t leave until everybody got away.”

Beside me Wallace mutters, “Mom, I’m FINE! Not so TIGHT, you’re gonna hurt me worse than this party did!”

“The escape raft was full,” I tell Dad, burying my face in his beige windbreaker, inhaling his safe-father scent. “We had to catch the next one. I was on a comm with the security team the whole time, but apparently those things have limited range.”

“Lilly turned up with a big cut on her arm,” Dad says. “Celeste got here, actually CRIED all over her, then rode along to the hospital in an ambulance. Luke Haldemann went too, apparently he got shot. Veronica, do you have any idea what happened?”

“I don’t,” I say. “I’d guess it was drug-related; we saw trafficking happening nearby. We heard a couple of vague warnings that something might go down tonight. But our theories about what it would be were ALL wrong.”

“You kids are EIGHTTEEN,” Dad says, furiously wiping away tears. “I don’t care how much you call yourselves the Justice League, you are NOT super heroes. If you have more warnings of ANY problems on this scale, you tell the authorities and ME, Veronica! No matter how corrupt those authorities may be! You don’t try to fix the problem yourself. Do you understand?”
“Yeah,” I say, pressing my cheek to his chest. “I love you too, Dad.”

I watch as Madison exits the boat, wrapped in a blanket. She’s immediately grabbed by her family, who surround and hug her. They cry, but she just shudders; closes her eyes, keeps the tears in. I guess she feels me staring, because she turns. We share a long, silent look, and then her family bundles her away.

“You Veronica Mars?” A guy in a Coast Guard uniform asks, approaching with a clipboard, diverting my attention. “I need you to read and sign the statement you gave, back on the ship. Mr. Echolls, I have one for you, too.”

He hands us each several stapled sheets. Then, right after I start reading, says, “Hey, I just want you to know, before it hits the papers. Because of you, we seized tons of pharmaceutical grade heroin tonight. You saved a lot more lives than just the people on that yacht, Miss Mars. So you’re aware.”

I look up at him and he smiles. Extends his hand. I shake it. “Did you catch the shooters who didn’t die?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Based on the facts I can piece together, there were two unoccupied inflatables floating nearby. My guess is the advance swimmers stashed their SCUBA tanks on the boat somewhere when they boarded. The shooters must have used those to swim to a raft, and escape. Probably why they didn’t blow the yacht up, by the way. Cell phones don’t work so good, underwater.”

I glance over the statement; it looks correct, so I sign. Logan does the same. Coast Guard Guy gives a friendly wave, walks off, and Dad says, “I’m proud of you for keeping your cool, kids.”

“How says we kept our cool?” Logan flashes a faint smile. “I thought I’d shit myself when the shooters opened fire, and all we had as a shield was an inflatable full of holes. Those assholes were determined to make us hamburger. I’m thinking Carrie’s right and I WAS the target; because they DEFINITELY wanted us dead.”

“The woman asked ‘Did you get HIM?’ while the man was taking apart his gun,” I agree, shuddering as I make the connection. “Maybe there was a reason our yacht party was chosen as a distraction.”

“We ought to hire you a bodyguard,” Dad jokes, shoving Logan’s shoulder with his.

Logan smiles. “Maybe;” he agrees. “Wonder if Campos wants the job?”

“You guys need a ride to the hospital?” Dad asks, putting an arm around my shoulders. Wallace turns and nods, but Alicia won’t let go of him. “Check on your friends?”

“Sure,” I say, and he leads us to his Honda. Helps us inside.

Logan’s asleep before we navigate through the crowd, and out onto the highway. I go under, curled against him, about two exits down the road.
Leads You Here Despite Your Destination

Chapter Notes

So for those of you wondering what's been up in Hearst Reality, you're about to find out. Trigger warning, because we left our heroes in a situation where any or all of them might be hurt, or worse.

THREAD THIRTY FIVE

I surface slowly, to the sound of my mother’s voice.

She’s doing that easy-constant-patter, cool-mom shtick I used to admire so fiercely as a kid—I can only make out one word in three. But the slightly slurred, liquored-up rhythm of her, “…never thought TAP SHOES…he sure needed…learned how to RUMBA?....can you imagine?” is weirdly reassuring. I feel pressure on my fingers, faint and sweaty, so I guess she finally managed to hold my hand.

“Where am I?” I grit, forcing my eyes open. There’s steel and white above me, blurred, and the world swims, molasses-like, as I turn my head to look at her. I’m drugged, and not just a little. My limbs feel like distant continents; they’d take centuries to move.

Her face is tear-stained, her hair lank the way it used to get when she went on a binge. “You’re in the hospital, baby,” she says, clearly not the first time she’s told me. “Do you remember the accident?”

Accident. I look down at the hand she’s holding, note the huge, generic diamond ring. Car crash. Hearst Reality. DAD...

“LOGAN!” I yell, and try to sit up. Fire blooms through my abdomen and thighs-- I fall back, gasping. “I have to GO…I’ve got to find…”

“I’m here,” he says.

I roll my face left, the only part of me that moves easily; he’s standing near the window, backlit by orange summer glare. He’s got a bandage around his head, covering one eye, and his whole left arm is wrapped and splinted. Two of the fingers on his right hand are taped together. The grey robe he wears bulges on both sides, like his ribs are strapped—he’s beat up, but walking. Logan’s not dead.

I start to cry. Harder than I’ve cried, ever, since the day Lilly died. So hard every breath stings.

Logan approaches, movements slow, sits in the chair opposite Mom. “Can you give us a minute?” he asks her, sending a direct, inscrutable look over my head. “Just…get a cup of coffee, and come back in five? I’m not trying to cut your visit short, I swear. But she gets so agitated when she first wakes up.”

“I’m only leaving for a minute, baby,” Mom says, patting my hand and nodding like a bobble-head. “I’ll be nearby all the time until you’re home, I promise.”

I make a noise of distress, because like I trust HER. Then she shuffles out, and Logan asks, “Mrs. R?”
“What HAPPENED?” I ask, gripping his non-bandaged fingers tight. “I couldn’t tell before I slipstreamed, and I was so SCARED! There was blood all over the floorboards. What about DAD?”

“Your dad’s here in the hospital, but he’s going to be all right,” Logan says, stroking a thumb over my knuckles in soothing arcs. “They say we got rear-ended, after I passed out--Keith hit his head pretty hard, hurt his neck. But don’t worry, he’s not paralyzed or…you know, he’s the same sharp guy. He just needs to heal. I’ll take you to see him, as soon as you can manage a wheelchair. And I stationed bodyguards outside his room. Also ours. Just in case.”

I press my lips together, and try to maintain. Logan’s alive, dad’s alive. I’m alive, even though my whole body hurts, and…

My ring hand lifts slowly, floats through the air. Lands on my belly. It’s tender and crampy, but… empty. Peanut’s not there.

I stare at Logan, and he stares back, tears welling up in his eyes. “She’s gone,” he says, quietly. “The seatbelt caused internal injuries, they had to do surgery. I’m so sorry.”

XXXXXXXX

Honestly, I’m not sure how to feel.

Peanut wasn’t a choice, she wasn’t even, really, mine…she was a guest, like me, in a body that belongs to someone else. But when I think of Logan watching that sonogram over and over, touching the screen…when I think of the way Dad was so caring with Bobby, and I was jealous, because it meant everything, growing up, to be Dad’s most important person…

I wanted her. Unplanned, inconvenient, likely a source of twenty years of hardship, both of us too young to have any clue how to cope. But I WANTED her, and so did Logan; then I screwed up in a moment of incandescent rage, and now she’s gone.

I lie still for a while, absorbing the shock. Logan tips forward, slowly, and rests his forehead against my hand. He doesn’t speak, because what is there to say, really? He just gives me time.

“How’s Veronica?” I ask eventually, when the quiet in the room becomes hypnotic. “Is she coping?”

“She’s angry,” he says, speaking into my skin. “Still deciding who she wants to blame, but doesn’t bear a grudge against me. The drugs make her sleep a lot, and when she’s awake, she…frets; I made them move me into this room, because I’m the only one who can calm her down. It’s just…she needs time, Ronica, and rest, to get over this. She needs to feel SAFE.”

“Rest…” I say, because I SO sympathize. “What a lovely fantasy.”

“I rented a house in Provence.” He lifts his head to look at me. His face is bruised, and I hope his eye isn’t damaged. “Ever been there?”

“I’ve never been ANYWHERE,” I say tiredly, fingers ghosting over the bandage at his temple. “Just Neptune. And New York. And Palm Springs.”

“It’s like a Van Gogh painting.” He tilts his jaw against my palm. “Gold and green everything, sunlight, vines and grasses...picture-postcard farms and bees. There are fields of lavender and sunflowers, and the warmth sinks into your bones. Even the light is gold.

“This place I booked is where mom and I used to stay in the summer, when I was really small. It’s got a garden with a hammock, and there’s a pond nearby. You can lie outside and doze, and the sun
beats down on the herbs, so they give off this scent…it’s like all the bad things you left behind can’t touch you, for a while. You can heal, get ready for the next fight. Feel quiet, and protected, and free.”

“Sounds nice,” I say.

“I want you to see it,” he tells me, fervent. “I want to live there with you. Aaron stashed tons of money in Swiss accounts; we’d never have to come back to the States, except by choice. Ronica, I’m SO sorry I fucked up so badly. I never should have made the deals I did. I never should have gone off to Basic, and left you here alone. I was just angry and frustrated with Veronica, and I didn’t THINK.”

“I made the specific choice that caused the crash,” I say. “If you and Veronica are looking for someone to blame, it needs to be me. Because I get to drift away to other realities where this tragedy didn’t happen…while you two are stuck here, putting the pieces back together.”

“Is that what you want?” he asks, and it sounds like an accusation. “To drift off to another reality? I mean, not that I would blame you.”

“No,” I say, and there it is. The truth I’ve tried not to speak, because there’s probably no hope. “If I had a choice, I would never leave you. I saw what you did in the crash. The way you turned the wheel. I know exactly how much you love me.”

He puts his face back down on my hand, kisses it. I lift my other, stroke his hair. We stay that way, frozen in the moment, for what feels like it could almost be forever.

Then the door opens, and my mom leads Jerry Sacks in.

He seems beyond reluctant to intrude on this emotional scene; hangs back from the bed, moustache squirming with embarrassment. But my mom nudges him forward, so he states the obvious. “Hey, I’m sorry, to um, interrupt. But I was here visiting Keith. And Lianne came by, you know, to tell him you woke up? And I thought maybe I would check in, since Keith can’t get out of bed yet. So I can report back about how you’re doing.”

“I’m furious,” I say, flatly, which elicits an actual smirk from Logan. Because he understands, better than anyone else, the urge to make someone pay. “No, I take that back, I’m so much angrier than furious it’s not even an adequate word. I want to know who caused this crash, Jerry, and I want to nail that person to the wall.”

“Veronica, I’m really not sure you should be wall-nailing in your…” Sacks gestures awkwardly and blushes, “…um, you know, condition. Just concentrate on feeling better, and then I can go back to investigating for you when you’re more…”

“Baby, you’re all agitated and you’re not thinking straight.” My mother sidles closer, hands ineffectually fluttering. “Somebody tried to KILL you, and you need to keep your head down! Nothing good ever came of provoking angry people.”

I give her a look of patent disgust. She meets it with the hurt hangdog expression that enrages me like nothing else—the one that casts ME as the bad guy, for not caving. Then her phone rings, and she turns away to answer. “Oh HI, Jake, honey, I’m just visiting Veronica. YES, Neptune General. Yes, she’s on the third floor…”

Mom walks out of the room, waving and pointing to telegraph her intentions, and Logan says, “Now’s your chance, Ronica. Why don’t you ask our guest to sit, so you can grill him more
efficiently?”

Jerry pulls up a chair, reluctant. I pin him with my gaze so he won’t break and run. “Are you investigating the crash? Since we’re all well aware, here, that Vinnie won’t?”

“When did some looking around,” he admits. “For Keith, ‘cause, you know, he’s my friend. But I don’t think your Dad wants me to tell you about it, Veronica. He was pretty specifically against that, in fact.”

“Oh, I PAID you,” I say, steely. “You’re violating the PI code of ethics if you don’t give me every scrap of information you’ve got, right this minute.”

“Code of Ethics?” he asks, confused; Logan smother a soft huff of amusement. But I guess Jerry takes my empty threat seriously, or maybe just shows mercy, because he says, “Okay. But you have to promise you won’t get involved until you’re well.”

I nod, and he leans closer, lowering his voice. “Keith told me he had a hard drive in his pocket, when the crash happened. But the boys who went over the car at the crime scene said no hard drives of any kind were found. It’s not with his personal effects here at the hospital, either. So your dad thinks whoever caused the wreck? Did it to get the drive.”

Fuck, I think, sharing an appalled glance with Logan. I was wrong about the perpetrators of the Boat Tragedy, and now I’m batting zero for two. Ronald Reagan followed at a distance because he WANTED us to leave town, unharmed. He only attacked after we picked up DAD.

Dad, who told me about the hard drive over the phone. And named the restaurant where he’d be waiting.

“Logan, is my cell around anywhere?” I ask.

“Sure,” he says. Removes it from the drawer of the nightstand, sets in in my palm. “You can’t use it in here, though, buttercup, it messes with the medical monitor.”

“Pry the back off for me, will you?” I ask, giving it to Jerry. “I can’t really…use my muscles right now, and Logan’s got a splint on his hand.”

He does, returns it, and sure enough. There’s a bug nestled inside. I remove the thing with a yank and toss it over. “Can you go…flush this, please?”

Jerry frowns at the bug, surprised and concerned, but he complies.

“They figured out Dad had the disk drive because he called and TOLD me,” I whisper, the second Sacks walks into the john. “You were right, Logan. I’ve been under surveillance, to make sure I complied with terms. Only it wasn’t me who ended up breaking the rules so badly I earned a death sentence. It was DAD.”

“Oh, we broke them too,” Logan says cynically, as Jerry returns. “Don’t kid yourself, Ronica, we’re done in this town. Although I’m relieved to know we won’t have to pay with our lives.”

“You think the Russians put that in your phone?” Jerry asks, as he sits back down. “The ones with the camera?”

“What camera?” Logan demands. “Wait, Keith was talking about this at the restaurant. Did you convince that idiot Piz to BUG Sorokin? Is THAT what set him off?”
“Um…no the camera used to film Veronica? I traced the video back to the initial poster, like Keith asked.” Jerry looks back and forth between us, aware of undercurrents but not sure how to avoid them. “It was a guy named Dominick DeSanto—he’s friends with the Sorokin kid who goes to Hearst.”

Logan pins me with a deceptively calm look and says, “There’s a video?”

My eyes narrow, because where does he get off? He keeps terrible secrets all the TIME! “NOT my fault. I was filmed by a hidden camera, back when you were dating Candace. The clip posted on the web… involves Piz.”

His eyes widen, but before he can speak my mom teeters back in, Jake striding behind. Logan makes an ‘oh great’ gesture of exasperation, slumps in his chair. Then grimaces and sits up straight, because apparently slouching hurts.

“Look who’s here!” Mom trills, pushing Jake forward. He sets a chair for her—Jerry gets up, and Jake takes his, as naturally as if that’s his due. Sacks retreats to the other side of the room, busies himself fiddling with Logan’s nightstand. “Jake was in Germany when the police called me. He had to drive to Brussels to catch a plane, because of the Lufthansa strike.”

“How are you, Veronica?” Jake asks; and GOD is it weird to have faux-concerned Big Daddy Kane visiting my bedside. “I was so sorry to hear about the baby.”

“She’s going to be fine.” Logan’s grip tightens on my hand—his voice sounds strained. Then again, Jake got him and this Sorokin character involved in some weird secret society, so who could blame him for holding a grudge? “Doctor says one more week of bed rest, then we plan to take an extended vacation.”

“The Manhattan studio is still empty,” Jake offers. “If you like the idea of New York. It’s yours for as long as you need it.”

“I’ve got a place lined up,” Logan says. “Overseas. Thanks, anyway.”

“If there’s any way we can help, let us know.” Jake pats my hand and stands, clearly feeling he’s done enough. “Lianne, Jerry, why don’t we let Veronica rest? She’s been through enormous trauma, she needs quiet.”

“I love you so, so MUCH, baby,” mom gushes, edging closer to press fervent kisses to my scalp. I manage not to jerk away, because Other Veronica hates her less than I do. “I’ll come visit tomorrow, I promise. I’ll be right here, any time you need me.”

I wave, trying to conceal the lip-curl, and Jake gestures for them to precede him. Sacks hands Logan a slip of paper, saying, “I think you dropped this,” and follows my mother out.

Logan lifts his brows, unfolds it. Shows it to me, wordless. The paper reads ‘Three Brothers Winery, Irene Navarro owner 1986-present. Investigate Herbert Tufton Enterprises, shell company/purchaser. Large cash infusion in local bank coincides with her move-in date’.

“I asked Sacks to investigate Weevil’s mother for me,” I explain, proud of Jerry for his ingenuity. “While you were in Illinois, and I was playing bull-in-a-china-shop with everyone’s lives. Weevil asked me to find his father, the day we chatted at the Winter Carnival, and all roads lead to this vineyard.”

“Always scheming,” Logan says, with affection. Tries to slump again, straightens. I stroke his hand.
“You know me,” I say, brightly. “Never a dull moment! So tell the truth, Logan, before I slipstream away. What will happen to you for going AWOL? Are we running away to France to keep you out of jail?”

He laughs, sardonic. “When we have our very own heavy-hitting fixer, willing to fly back from Germany just to console? Nah, I got kicked out of the Naval Reserves is all. Wasn’t even dishonorable. And who cares? I’ll have more fun being an international man of leisure.” He speaks lightly, but I catch the faint trace of bitterness. Logan isn’t built to stand on the sidelines, sipping Chablis. It’s why we suit.

“ Weird,” I say. “I mean that’s great news, but the Jake Kane I know could care less about those who don’t share his name. This one’s moving mountains to keep you respectable, though. Plus offering us free housing, and driving between COUNTRIES just to catch a plane home.”

“Veronica, personal intervention in times of crisis is a membership benefit,” Logan tells me. “And he’s been pushing that apartment like it’s Shangri-La for more than a YEAR. We should have taken him up on his offer, back when he first made it. None of this would’ve happened.”

“The apartment was a carrot to get me out of Neptune,” I say. “Something to do with Duncan, I think. I haven’t worked out the specifics yet.”

Logan studies me for a minute with his un-bandaged eye. “Let me ask you something, Veronica. Your last visit to my past—was it when Lucky got shot?”

I shake my head, frowning. “Graduation day. From the minute we woke up at Alicia’s until we fell asleep in Dad’s car. It’s been an eventful week.”

He emits a strangled laugh, the kind he used to favor in MY reality before Aaron died—a sound containing zero actual humor. “Well that’s just GREAT. Graduation day. I must have lost count, amidst all the hubbub.”

“No shame,” I say, thinking HE COUNTS MY VISITS? “Things are BAD, here.”

“And you fell asleep in the car?” he reiterates. “On Graduation Day? Then immediately showed up in this bed?”

“I was TIRED,” I say, defensive. “Large-scale death and destruction takes a toll on my pep.”

“Yeah, same.” His tone is dry. He gazes down at the floor, lips pressing together—then looks back up, decisive, and grasps my hand. “Jake brokered a deal between me and the Russians, to keep them from killing us after we foiled their drug shipment. Since Gory Sorokin and I are both…you know.”

“So the Sorokin concession was ‘don’t murder’, and yours was ‘never again poke the Bear’?”

“In a nutshell,” he says. “I’m guessing the video was an attempt to piss us off so we’d violate terms—enabling Sorokin to take revenge without consequences. Which is a pretty cagey move for that smug Russian moron.”

I scowl, because this much honesty from Logan is always suspect. “So why are you spilling the beans NOW? Why not last time I visited, when this information could have prevented Boat Party deaths?”

“Case of mistaken identity,” he says, face bleak. “God, it’s so stupid I almost don’t want to tell you.”

“Yeah, not gonna fly,” I tell him. “Willing to bet ‘owning up to idiotic shit’ was a wedding vow
Veronica demanded.”

He smiles, faintly self-deprecating. “In the hospital, the night of graduation…we were waiting to find out about Luke. And Veronica said something like, ‘I need you to promise me something. When Future Me asks what Present Day Me is up to? Swear you won’t tell her. Our happiness is at stake.”

The smirk fades, and he shakes his head. “My brain was fried, I was barely awake, and I thought she was still you, giving slipstream instructions. Because you’d been around all day, remember? I thought you were warning me, in no uncertain terms, that I’d screw up the slipstream if I fed you more data about the past.

“But it was HER talking, apparently,” he says. “MY Veronica. And I guess she meant I’d ruin our RELATIONSHIP, if I kept participating in time travel shenanigans. She asked me to stop, because she wanted me to put her first. I said, of course I’ll quit, I love you, whatever you want…I didn’t understand. And then I kept right on investigating. Amassing information I could use to protect you, the next time you showed. Only there was no next time. You disappeared for a year.

“I worked hard at putting the puzzle together, Veronica, especially after…and I guess she decided I was following the letter of the law, but not the spirit. That’s what must have prompted the ‘growing apart’ speech she gave me, the night I got dumped. She thought I didn’t love her; so I lost you both at the same time. All because I…because I was having trouble handling the things I did, on the boat. I was wrapped up in my own problems. And I misunderstood!”

“But you and Veronica are back together, now,” I say, soothing. “She MARRIED you.”

“She told me yesterday, when she woke up,” he murmurs, “that I’m still her best friend. And that she realizes, now, how much I care. She wants to find a way to make things better. She had a fucking MISCARRIAGE, Ronica, and she was comforting ME. Jesus, I’m an idiot. I don’t even deserve her forgiveness.”

“Logan,” I say. “She loves you, like I’ve insisted all along. Which is only natural, because you’re fucking amazing. And she knows you love her, with or without the baby…I made you tell her so.”

He laughs, and this time it sounds more real. “That’s right, you did,” he says. “One of many reasons I adore you. My ass-kicking wild girl--who still finds time to Emma relationships in which she has no stake.”

“Well that’s not, strictly speaking, true,” I say. “In realities where you’re not dating her, you and I don’t get to fool around.”

“I thought I was going to die, you know,” he says, the smile lingering. “In the car crash. You probably don’t remember this, but you told me there were no survivors, the night of the debutante ball. You said I spun the car, so I’d take the brunt of the crash; and I managed to do that, before we hit. But I admit I was shocked, when I woke up in the hospital, all five limbs still attached.”

I snort. “Yet you still tried to sacrifice yourself for the rest of us. Because you’re fearless. It’s the thing about you that terrifies me most.”

“The scariest moment, for me,” he says, meeting my gaze in his intent Logan way, “is the very last one, before you leave.”

And I get what he’s saying. I do. Because I told Logan I had no regrets, in that little inflatable raft--I’m amazed I’m lying here now. I’ve seen enough dead-end realities, at this point, to recognize the warning signs—and this one’s flashing lights, orange cones, and a voice on a bullhorn screaming
TURN BACK.

“Looks to me like we’re ALL about to leave,” I murmur, as gently as I can. “Cast out of town on the heels of tragedy, never to return? Excessively noir, in my opinion.”

“Only if we let it be,” he says. His eyes tell me he understands. “I don’t believe a sad last act’s our fate.”

A cheerful, plump nurse wearing Donald Duck scrubs bustles in, checks the chart at the bottom of my bed. “That’s what I thought,” she chides, raising her brows. “Your meds were due half an hour ago. Why didn’t you ring the bell?”

“I was enjoying alone time with my special guy,” I say, smiling up at Logan. He squeezes my hand.

“Well, you’d better take them now.” She hands me a pill, and a little paper cup. “Sleep heals all wounds.”

I stare at the blue capsule between my fingers, at the friendly but implacable nurse. I know I have to protect Other Veronica, so I close my eyes and swallow it down.

“Well. Guess this is it, then,” Logan says, watching her stride briskly away. “Better a whimper than a bang, which is how you left me last time.”

“See you in Provence.” I nestle down into the pillows. Gaze up at his beautiful face, and manage to keep smiling. “Save me a glass of wine. And a spot in the hammock, next to you.”

“I love you, Veronica,” he tells me. His voice cracks.

“Same,” I say, tugging his hand. He comes, unresisting, and we kiss--a feather-light press of lips that says everything words can’t. “Always have, always will.”

The pill works quickly—I can feel the dream overwhelming me, unconsciousness looming. He grips my fingers as I drift, staring right into my eyes, because he’s Logan. He never runs, never hides.

I stare back until I can’t, anymore. Until my lids flutter shut.

Logan squeezes my hand when my limbs fall slack. Lets go. Softly, under his breath, he begins to hum ‘Wish You Were Here’.

Take me somewhere good, I ask the slipstream as I slide under. And feel the whirling twist of fate, before darkness falls.

THREAD THIRTY FIVE INVERTS

I drift slowly towards the surface, who knows how much later, to the muted strains of ‘Just Dropped In’. I’m sitting, head tucked into the hollow of Logan’s shoulder; his arm’s draped around me, and he’s toying with my hair.

My lids blink open. I’m in a luxury hotel suite that makes the Neptune Grand look like Motel Six—it’s top-to-bottom high-end French, suede couches and Turkish rugs in shades of silver and grey. Yellow leather chairs, and cream pillows embroidered with C’s, break the monotony; a grand piano hulks in the corner, for atmosphere, I guess.

Past Logan’s head, a wall of windows showcases a park, and the downtown panorama just beyond. Lights like gems adorn tall buildings, the reflection of our opulent suite superimposed. We’re in a big
city—the downtown is huge—and cars stream along roads, ant-style, despite the hour.

The remains of a room service meal are spread out on the coffee table, wineglasses and steak rinds, smears of chocolate and cherry-red sauce. Logan’s dangling a beer bottle from two fingers, chuckling silently at Julianne Moore. The night feels cool and still.

“Hey,” I say, burying my nose in the warm spot below his ear, breathing in his scent. Because this is the same Logan I just left behind, right? The exact same guy, albeit an earlier version. Before I managed to fuck his life up, and leave him piecing together shreds. “Did I miss the whole movie? Do you even realize this is my favorite?”

“Is it?” He tilts his head to look down at me, smiling gently. “Which part do you like best?”

“The funeral,” I say, matching his grin—the tender expression on his face is well-nigh irresistible. “When the ashes blow the wrong way, after John Goodman makes his speech. Because that’s life, you know? You pontificate at length, certain you’re right, and then the ashes ALWAYS fly backwards.”

“Mrs. R.,” he surmises, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “Ever the cynic. Myself, I calculate the blow-back ratio at a more modest 90%.”

“Oh, stop with your bright-eyed naivete,” I say, swatting him. “It’s like you’ve become a Disney Princess.”

“Well, we all know what that means.” He eases his arm around my waist, tugs me closer. “At some point in this fairy tale, I’ll be needing the kiss of true love.”

I open as his mouth fits to mine; he lingers, tasting voluptuously, making it last. He seems to want the intimacy more than a race to the finish, which is both par for the course with Logan, and incredibly hot. I need several seconds, after he pulls away, to force my lids back open.

“Where are we?” I manage, voice hoarse. The curve of his lips grows slightly smug.

“New York,” he says, in his softest bedroom voice, and WOW. He’s working his WILES on me. I’ve never experienced this up close before, and the magnetic force of it is like GRAVITY. “We’re here with Lilly, your mom and Jake, Ronica. Tomorrow morning, you tour Columbia. It’s decision time.”

“Dad didn’t come too?” I ask, as he nuzzles behind my ear. I may be panting, and who could blame me? “In my reality, the post-graduation trip to New York was JUST me and Dad. Or, more accurately, ME, even HE didn’t show up for half of it.”

“No, I mean… Jake’s paying for your education, and for Lilly’s too. So he’s the one who came?” Logan sits back, puzzled. “Your dad’s too busy for vacations, anyway. He’s hot on the heels of the Thumper Orozco murder, wants to write a True Crime novel. He seems REALLY into the investigation—says literature might be his true calling.”

“Did they…find Corny?” I ask gently, stroking my knuckles across his cheekbone. He looks down at his lap, come-hither smile vanishing. Shakes his head. “How’s Carrie handling it?”

“With coke and attitude,” he says. “Same way Carrie handles everything. At least she doesn’t loathe me too much. I was afraid she would.”

“How are YOU handling it?” I ask, curving my palms around his jaw…coaxing him to meet my gaze. “I hope you understand his death wasn’t your fault.”
It kind of was, though, Veronica,” he says, gravely. Unflinching. “Nobody else was sober enough to watch the guy adequately; he was so out of it he probably just…fell asleep and let go. But jumping saved the others, whereas they died in the reality you saw. So…I’ll just have to cope with the fact that I made certain choices, and as a result, someone’s gone. And…try to make amends to the family that lived. You know?”

I nod and say, “I do. And the fact that you’re this invested in protecting people is the exact reason I love you.”

His tender smile comes back. “Yeah, you made that clear while we sat in the little boat, waiting for the big one to explode. I’m still shocked to the core you have no regrets. This isn’t even your LIFE, Veronica, but you cared enough to DIE, saving me. And before, when I said I had to rescue Dick and the others…you agreed. You trusted me to do it right. Then waited until I neutralized the shooter before finding Madison, just because I asked. I mean, it will go down in history as the worst party EVER…but that night vaporized all my remaining doubts.”

He sets his beer on the table with a decisive clank, kisses my temple. “Which REMINDS me,” he says, grinning. “I have something for you. Just…hang out on the couch for like five minutes, okay? I’ll be right back.”

Logan moves off into the bedroom with the nervous/excited skip which means something’s afoot; I watch him go, puzzled. Then notice my laptop, sitting open on the table, browser set to Google.

I cast a brief glance at the open door, from whence rustling and muttering can be heard. Log swiftly into kittenfancy, and see a mail waiting.

“Thank you for saving him,” it says, short and to the point. “I don’t remember things right, as usual, but everyone says he almost drowned. And thank you for Lilly, and Wallace, and all the other people I love. Usually I wish you’d disappear forever--but I’m glad you were there that night, instead of me.

“Oh, and I’m pretty sure he’s going to ask you something, next time you appear. He doesn’t realize I’m onto him, but he keeps hounding me with identity-determining questions. I just want you to understand--HE cares whether you say yes or no, but I don’t. Because I already agreed, and I’m the one who matters.”

I frown at the screen, even more confused now; then hear footsteps, and quickly log off. When he returns, hands in pockets, plops down beside me, I’m twirling a room-temperature glass of wine between my fingers, enjoying the way it smells.

“Close your eyes and hold out your hands,” he says, in the coaxing voice that sounds like sin.

“Oooh, are we exchanging gifts?” I ask, brightening. “GRADUATION gifts, perhaps?”

“You’re warm,” he says smirking. “Aim higher.”

“A PONY?” I demand, with fake, bouncing excitement. “How’d you manage to fit a PONY into your pocket?”

“Sugarplum, you know if you want a pony, all you have to do is bat your eyes and I’ll buckle. But there’s one too many huge things in my pants already to hide a baby horse there.”

I laugh, close my eyes, extend my arms, palms up. “Observe me following instructions.”

Something square and velvety lands in my left hand. I crack my lids a fraction.
Yep, that’s a ring box, plush and forest-green.

I flick it open with one thumb. The blue Taylor-esque extravagance from Ideal Reality is nestled inside.

I look up at him, clock the vulnerable hope in his eyes, and realize; THIS is why I was able to show up once more in Hearst Reality, even though I prevented the Boat Disaster. Even though I told Logan I regretted nothing, and ended all his reservations.

Hearst and Ideal Reality didn’t split the night of the Nautilus. They split HERE. In Hearst Reality, Logan proposed during the New York trip, and Veronica said no.

But as she just told me via email, THIS Veronica said yes. Which means, it’s too late to preserve the existence of Hearst Logan. The die has already been cast.

Ergo, no matter how much I scheme and finagle… I’ll never see Hearst Logan again. The Logan who’s been my friend and partner through all this slipstream insanity. The one who recognizes me, and loves me best. The one who turned the wheel so he’d take the impact. He’s vanished into the mist, just like Boat Logan, and the sad guy who taught me to surf. Like Lilly, in my own life. Everyone I love slips away.

“So here’s what I’m thinking,” the Logan in front of me says; made nervous by my expression, maybe, some hint of inner turmoil. “You put this ring on, and all the parents will back down. It doesn’t mean you have to marry me now—or even ever, if that feels wrong. It just shows you love me enough to wear this in public…and you’re open to the possibility that we might last long-term. And you look at me as someone who’s worth taking a chance. Someone who deserves a commitment.”

I stare at the rock, and my throat tightens; because this is the moment Ideal Reality begins. If I say yes, despite the romantic setting, I’m sending myself down a path towards a Logan who won’t acknowledge me.

If I say no, though, I’ll probably lose him today. And permanently.

Framed that way, it’s really not much of a choice.

“Only you would sit there,” I accuse, gesturing at his handsome, rumpled self, “looking gorgeous and earnest as love’s young dream, holding out a rock worth the national debt, and fear REJECTION.”

The vulnerable curve of his mouth relaxes into a smirk. “Lie down with bobcats, wake up with scratches,” he says. “I’ve learned, in matters concerning you, to expect the unexpected.”

“Put that thing on me,” I tell him, holding out my left hand. “And take a picture we can forward to our friends. Then clear your calendar, because a do-not-disturb sign will be hanging from the doorknob for the next few hours. During which time you’ll be FULLY occupied.”

“Ma’am, yes ma’am,” he says. Extracts the ring and waves a hand beneath it, Vanna White displaying prizes. Slides it onto my finger, kisses my knuckles.

“Every girl in the 09 is going to HATE me,” I say, and he gives a nerves-releasing laugh. I tackle him backwards onto the couch, and he goes without a fight; gazes up at me with those big, dark, winged-brow eyes, as old and knowing as time.

“Veronica,” he breathes, tracing my lips with his thumb. “Mars-Echolls. SWEAR you’ll be pretentious and hyphenate.”
I hold up three fingers in what I think is ‘scout’s honor’, and he bursts out laughing. “Well, if you INSIST…” he says, and rolls me under him.

Neither of us says anything coherent for a very long time.

XXXXX

“What would you have done?” I ask, much later. We’re cuddled together in the armchair near the bed, wrapped in a yellow cashmere throw, sharing a celebratory glass of wine. He’s turned the seat to watch the city flash past the window, and seems exceptionally serene. “If I’d said no?”

He shrugs behind me, presses his lips to my bare shoulder. “Dunno. Drinking binge, probably, to start. Maybe a soul-searching journey through Timbuktu? Followed by a call to Campos’s friend in the Navy, asking for a job.” He shifts, folding his legs lotus-style, settling me in the central hollow. “At least that way I’d have the chance to be SOMEONE’s hero.”

“Sneaky!” I accuse. “You presented this proposal as a pragmatic solution devoid of real significance, but actually it was a test. The word ‘no’ coming out of my mouth would have signaled the beginning of the end.”

“What was it you said to me, a LONG time ago? Something about how I deserved to be treated well? I’ll never trap you, Veronica. But I’ve come to the conclusion that you were right. It was time for you to make a declaration of intent. To tell the world you choose me, of your own free will; and we’re not just some tempestuous, doomed slipstream romance, that’ll flare out and fade away the minute things get sketchy.”

I snuggle my head into the curve beneath his jaw, wrap his arms more securely around me. “You’re my partner in trans-reality crime,” I say. “There is literally no one else on earth I could trust the way I’ve trusted you. I’m in it for the long haul.”

“Mmm,” he says. “Butch and Sundance across multiple universes. I’ll be Sundance, because I’m the handsome one. And you can be Butch.”

“Oh, ha ha ha.” I tilt my head to kiss his Adam’s apple. “You’ve had enough contact with my lady parts in the last hour to be certain of my gender.”

His hand curves around my breast, under the blanket, and he strokes his thumb down the slope. “I love you in pink, and I love you in black,” he says, unfazed. “Wear whatever clothes you want. Just realize I’ll be doing my best to get them off.”

“Deal,” I say, pulling my knees up to my chin. I watch the cars stream along the streets, like sparks down a wire. The beat of his heart is strong and sure against my back. “The important thing is…no matter who gets to be on top, we’re in this together.”

He nods, and I sigh, letting my eyes drift shut. It’s the world’s biggest irony, really; Hearst Logan was undone when he got what he wanted most. His existence depended on non-acceptance of his first, truly genuine proposal. I want to think he’d understand and appreciate the joke, in any world where he still exists. But I’ll never know.

That’s the problem with Slipstream choices. I’m a rat in a maze. And I can’t see what goes on, behind the doors I don’t open.
THREAD THIRTY SIX

One minute I’m dozing post-coitally on Logan’s chest, lazily watching New York pass the window. The next he’s shielding me from Celeste Kane’s Rage Radius, while she white-knuckles a bottle of water and hate-glares our direction.

“My son is MISSING,” she hisses, like the reptile I’m half-convinced she is. “My son is VULNERABLE. You will tell us EVERYTHING that might be pertinent, including the name of your…source, so Clarence can better judge this data’s value.”

“Our SOURCE prefers to remain anonymous.” Logan’s tone is mild. He looks relaxed, completely unfazed; but his eyes glitter in a provoking-mayhem way with which I’m intimately familiar. It’s shocking to see this side of him surface in Ideal Reality. I thought the perfect version was tamed.

Plus maybe I’m just in a stupor due to excess angst and sex, but why does VICTOR want anonymity? I mean, the guy’s Hollywood royalty, it’s not like he fades into the background.

I sit up, taking stock, as Jake puts a hand on Celeste’s shoulder and shakes his head. This is the cold, expensive penthouse where Lilly lived in Boat Reality…it must be Celeste’s. In addition to the Kanes—apparently still partners in crime, despite the divorce—Clarence is present, leaning against the bar and talking on his phone. Lilly’s here too, curled up on the loveseat, hair cut into a sleek, slanted bob. She’s examining her nails, waiting for the right moment to strike.

Jake skirts his ex-wife to sit on Logan’s ottoman, elbows braced against knees. His heart-to-heart pose, I guess, hands clasped to indicate sincerity.

“Logan,” he chides. “Nobody’s seen Duncan in forty-eight hours. His…conditions aren’t fully controlled, even when properly medicated; and we doubt he’s currently taking pills at all. If he’s been abducted, he’s frightened, and most likely hallucinating. And if he’s wandering around unsupervised, he’s a danger to himself and others. The information you and Veronica brought us is helpful and appreciated; but we need you to be completely frank. For Duncan’s sake.”

“For the sake of your public image, you mean,” Lilly interjects, acid. “I told you, Veronica’s SOURCE won’t blab to cops or papers. Your new ‘business initiative’ will still dominate the news cycle.” She makes air-quotes, to emphasize, and Celeste favors her with the death stare.

Guess the simpatico caused by Lilly’s Near-Death Experience didn’t last long.

“Wait, the COPS don’t know he’s missing?” I demand, turning to Logan for confirmation. “We’ve got a mentally-ill convicted murderer either kidnapped or running loose, and nobody but US is out looking? I can think of ten ways off the top of my head this could end in public disaster!”
“There’s a huge product launch scheduled for next week,” Clarence says, mildly, pocketing his phone. “Several years in the making, and a primary source of Kane Software’s future income. If the media got wind of Duncan’s disappearance, it would completely overshadow the press narrative… with financially devastating results.”

“We’re talking billions of dollars,” Jake says, pinning Logan with a calm gaze that implies ownership. It’s the kind of look the head of a secret society, for example, might give one of his lifetime-membership minions. “But of course, Duncan’s safety, and the safety of those around him, are also high priorities. Which is why it’s important that lines of communication stay open, while your…detective agency works in tandem with our staff.”

“If you worry so much about your son,” I say, not without sarcasm, “why’s he in that sanitarium in the first place? It’s clearly corrupt, and quality of life depends on the patient’s bank account. Are you sure they’re not INVOLVED in this vanishing act?”

“Hazelwood was HIGHLY recommended to us, by numerous associates with family…issues,” Celeste snaps, angrily drinking water. “And obviously, we pay well to ensure optimal care. We’ve been perfectly satisfied with Duncan’s progress, prior to this…incident.”

“In other words,” Lilly explains, “Hazelwood has the backing of all the best families, who use it to hush up private scandals. It’s a good thing we Kanes are liberals, or Mummy Dearest might have locked ME up there. ‘Promiscuous, Bisexual Kane Heiress Dates Non-White Person’--imagine THAT on the cover of People.”

“Don’t inject your drama into this, Lilly.” Celeste twists the bottlecap convulsively. “Our situation is fraught enough already.”

“How about instead of divvying up blame, and rationalizing keeping this quiet,” I say, “we discuss the results of Clarence’s preliminary investigation? I’m SURE, being the gem of an employee he is, he’s already finished the heavy lifting.”

Clarence picks up a folder from the bar like he’s been waiting for this question, brings it over. I flip through pages of densely typed notes. “Duncan went to bed as usual, two nights ago, according to multiple employees,” I summarize aloud. “He was discovered missing the next morning at eight, when a nurse showed up with daily medication. His disappearance went unnoticed, supposedly, by all staff on duty; but one of the RESIDENTS saw a car park on the lawn in the middle of the night—a white Rolls Royce, no less. According to this guy, it was driven by a man in a pirate costume, and Duncan climbed into the front seat of his own free will. I’m assuming this witness is a mental patient, though…so maybe his story’s a hallucination?”

“It’s likely,” Clarence says. “The individual in question is a paranoid schizophrenic.”

“Was he at least able to describe the pirate?” I ask. “Did he have a parrot, perhaps? Eye patch? Peg leg?”

Clarence shoots me a suppressive look. “Medium height, white male, slender. Hair covered by a green scarf, seen from a distance without benefit of glasses.”

“Any suspects, thus far?” Logan asks, stroking my shoulder blade with his thumb.

“I’m checking into Kane Industries business rivals,” Clarence says, “in case this abduction relates to the product launch. We’d like you to discreetly question Duncan’s friends. Who among them might have helped him escape? Who would shelter him? He’s not hiding at any Kane-owned properties, I’ve checked. And if he WERE wandering unsupervised, he would have been seen by
now. Someone’s concealing him; we need to find out who, and where.”

“OK,” I say. “Obviously, we know all his friends from high school. Hell, we ARE all his friends from high school. Did he have buddies at the sanitarium, maybe, who might be coherent enough to interview?”

“He spoke to several people regularly within the ward,” Clarence says. “An older male resident who’s since moved to another facility. A doctor who performs his monthly psych eval. He seems to like a few nurses, and sometimes even chats with janitors. And of course, there’s the floor monitor you bribed to provide monthly reports. I gave those to my team yesterday, they’re working to verify accuracy.”

“What’s Duncan’s current mental state?” Logan asks, taking the file from me and paging through. “Is he more or less coherent than usual?”

Jake and Celeste share a look, silent communication of two people who loathe, but GET, each other. “He hasn’t gone into a fugue state in a year,” Jake says, finally. “Although he does still rock, when he’s upset. And as I mentioned, he has…mild psychotic episodes. They’re not violent—but it isn’t always clear, in conversation, whether he’s discussing real events. He’s had three seizures since March, those seem to be worsening. Also, and this is new; he tends to…confabulate people. He refers to his psychiatrist by his previous doctor’s name, for example. And he believes one of his fellow patients is…someone else, as well.”

Jake looks down at his hands, and I ALMOST feel sorry for him, mourning the death of his dynastic dreams. “The doctors say Duncan has no memory of killing Aaron. He lives in the past-- assumes he’s on vacation, resting up for Sophomore Year.”

“He was doing so well, nine months ago,” Celeste says, almost wistfully. “He stopped rocking, started speaking; seemed more like his old, well-behaved self. Then the delusions began. Insisting he’d conversed with friends who didn’t visit. Claiming he’d witnessed violations of physics. He was confident and happy, but his stories were quite…distressing.”

I raise my eyebrows, because ‘Celeste’ and ‘distressed’ are words that rhyme but don’t match. It occurs to me to wonder if she’s lying. What do the Kanes GAIN by letting Logan, Lilly and I investigate, anyway, even if Clarence handles the sensitive stuff? Are they just humoring us, so we don’t call the cops?

And on a related note; what do they plan to DO with Duncan, once he’s found? I mean, Clarence probably killed Aaron in my reality—he’s the most loyal retainer any billionaire’s ever had. But Duncan’s a danger to the Kane reputation, capable of rape, violent rages, and possibly ordering hits. Would Clarence make Duncan disappear, if Jake gave the order? Would they send him straight back to Hazelwood, even though it’s not safe?

Ugh, this case is bringing up Duncan-related feelings I’d rather repress; sometimes protecting the guy from karma makes my stomach hurt.

“Look,” Logan says, resting his palms flat on the coffee table. “Obviously we’re going to do everything we can to find Duncan, all of us love him. But you need to understand; Veronica JUST got removed from bed rest YESTERDAY, she’s still under medical supervision. She’ll be our profiling mastermind, because duh. But I’m issuing a blanket ban, right now, on her involvement in anything dangerous. Her doctor thinks the risk of miscarriage is high, so the baby has to be our top priority.”

“Understood.” Clarence nods. “Trained professionals will retrieve Mr. Kane, once he’s located.
Miss Mars isn’t needed at the scene.”

“Miss Mars is capable of deciding what she can and can’t do, without the Pregnancy Police playing buzzkill,” I say, glaring at both of them. “It’s not like I’ll be scaling buildings with a grappling hook. Or engaging in Scarface-style machine gun fights.”

“See, you say that now,” Logan murmurs, meeting my look squarely. “But the second you got the kidnapper in your sights? You’d go right up Kane Tower like Spiderman, AK strapped to your back.”

“And I know where I’d plant the HOOK,” I snap. “I’m just as motivated to protect Peanut as you are, Logan. I won’t do anything stupid.”

“Of course you won’t, pumpkin,” he says, with a razor-bright smile. “Your life-endangering plans are EXTREMELY clever.”

I open my mouth to retort, and he holds up a ‘wait one minute’ finger. “Let’s continue this discussion in the car,” he says. “Jake, Celeste, Clarence, ALWAYS a pleasure. We’ll be in touch as soon as we know something worth telling. Lils, a quick word?”

Lilly uncurls and follows us out, smirking at my pissed-off expression. Logan pulls her into the elevator, then hushes her when she tries to talk. It’s not ‘til we’re on the sidewalk that he whispers, “You need to not mention Victor. Like, AT ALL, especially not around Wiedman.”

She rolls her eyes, mimes zipping her lips shut, and he says, “Thanks. I worry what they’d do, if they knew what he’s been up to.”

“You SHOULD.” Her wide blue gaze is serious. “Nobody in that condo is trustworthy. BELIEVE me, I learned the hard way.”

“Luckily, you have us,” he says, squeezing her shoulder. “Ronica’s gonna find Donut, Lils. There’s no mystery she can’t solve, given enough time. How long are you staying?”

“Four days,” she says. “Then I have to fly back, at least for the weekend. It’s Sam’s birthday, I promised Jackie.”

“OK we’ll assemble what puzzle pieces we’ve got at the hotel,” he tells her. “I’ll give you a call tonight and summarize. In the meantime, keep your ears open. Jake may let stuff slip, once everyone in the room’s named Kane.”

“You know I’m the spy who loves you both,” she says, winking at him and giving me a hug. “Please fix this, Ronica. Donut’s not capable of protecting himself.”

“Consider him found,” I say, because seriously. Logan’s currently in my bad books, but I’d never leave LILLY hanging.

She heads back into the building, and Logan continues towards the garage. I stand stock-still, arms crossed, until he realizes I’m not following. He turns, surveys me with a sigh. “Okay, I admit I was high-handed back there.”

“You THINK?” I ask, incensed. “I’m not your concubine, Echolls. I’m a licensed PI.”

“Ronica,” he says, approaching, and curls his palms around my upper arms. Gazes down at me, eyes tired. “Light of my life. You are brilliant, and passionate, and generally exceptional. But when you get pissed off, your common sense goes out the window.”
“Oh, I’m the impulsive one?” I demand. “That’s rich. Who ran over the top of a yacht to jump an assassin with a machine gun?”

“That was strategy!” he says. “A calculated risk. Whereas you just lose your temper and start poking bears, which will ultimately win you a Darwin Award. If you weren’t knocked up, I wouldn’t try to stop you—obviously I’m no house pet. But I don’t want Peanut to die.”

I start to retort, then remember Hearst Reality. And how I told Improved Past Logan that everybody there was killed. So if this Logan knows about the slipstream, despite appearances? He might realize we’re at the same point in the timeline.

Maybe he’s scared an accident is fated. Maybe he thinks Duncan was taken by the Sorokins. And maybe this overprotectiveness is his Hail-Mary, save-the-family play.

“You’re right,” I say, which makes his brows go up in surprise. “No bear-poking this time around, I promise. I’ll keep her safe until the danger is past.”

“THANK you,” he says, fervent, and pulls me into his arms. I wrap mine around his waist, and his grip tightens like the gesture matters.

Like Ideal Logan still loves and knows me, after all.

“Let’s look on the bright side,” I tell him, letting go, and resume our march towards the parking garage. “At least my mother wasn’t at that meeting, making things more painful.”

“Mmm, bet she’s pissed,” he says. “She can’t enjoy exclusion from this much drama. Luckily, Jake views her as a frivolous self-indulgence, and pays very little attention to her wishes.”

“Way to live the trophy-wife dream, mom,” I say, as he opens my door. “It’s not like she has pertinent dirt, anyway—although to be fair, neither do we. Have you got the faintest clue where in the world Duncan Kane is?”

He cocks his head, considering, as he starts the engine. “My gut says the staff at Hazelwood knows more than they’re telling.”

“And you think this why?”

He turns to me, gaze steady. “I never saw Donut unhappy in that facility, and I’ve visited every month since they locked him up. He doesn’t mind being there—thinks it’s one of those week-long practically-a-spa-day visits he used to make every summer. He’s convinced he’s still Neptune High’s Most Likely To Succeed, and he’s really excited about prom. The guy has no reason to escape.”

Logan sighs, shifting gears. “As to where he went…Jake hasn’t received a ransom demand. So I worry maybe Duncan lost it. Attacked somebody, got killed or ran off, and a cover up’s been staged. If he’s not dead, I’ll bet the sanitarium’s frantically searching.”

“Could the cover-up be courtesy of Clarence?” I ask. “Like the body will appear once the product launch is past?”

Logan laughs, without humor. “Clarence will do anything Jake wants,” he says. “Up to and including murder. I don’t see the point of this investigation, though, if they know there’s no chance of a happy ending.”

“Sure you do,” I say. “Keeps us too busy to alert the press.”
He shakes his head. “Forbidden in the non-disclosure agreement we signed this morning. Besides, Jake’s got me by the metaphorical balls, he knows we’d never call the cops. No, I think the bit they’re hiding is business-related…and likely the clue that makes sense of the puzzle.”

“Enh, I’ve beaten Wiedman at his own game before,” I say. “If we can get video from Hazelwood’s security cameras, I’ll have this mess sussed out by lunchtime.”

Logan smiles at me, quick unguarded sideways glance, and I’m struck again by how OPEN the Ideal version is…how sure he seems that he’s loved. Accepting his proposal really DID remove all doubt, I guess.

But was it ME saying yes last summer that’s made him so happy? Or HER?

It seemed the former, last night in Improved Past. He very nearly said so, and SHE wasn’t even wearing the ring. But maybe things have changed, in the months since.

I mean, look at him now, with his beach house and mellow job, and healthy, stable relationship. Ideal Logan and Other Veronica seem COMFORTABLE in a way MY Logan and I never managed. Real Logan was too much of a hot mess, post-Aaron, and I was obsessed with maintaining control.

Regardless, though, Ideal Reality’s won the slipstream Lotto—it’s officially the only one left. If I want to make sure I come first in my boyfriend’s eyes, maybe I need to focus on getting back home.

Logan parks with a decisive jerk, and I blink up at the Sunset Regent’s valet station. My door opens, a red-vested attendant helps me down, and the car’s whisked away before I have time to turn.

“Money talks,” my fiancée quips, sardonic as Original Logan, and gestures for me to precede him. “Come on, angel face, they’re waiting upstairs.”

When he swipes open the door to room 302, I find a full court press in progress. Mac’s at the desk by a wall of windows, multi-tasking with a travel scanner and three different laptops. Weevil’s got a stack of papers as tall as my hand, which he’s reading with the assistance of adorable glasses.

Victor’s leaning against the foyer wall, arms folded and ankles crossed, watching with a bored air. When we walk in, he holds a finger to his lips, removes a bug scanner from his pocket, and carefully checks us for spyware.

“Clean,” he pronounces with a thumbs-up, handing the scanner to Logan. “But it never hurts to be careful.”

“That Clarence Wiedman is a slippery character,” I agree. “He bugged a pencil sharpener in my room, once, and I didn’t find it for MONTHS.”

Victor’s mouth curls faintly, appreciative. “My name come up?” he asks Logan, who shakes his head. “You warn off Lilly?”

“Why do you care so much about staying hidden, anyway?” Weevil asks, looking at Victor over the top of his glasses. “Afraid Jake Kane’s gonna ask for your autograph?”

“Got it in one.” Victor presses a faux-sincere palm to his chest, which he spoils with a sideways grin at Logan. “Truth is, I’m painfully shy.”

Logan snorts, and Mac calls, “Bond, I found something.”
I cross to the desk, and she points at one of the laptop screens. “I finally made it past the Hazelwood firewall,” she says. “These people are remarkably untrusting, for supposed care-givers. My first thought is, whoever took Duncan knows where the cameras are. Check this out.”

A cheerful-looking male nurse appears in the streaming video, leading Duncan by the arm. Duncan’s in white pajamas, and seems cooperative but vacant. They go into a room at the end of the wing. Two minutes later, the orderly emerges and walks, whistling, away. “So that’s Duncan going beddie-bye,” she says. “Where he stays, until 3:16 AM, with no apparent visitors. Here’s what happens next.”

She clicks an icon, plays another video. In this one, Duncan exits the room alone, walks down the hall. He looks happy this time, and he’s not faking… I recognize the blank-but-smug expression.

I look up at Logan, who’s come to stand beside me. He says, “They’re supposed to fasten patients to the bed, then lock the door from the outside. The room has a window, but it’s barred. Nobody got in without a blowtorch.”

“Which suggests that smiley-faced character didn’t strap him down,” I say. “By accident or design.”

“I told you, rich patients get weekends off,” Victor interjects, from behind me. “Half the staff accepts kickbacks to let friends take ‘em on sabbatical. I wasn’t able to suss out their system, because people disappeared after hours, but this is a big clue.”

“Here’s video from the exterior door,” Mac says, maximizing another window. Duncan emerges; walks across the yard, and out of camera range. “This is the last sighting—and it APPEARS, to the casual observer, like he just wandered away. But not so much.”

She zooms in on the far left edge of the video, clicks several times to maximize. “That’s the front end of an old car, right?” she asks. “Eli, come look, we need your expertise.”

Weevil sighs and heaves himself off the bed, a distinctly un-lover-like response. He’s back in low-cost East-LA garb, too, while she’s wearing a TAG Heuer watch with Joe jeans and a Sleestak tee. So I’m guessing, even if they ARE still an item, he no longer shares the wealth.

Nudging me aside, Weevil leans in close, peers through his glasses at the screen. Whistles. “That’s a Rolls Royce, Mackenzie. White one, 50’s-era Silver Cloud. You can see part of the headlight and the front grill, right here.”


“Duncan was abducted by buccaneers,” I say, handing him Clarence’s folder.

“Like the Neptune High sports teams?” Victor scans the data, eyes narrowed in focus. “Or will we find him halfway across the Pacific, singing jaunty chanties and swigging rum?”

Logan and I share a look. “Friends and family’s our slice of the pie,” he murmurs, with a slow grin. “Maybe we WILL have this solved by lunchtime.”

I REALLY don’t want to restrict myself to friends and family. I’d love to unearth Jake’s secrets, and leverage them to pry Logan, Dick and Wallace free. But no way, after our earlier argument, will I do so if it makes things worse. Like those suction-cup car signs say, I’ve got a baby on board. And even if I’m not Ideal Logan’s Happily Ever After, these days, it’s not like I want him DEAD.

Plus, if I dig and Mr. Overprotective gets wind of it, he’ll completely lose his shit.
“Lucky us,” I say, instead of voicing this. “You and my OB can join hands and dance for joy.”

He smiles down at me. Drapes an arm around my shoulders and tugs me close, spreads a palm protectively over my belly. “If you were engaged to Veronica Mars, you’d fret, too.”

“Most likely,” I say. “Luckily, the person I’m engaged to NEVER courts death without warning.”

“Aw, pumpkin,” he says. “Maybe we’re soulmates. Besides, you’ll only be pregnant for six more months. That’s like…180 days. Piece of cake.”

“Heartwarming as it is, watching you two canoodle,” Victor interrupts, “We should quit micromanaging fetal development, and focus on the main event. We’ve got a rich-kid psychopath running loose, aided by unknown forces. And he happens to be fixated on YOU, my dear.”

I turn an accusing look on Logan, and he winces, silent confirmation. “Yeah, I might not have mentioned that part? You showed no interest in visiting, so nobody had to come right out and deny access.”

“Fixated HOW?” I demand, my gaze moving back and forth between them. Recall the blonde girl in the ward Duncan ended up atop. “Like SEXUALLY?”

Logan shrugs, defensive, with a sour glance at Victor for spilling the beans. “You were Duncan’s first love,” he explains. “The guy lives in the past. And let’s face it, dating you is…kind of the pinnacle, for anyone with a brain.”

Weevil frowns, but Mac seems amused by the back-and-forth. She pops licorice in her mouth and chews, like she’s watching a great movie.

“Duncan thinks you’re still his girlfriend,” Victor puts in, with a lazy lift of brows. “And Logan’s dating Lilly. Everyone plays along at the hospital, in the interest of keeping him stable. When his last shrink tried to disabuse him of the notion, he dove over the desk, then put a pencil through the poor bastard’s cheek.”

How do you KNOW all this? I want to demand. But Other Veronica’s heard the answers—and Victor’s poker face is formidable. So I direct my ire at the handiest target on my shit list.

“Guess that’s why you want me far away, when Duncan’s captured,” I accuse Logan, turning on him. “It has nothing to do with doctor’s orders, does it?”

“Both factors are in play, Veronica,” Logan says, squaring up. “It’s not like I LIED.”

“Ugh, all you DO is lie!” I yell. “All the time, about EVERYTHING! If this were a Dickens novel, you’d run a house of pickpockets, and twirl a waxed moustache! I can’t solve a crime if I don’t have the facts, Logan! Remove one domino, and everything falls WRONG!”

I cast around for some way to vent, grab a bucket off the desk. “I’m getting ice. And soda. I’ll be back in a few minutes, after I calm down.”

The door slams behind me and I storm down the hall, footsteps audible despite the heavy blue carpet. I smack the elevator button, wait for it, toe tapping--shove through as soon as it slides open. Turn to press the ‘ground’ button, and there’s Victor, squeezing inside.

“Nice weather we’re having,” he says mildly, when I level a death glare. “Look, I just need a smoke. I’ll stay out of your hair.”
“I’m not so happy with YOU, either,” I inform him, crossing my arms. He’s balanced on his hands on the bar at waist level, looking like the world’s most die-hard Beach Boys fan. “This particular creepy-Duncan detail wasn’t in your files.”

“Sure it was,” he says easily, gesturing for me to precede him as the doors slide open. “Just not the section you read before Junior caught you, I’m guessing.”

I sigh, because he’s probably right. “What’s your stake here, anyway?” I ask. “Why do you care so much what happens to Duncan?”

“I’m just enjoying the adventure,” he tells me, which is such patent bullshit, I can’t contain my snort.

“I AM!” he maintains, smiling. Digs Marlboros and a gold lighter from his pocket, as we exit the lobby—sparks up with a deep, satisfied drag. “One last caper, before I get too old for this shit, take up pinochle. An homage to my past, you might say. I USED to be a real hell-raiser.”

“As opposed to now?” I settle on a bench to one side of the doors; he sits beside me. Traces the engraving on his lighter with his thumb. “Because you are the very model of a sedate and timid senior. I’m guessing your major problem is bunions.”

“Gout,” he corrects, with a smile a lot like his grandson’s. Twirls the lighter and re-pockets it, gazing off into the distance. “Courtesy of my misspent youth.”

“Your youth was MISSPENT?” I ask, feigning shock. “Will these startling revelations never cease?”

He laughs, shaking his head, like I don’t know the half of it. “Look, that kid in there needs at least one family member who gives a shit,” he says, eventually. “And he’s not focused on his own back, because he’s busy guarding yours. If Duncan comes looking for his tragic lost love, who’s he gonna find, standing in the way?”

“Apparently, he’ll find you,” I say thoughtfully, studying him.

“That’s the plan,” Victor agrees. “And of course, we don’t want anything happening to your munchkin. My wife had a miscarriage, once, and it was…tough for her to get past.”

“Yeah,” I say, curling my hands around my belly. Remember how I felt, in Hearst Reality, when I touched it and found Peanut not there. “I can imagine.”

“On the other hand,” he continues, studying me astutely as he blows smoke downwind, “She felt trapped during SUCCESSFUL pregnancies, too. I may have mentioned, my wife was a go-getter.”

“Was she a good person?” I ask, somewhat bitterly. “Did she have her shit together? Because I ought to confess, Victor, I’m…kind of an asshole. And I’m not sure this cheeful, stable, laid-back life with Mr. Perfect is going to work for me. When I try to pretend I’m a sweet and pretty princess, nobody EVER believes. Ugh, maybe I won’t GET a happy ending.”

“Let me tell you something about people who grow up in Hollywood, Veronica.” He sucks back the last third of the cigarette in one luxurious draw, crushes it out beneath his foot. Exhales, slowly, like he wants the sensation to last. “We learn to play roles. Sometimes we don’t even realize we’re doing it, the habit’s that ingrained. Your fiancée back there’s performing the part of Good Boyfriend with all his available skill, right now…but underneath, he’s still a damaged kid. He had a shitty father who knocked him around, and a mother who never lifted a finger. He needs a girl who can handle that about him. Who cares, but won’t show pity.
“I’d be willing to bet,” he continues, fixing me with his sharp and clever gaze, “that if you told
him to his face you see him as scarily functional, he’d burst out laughing. Subsequent to which, the
role he’s playing would change...maybe get less pristine. But he’ll always turn his best side to you,
my dear. Because your approval is more important to him than anyone else’s.”

“You know, Grandpa Victor,” I say, a smile twitching at the corners of my mouth. “I’m starting
to suspect you and I are kindred spirits.”

“Ha,” he crows. “Because we speak our minds, and don’t give a damn?”

I smile. “Exactly that.”

“Well, it’s better than caring, keeping your mouth shut, and STILL getting kicked in the face,” he
concedes. “Sometimes that pain’s unavoidable, but I’ve never grown to enjoy it.”

“Truer words,” I say, and nudge him with my shoulder.

He puts an arm around me, pulls me against his side, warm and bony, reeking of patchouli. We sit
together, quietly contemplating the parking lot, for several long, peaceful minutes. Then the
slipstream wraps around me, and carries me off elsewhere.

THREAD THIRTY SIX INVERTS

My head’s still tilted against a shoulder, but this one’s muscular and smells familiar--beach at
summer, boy pheromones, salt and sweat and rain. We’re walking through an echoing, unfurnished
space, Logan’s arm around me. I note honey-colored parquet floors, in my first quick, orienting scan;
then a wall of wood-framed, arched windows that open onto a terrace. That’s cement, spacious,
railed in green wrought-iron, and showcases a view of a large park.

“Look, a two-sided fireplace!” my mom trills. I turn, and there she is in a baby-blue sheath dress,
a squash-blossom necklace draped across her chest. She points at a beige-marble, free-standing
rectangle, which divides the echoing space. “So handy for those cold, New York winter nights. You
can put a grouping of furniture here, maybe tan leather? A nice bright rug, and that dining table we
saw in the showroom, over THERE. Then you’ll be nice and warm no matter WHAT you’re
doing!”

“Doesn’t Jake already own this place?” I murmur to Logan, who flattens his lips so he won’t
laugh. “Why the sales pitch?”

“Logan, be a doll and go find Jake,” Mom says, overhearing, and pins me with a censorious gaze.
She crosses her arms as he runs this fake errand, preparing to unload. “You know what your problem
is, Veronica?”

“I have many,” I say, crossing my own arms in mirror. “Care to be more specific?”

“You don’t worry enough about PRACTICAL things.” The sad droop of her mouth means we’re
now discussing Her Mistakes. “You’re being flip, but this is a once-in-a-lifetime offer. A free ride to
Columbia, and an incredible apartment? Not things a Mars should snub. I mean, you’d be living in
the San REMO, Veronica. MADONNA applied to buy here, and got rejected!”

there are plenty of pretentious schools in the Golden State where Jake could buy me a spot.”

“If he felt so inclined,” she retorts, in a tone that makes clear he won’t. “At least you managed to
lock Logan down, before he swanned off to Berkeley and discovered sorority girls.”
“Wow,” I say drily, because she used to be less overt. “All this conflicting parental advice is melting my circuits. Dad’s advocating Columbia so I’ll DITCH Logan. Yet you think absence will make our hearts fonder?”

“Please. If you move here, so will he,” she says. “I’ve been in desperate high school love, I recognize the signs. Your father’s a sharp investigator, but he has problems thinking…strategically. Logan, though, he’s shrewd. He’ll do what it takes to get what he wants, even if it means a delay.”

“He’s rich, too,” I add, trailing a finger along the fireplace. It’s cold, and somewhat dusty. “Which is the salient point, right?”

“You have to think of your future,” Mom says, disregarding the jab. “Jake’s been very generous, while you were a minor, and now he’s offering this great deal. And of course Logan will take care of you, once you’re married. But here’s the thing about your father, Veronica; he’s a good man who can’t provide. All he’s got to his name are morals, and that’s all he ever WILL have.”

Bingo, I think. The mystery of my Boat Reality poverty, solved. I don’t HAVE a Jake Kane trust fund, because I’m not Jake Kane’s daughter. The fatness of my wallet—and clearly, my mother’s—depends on his largesse. And Logan’s meant to pick up the slack, once I don that second ring.

I wonder how punishing a prenup Lianne signed, to make her teenage dreams come true. I’ll bet it’s Draconian, if Celeste got involved—and dwindles to zero if she leaves Jake, or cheats. Celeste might have even demanded a paternity test, to be sure I didn’t inherit; certainly she forbade Clarence from protecting us, which hints at serious rancor.

Big surprise, right? Because normally Celeste’s a giving Earth mother with a heart of gold. And she’s extra-specially fond of my husband-coveting mom.

Lilly stalks across the loft in a leopard wrap dress and stilettos, talking intently into her phone. Her sky-high heels clack against the flooring, her cleavage is set to stun--I grin, because I’ll bet she dressed this way to fuck with Lianne. She mouths ‘five minutes’ at me, holding up corresponding fingers, and strides into what looks like the kitchen.

“You know, mom,” I drawl. “You may not realize this, since you seem to live in the seventeenth century. But nowadays, we ladies can get things called jobs. They pay money for labor of the non-sexual variety, which can be spent on housing and education. It’s a brave new world!”

“Don’t start with the sarcasm, Veronica,” she says. “You know I only want what’s best for you. And after all the…awfulness that took place on your graduation night, Jake and I just think you’d be SAFER away from Neptune.”

“Mom, those shooters were distracting the Coast Guard from a drug run. It wasn’t personal. Besides, I’m a smart girl. I don’t NEED Logan’s money, OR Jake’s. And maybe I’m non-strategic like Dad; but I’ll make long-term decisions based on what brings me actual happiness.”

“And that would be?” she asks, arch. “This…favor-trading side-business, which keeps landing you in trouble?”

“I want to open a detective agency,” I say. “I like stringing clues together, and catching bad guys red-handed. And just to set your mind at ease, this career plan has the full support of the other thing that makes me happy…my hot, non-legally-wedded, who-gives-a-fuck-how-much-cash-he-has boyfriend.”

“Wow, my ears are BURNING,” Logan says, approaching from the side to kiss my temple. His
tone is jolly, but sounds forced; when I glance up at him, his face is grave. “Must have something to do with the word ‘hot’.”

“You know you’re my own personal Heat Miser, sweet cheeks,” I purr. Manage a smile for Jake, who’s followed him out of the bedroom. “Mom’s really been making the sales pitch for this place.”

“Isn’t it fantastic?” Jake asks with his easygoing grin. He gestures to encompass the view. “The perfect piece of real estate for a downtown New York lifestyle. I only wish I could have snapped up the two-story tower room before it went off the market…but Jobs had the deed. I lost out to some ROCK star.” He cups a hand around one side of his mouth, and leans towards me, confiding. “Jobs hasn’t liked me much, since streaming video debuted. Fortunately your friend Jessica’s dad owns a unit in the North Tower; he put in a good word for me with the co-op board.”

Jake chuckles, smug about his score—mom mouths ‘BONO’ at me, with way too much excitement. I clench the entire lower half of my face so I won’t roll my eyes. “I’m so happy you girls want to stay here,” Jake continues. “And that YOU’VE been accepted to my Alma Mater, Veronica. Now Lianne and I have an excuse to visit for booster events. Wait ‘til you see New York at Christmas—it sure is a far cry from Neptune.”

“Oh, yes, snow up to your eyeballs!” Lilly chirps, emerging from the kitchen, closing her phone with a snap. “Eyeballs which can actually FREEZE, due to wind chill. And your BFF, namely me, will only be around on weekends. Because no WAY am I driving two hours to and from Poughkeepsie every day, even if Dad DOES hire a town car.”

“We’re trying to ENCOURAGE Veronica here,” Jake says, suppressive. Lilly makes a face at him, which evokes his rarest smile.

“EVERYBODY knows you bribe Ronica with food,” Lilly explains. “It’s the quickest way to her heart that’s not Logan-specific, plus I’m STARVING. Didn’t someone mention Italian, earlier?”

“Did you see enough to make a decision?” Jake asks. “Veronica? Logan?”

“And then some,” Logan says, lightly, making me frown. “How about you, sugarpuss? Had your fill?”

I grimace, he laughs at me, and Jake gestures towards the door. “Patsy’s Pizzeria is a great little hidden gem,” my stepfather says. “If everyone likes New-York-style? The route’s walkable, and you can check out local shops along the way.”

“Lead on,” I say, and he takes mom’s arm, like she needs help walking across the room.

There’s a gold-faced private elevator, which we’d share with another tenant (thanks, I gather, to the nefarious Bono). We go down sixteen floors to a terrazzo-and-marble lobby, with old-fashioned bronze light fixtures that illuminate it poorly. The exterior is faced in faded brown brick, with two pointy towers atop more substantial wings.

“So, here’s a plus: if we ever need to call Ghostbusters, we’ll be living in the right place,” Logan says, gazing up, hands in pockets.

I snap and point, making the connection, and he laughs. “I came back as soon as I could,” he murmurs, steering me down the sidewalk. “Hope those five minutes alone with Lianne didn’t make you TOO miserable.”

“Ugh, she congratulated me on LOCKING A MAN DOWN,” I mutter, as mom and Jake move out of earshot. “And warned me to be more ‘strategic’. I cannot BELIEVE her, like EVER.”
“At least she hasn’t thrown up her hands in disgust,” Lilly offers, coming up behind me. “When Dad and Celeste found out Jackie has a kid, they went into shock. I’m grateful to your imminent teen marriage for deflecting attention; they stopped muttering, this morning, about banishing me to Europe.” She makes a face. “I don’t get what the big deal is, anyway. I mean, Dad hooked up with your mom in high school, right? This engagement must seem almost NORMAL to them.”

“So that apartment’s your Tower of London, to get you out of Jake’s spotlight?” I ask, as we pass a twenty-something guy walking fourteen poodles. “And you’re willing to accept it, because the prison’s luxurious?”

She laughs. “As I discovered on graduation night, when we almost got incinerated? Life’s short, Veronica Mars. My girl wants to be with her kid, and I want to be with my girl, at least for now. The glamorous Manhattan studio is just…frosting.”

“She winks at me, jogs up ahead to speak to Jake, and Logan repeats, “Even if we say NO?’” I ask. Logan turns his head, ignoring a herd of giggling, pointing high-school girls, and studies me with increased focus.

Lilly lifts her brows. “Well, I’d be disappointed,” she says. “And possibly lonely. But we could still be phone buddies. I mean, BFF’s forever doesn’t mean we’ll NEVER say goodbye.”

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“Mrs. R,” he says, face relaxing into a smile. “Two days in a row. I do declare, I feel positively PAMPERED.”

“Stop,” I say, giving him a little shove. “Lianne just worked the Southern Belle routine to death. It’s like fingernails on the chalkboard now.”

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“Even if Logan and I opt out?” I ask. Logan turns his head, ignoring a herd of giggling, pointing high-school girls, and studies me with increased focus.

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She winks at me, jogs up ahead to speak to Jake, and Logan repeats, “Even if we say NO?”

“You are KIDDING me,” I say. Then shiver, because I can’t help but think of his plane, exploding. I guess Woody’s death on that particular day was one of those fated things.

“Au contraire. The guy responsible is a lifer, and he’s not talking about why. But it’s not like child abusers are POPULAR in the prison environment.”

“I wonder if Stewart Manning paid that con to wield the knife,” I muse aloud. “He was friends with Lucky, and he’s the type to hold a grudge. Plus we both know how much he enjoys punishing sinners.”
“Funny you should mention it,” Logan says. “Not the Stewart part, I mean-- it may have slipped your mind in all the excitement, but Stewart Manning is DEAD. The ex-wife of the shiv-ver has suddenly come into money, though. Mac’s sorting through shell accounts to find a connection, since it might have something to do with the Sharks Killer. But nothing’s been proven thus far.”

“Oh my God, Logan, look!” Lilly calls, pointing at the Brooks Brothers shop window. “A whole STORE devoted to those Argyles you love! You should stock up now, in case they go MORE out of style!”

“Ah, Lils, you slay me with your wit.” He steers me over so we can look. “The green one’s not bad. What’s your vote, peaches?”

I don’t answer. I’m staring at my brown-sweater-slash-robe, which adorns the mannequin on the left.

“You mind if I run in for a sec?” I call to Mom and Jake, who’ve powered way ahead. Jake looks at his watch, shrugs, so I push through the door. Find the display that houses my sweater and search for a large, while Logan and Lilly trail after.

I hold it up to his chest—it’s a Fair-Isle, with grey and white zig-zag patterns along the lapels—and he obligingly extends his arms to check length. “Try it on,” I say. He looks at me strangely but complies, and of course, it fits.

“VERY rugged,” Lilly coos, which earns her a sardonic Logan look. “Next time you want to chop some wood before heading to the Farmer’s Market, you’ll have the perfect accessory.”


“Aren’t gifts supposed to be things I actually want?” he calls. But he’s talking to air, because I’m headed for the register.

When we emerge with our spoils, Jake’s on his cell, talking quietly. He cuts things short once he sees us, and snaps it shut as he approaches. “I need to head back to the hotel for a quick video conference,” he says, making apologetic face. “Do you want to go on to the pizza place? Or would you rather order a snack from room service, and hit Del Posto once I’m done? My assistant made reservations, just in case.”

“Veronica wants Del Posto,” Logan says, doing the ‘oh yeah’ nod when I lift my brows in question. “Trust me on this, it’s your Ur-Restaurant.”

“Fair enough!” I say, clapping my hands. “Far be it from me to mess with the grand plan.”

Back at the hotel I locate my suitcase, then change into a cami and sleep pants suitable for lounging. I throw the sweater on top, and yeah, that’s more like it. There’s a sense of continuity and rightness to this purchase—it makes me feel weirdly safe.

I find Logan on the window seat, barefoot in a t-shirt and jeans, gazing pensively out over the city as the sun starts to set. His hair’s mussed; he’s got the radio on low, playing Billie Holliday. I guess it suits his mood.

He looks up and smiles when he sees me, pulls his feet closer so I can sit. “Suddenly I begin to understand that sweater’s appeal.”
“It’s my ROBE,” I say. “In the future. You wear it sometimes, to keep it smelling like you. And I put it on every morning, as soon as I wake up.”

He curls his hand around my foot, for security, I think, stroking his thumb along the top. “Something happened today,” he says. “It won’t be much fun to talk about, Ronica--but I think we should, while you’re still here.”

I nod, although this doesn’t sound promising. His mouth curls, like he gets it. “OK,” he says. “So you know I’d rather stay in California and surf, and it’s sweet that you respect my choice. But I think maybe you don’t realize how much my life revolves AROUND surfing, now. Because when you show up, we mostly solve mysteries. And screw.”

He laughs when I shove him with the foot he’s not holding, lifts the one in his grasp to kiss my toes. “Anyway, not to puff myself off or whatever, but I’m pretty well-known. I have a FAN club.” He bobs his brows, self-mocking, which makes me smile. “I’ve been semi-pro for a while, and it’s eating an increasing amount of time—endorsements, appearances, contests. Plus Dick and I are kicking around the idea of a shop and merchandise line…which I want to pursue, because it would keep him out of trouble. If he runs off to be a pothead beach bum in Hawaii, I’m afraid he’ll end up dead.”

“Have you started making your own boards yet?” I ask, which prompts a surprised lift of his brows. “You will. Turns out you have a knack, and you find it relaxing.”

“So I guess you DO know,” he says, settling back. “Good, that makes this all so much easier. All right, moving on. When you went to live with Jake and your mom, and you and I started dating, Jake developed a sort of…fatherly interest in me? Which, until today, never seemed like a big deal. I figured he just…needed someplace to hang his paternal dreams. And once he realized I had no interest in software, he found a different protégé.

“But turns out he wasn’t put off, when I declined to join the family business. Because like an hour ago, while you were fighting with your mother at that apartment, he gave me the WEIRDEST back-slapping motivational speech. About how guys like me can go far, and institutions are in place to help us thrive. He said he’s impressed with everything I’ve accomplished--but would hate to see it go to waste, just because I formed…embarrassing attachments.”

“Meaning me,” I realize, when he pauses. “I’M the embarrassment! THAT’S why I’m being shuffled off to college in New York, out of view of California high society circles…along with his OTHER current source of chagrin, Lilly!”

“Yes,” Logan says, apologetic but unflinching. “You garnered a lot of bad press with your antics at the debutante ball, and graduation made us both 24/7 news fixtures. He’s WAY displeased with the whole detective thing, too. Which I guess makes sense…wouldn’t want you uncovering his secrets. I think his plan is to split us up, then rehabilitate my image in your absence.

“The way I figure it, Jake realizes Veronica’s ambitious, and so are both her…your…parents. He thinks a top-notch free education, coupled with a luxurious lifestyle, makes irresistible bait for all three of you. And of course the opportunity to be roommates with Lilly is also a draw.

“So anyway, in conclusion. He’s giving me this speech, very fake-jolly, and all I can think about is the day you mentioned a secret society. And how me joining led to us DYING, in one reality. I got this sick sensation in my stomach and started wondering…Ronica, does the secret society have something to do with JAKE?”

“Yes,” I say. “It’s called the Castle--he RUNS it, actually. And one of the members is a Russian
mobster’s son, specifically the heir apparent, Gorya Sorokin. I wasn’t told all the details, before the relevant reality disappeared; but I know the Sorokins were involved in the Boat Disaster. And Jake brokered a deal to keep them from offing us.”

“Those assholes must be pissed,” Logan says, gazing off into the distance as he connects dots. “You foiled their distraction scheme, then got millions in narcotics seized. The shooters on the Nautilus were speaking Russian, FYI, two of the bodies have been identified. We stopped their push to take over the languishing Neptune drug trade.”

“Man,” I say, tilting my head back and closing my eyes, “did I turn out to be on the wrong track THERE. I was convinced the guilty party was the Sharks Killer, and put my foot in the biggest pile of shit around.”

“Veronica remembers seeing a guy who seemed like he was in charge,” Logan says, patting my toes in consolation. “She looked through mug shots, but he must have a clean record. According to her, the leader didn’t sound Russian.”

“Nope,” I say. “He sounded American, and whistled a surfer-boy pop song. That doesn’t mean much, though. Plenty of foreigners speak English without an accent.”

“So here’s my problem,” Logan tells me. “I’m not inclined to accept Jake’s Faustian bargain. No way am I breaking up with Veronica…and I want no part of some sketchy secret society that’s tied up with the mob. But I’m thinking it’s a BAD idea to tell Jake no.”

“He pretty much holds the purse strings for Ronica, Lilly, Donut and Lianne; beyond which, he’s an extremely powerful guy. I’m afraid if I reject his mentoring, it will put us all in danger…possibly even lead to our deaths. So my question, before you slipstream away is...what do you think we should do? Which college is the best choice? I need your special brand of foresight, so Veronica and I can protect ourselves.”

“Well you’ll be relieved to know we didn’t actually die,” I say. “In the car crash, I mean; Dad lived, too. I made an assumption, the day of the debutante ball, which turned out to be wrong. And while I wouldn’t categorize joining the Castle as a GOOD move, I DON’T think it’s the reason we were attacked. Dad had a hard drive in his pocket that Kendall Casablancas gave him, and someone awful wanted it back.”

“Fuck,” he says. “It always comes down to Dick’s stepmom. Thank God you warned me away from her last summer--because she SEEMS like a harmless, horny cheerleader on the make.”

“She’s greedy, but basically small potatoes,” I say. “Her crimes are all about self-preservation and cash; I’m positive she gave that drive to dad to secure one or the other. As far as the Castle, though…in the only future still standing, you seem to be a member. So while I support the avoiding-it plan, I’m not sure you’ll be able to help yourself.”

“The ONLY future?” he asks, surprised. “Your chart showed four!”

“Wow,” I say. “I’m TERRIBLE at keeping you current on slipstream events. OK, one reality dropped off a while ago, after we stopped Beaver from roofie-ing us. A second disappeared just recently, when we prevented the boat from blowing up. And the reality where we almost died…I think that one’s gone now, too. Because here, when you proposed yesterday…I said yes. And presumably, so did Veronica.”

Comprehension dawns in Logan’s eyes, and the realization makes him sad. “She turned him down,” he guesses. “In car-crash reality.”
“Correct,” I say. “Which is why I think that one’s paradoxed out of existence; because it seems like YOUR Veronica WANTS to get married.”

“Very much so,” he agrees, becoming animated. “And that means in the last few weeks, we’ve changed EVERYTHING! We’re en route to a future even YOU haven’t seen!”

“Possibly,” I say. “We might be forced into the same choices our counterparts made. Some events can be altered—but some seem to happen no matter what we do.”

“So if we stay in Neptune,” he continues, “we can choose new ways to engage roadblocks. We don’t have to stumble into the traps we sprung, in failed possible futures.”

“Well, there were twenty people gunning for us, senior year,” I say, taking his hands in mine. “And we shrank that number considerably via sheer native cunning...not bad for a couple of high school students. Why the gung-ho push towards Neptune, though? I thought you wanted to go to Berkeley?”

“I can surf in either location,” he says, smiling as he toys with my fingers. “And if Veronica turns down Columbia, her second choice is Hearst. I was leaning towards Berkeley because I thought that’s what YOU wanted. But you mentioned a few visits ago that you’d changed your mind?”

“Here’s the thing,” I say. “What I want doesn’t matter. You need to make this decision with Other Veronica, not me. Because, unless we manage to end the slipstream, and settle her happily somewhere else, this is HER life, Logan…and yours. I’m just a guest star.”

“How is that fair?” he demands. “Don’t you have a right to plan your own future? Can’t you and I be happy here TOGETHER?”

“The slipstream’s NOT fair,” I tell him. “To ANY of us. It’s a shitty situation that’s painful all around, and I have no idea how to ever make it stop.”

“I wish sometime we could meet in a place where it WAS your body, and your choice,” he says, fervent. “I wish I could just be with YOU, and quit this insane juggling.”

I want to reassure him that our time is coming—that one day we’ll get past the rough patch, and have a happily ever after. But I’m starting to realize there are no guarantees. Even if I fight as hard as I can to make his life perfect...to render this Logan’s surroundings safe and favorable...there’s no guarantee I’ll get to stick around and enjoy it. He may end up with HIS Veronica, just like all the vanished Logans did. He may get sick of my shit, and start pretending I don’t exist. And I may end up…who knows?

A ghost, wandering the earth, maybe. Searching for vengeance, or resolution denied. A restless spirit, banned from home, because all these months I’ve been DEAD.

“Same,” I say, and leave the morbid imaginings unspoken.

“So we’re agreed,” he continues, subdued, after a heavy silence. Tugs me by the hands into his embrace. He tucks me under his chin, wraps me in his arms, and my bleak mood softens, just a little. “We stay in Neptune, go to Hearst. Keep digging up dirt and solving mysteries. Brazen this slipstream bullshit out, because we’re not wimps who take the easy path?”

“Yeah,” I say, and hope it’s the right choice. One that doesn’t result in discord and danger, lost pregnancies and broken dreams. “We’re agreed. As long as Other Veronica buys in, too.”

He turns his face towards the window, to watch the last of the sunset. On the stereo, Billie sings ‘I
love my man…I’m a liar, if I say I don’t. But I’ll leave my man…I’m a liar if I say I won’t.’

I close my eyes, bury my face in his chest. And long for the days before the slipstream, when I understood the cause of every wound. When my past and present were a direct result of my own choices; and even though life sucked, I had a measure of control.

I’m sick of being the guest who doesn’t get to muss the sheets. I’m sick of not having the starring role in my own goddamned life.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to Ghostcat for all the Noo Yawk details, they really helped set the scene.
The slipstream, this time, feels like drifting through Jell-o. I roll and it sloshes, rubbery, unpleasant. A rasping, sawing sound reverberates through vast silence...weirdly, there’s even a stench. I roll to escape it—ha, that’s a laugh--and the Jell-o shudders, engulfing me. Then the slipstream barks, and I jerk awake.

I’m staring at a pink wall, against which red and gold pillows are piled. I turn over, the waterbed shivering beneath me, and Backup licks my face.

I’m home.

Gripping the bedframe, I struggle to sit; but there’s no Nyquil hangover, no residual torpor. I’m in sleep shorts and a black tank, not my ditching-Logan jeans. A scrabble on the nightstand yields my Sidekick. It’s June second.

More than two months have passed since I started slipstreaming; which means this wasn’t just a dream, albeit a fucking long one. I’ve been playing Rip Van Winkle, in this reality, throughout the whole ordeal...while a doppelganger (presumably) ran my life?

Unless maybe I’m STILL unconscious. The month I tried to solve the bus crash, my life was one long waking nightmare, and I had dreams within dreams within dreams--until I went completely off the rails, and sought compassion from BECKY JAMES.

Lately, though, I’ve managed to ride the slipstream like a rodeo cowgirl. And last night, I clicked my heels three times, and begged to come home. Maybe the Metaphorical Forces of Fuckery shrugged and obeyed?

Backup whines; licks the air where he wishes food was. I run a hand over my non-baby-inflated belly, and reflect that at least quadruple espresso is now an option.

I feel like an actor in a play, bathing in my anemic, sporadically-hot shower, choosing clothes from a food-service-job-funded wardrobe. Babying the Saturn’s finicky clutch, so the engine doesn’t flood. All the way to Java the Hut, I keep expecting Improved Past Logan to nudge me awake with pastries, indulge me in a morning quickie. Then spoon me in our big, soft bed, while I gaze at the ocean view. But I keep on driving through the urban wasteland of Real Neptune…and my engine has developed a rattle.

Daphne, the manager, waves when I enter the shop. I mirror her, tugging my worn green army jacket closer against the air-conditioned chill.

“Veronica!” she calls. “Does this mean you’ve come crawling back, and I no longer have to work Saturdays?”

“I desperately need caffeine,” I say. “And sugar. If you’ll fill a water glass with espresso, and fork over a pile of bear claws, you can pretty much name your price.”

She laughs and makes me a quad; dumps it, without asking, into frothed milk and caramel, then tops the cup with cream. “Celebrate the last day of school too much?” she asks, winking; waves away my money and hands me two pastries. I stick the ten in the tip jar.
“Enh. If you call explosions, gunfire, death and destruction CELEBRATING. Business as usual for Neptune.” I take a long draught, because Daphne never makes coffees too hot. “But seriously, folks. Truth is, I haven’t slept much, lately. Those cumulative effects they warn you about have fried my brain.”

“Your ex was in here this morning,” she tells me, grinning. “The cute surfer with messy hair. Am I allowed to speak his name?”

I shrug, because honestly I have no idea. “Wending his way ocean-ward?” I ask, through a bite of bear claw.

“He told Regina he wouldn’t be out long today, because he had to get home and PACK.” She winks, in full gossip mode. “But the waves at Cape Crescent were calling his name, you know how he talks. He looked hungover too, drank a ton of coffee. When you appeared in a similar state, I thought MAYBE…”

“We were partying like it’s 1999?” I ask, lightly. “You know I’d never incriminate myself to a potential employer. Thanks for the nutritious breakfast, Daphne. I’ll consider your pleas for aid…and possibly ride to your workplace rescue at a later date.”

She laughs, and I head back to the car, eating determinedly. Filling in blanks for the last two months ought to be my priority; but I turn right on Murchison instead, and head towards the PCH. Logan plans to spend the day packing. Like I’ll be able to calmly investigate minutiae before hearing THAT story.

There were no messages on my voicemail this morning, not even saved ones. Nothing interesting in my EMAIL inbox, either, except an “I’ve arrived in Uganda!” blast from Wallace. Plus one ominous note from Mac; “Thought you should know—Parker just moved back to Denver.”

I’d love to hear what the girl who’s been living my life made of THAT statement. Unfortunately, she didn’t reply.

There are posters from a Sheriff’s election planted in neighborhood lawns…’Vote for Ethics—Vote Mars’ and ‘Vinnie Van Lowe—A New and Improved Solution’. If it’s June second, ballots were cast three days ago. I need to track down Dad, and congratulate him on his landslide.

Because come on. The choice between my father and Vinnie Van Lowe is like the choice between Kobe steak and larvae-ridden carrion. Dad probably didn’t even bother to stay up for the count.

I wind around a cliff, exit by the forties-era lighthouse-on-a-rock; swerve down the narrow dirt trail to the beach. My Saturn bottoms out on every rut…making me yearn, once again, for an SUV with four-wheel drive. The kind all my rich friends take for granted.

Logan’s lashing a board to his Rover’s roof when I park beside him, on the flattened patch of grass that serves as a lot. Dick’s got a foot up on the bumper, making glum, half-hearted banter. When he sees me, though, his eyes widen, and he takes off at a trot for his jeep. He’s buckled in and peeling out before I even leave the car.

I can’t contain my smirk. Looks like Other V used the psycho act, in my absence, to good effect.

Logan plants an elbow on the hood and does his locker lean as I approach; he’s rolled his wetsuit to the waist, and there’s a sodden bandage covering half his chest. “Wow! Forever’s shortened considerably, since the last time I checked,” he says. “Please tell me you didn’t plant a tracker on my
car. And you’re not here to yell about my fight with Sorokin again.”

“The gals at Java the Hut gave you up,” I say, extending a white paper bag. Thinking shit, I can’t escape Sorokin. “Bear Claw?”

He takes it, peers inside. “There’s a bite missing.”

“Just a little one.” He shrugs, sinks in his teeth, and I tug on the wet bandage. It slips off; I find myself staring at a row of stitches, which marches most of the way down his left side. “Jesus!” I exclaim, involuntarily. “You subjected that to SALT WATER?”

He grunts, chewing, and I note his eyes are red. “I took a pain pill,” he says, after he swallows.

“Oh, well that makes it all dandy!” I say, shoving the bandage in the paper bag. “Are you INSANE?”

“You tell me.” He swallows the last of the donut. Reaches into the cab for a Convulsions t-shirt, covers the wound from my prying eyes. “You seem too Veronica-like to be a mirage; but the last time we spoke, she…you?…said we were through. Maybe I’ve finally cracked?” He takes the bag from me, wads it up, tosses it in his passenger foot-well. “Look, thanks for the breakfast, but I’ve got to run. My plane leaves in four hours, and you know how they are about security at airports. Wouldn’t want to let anyone BAD on board.”

He grins and bobs his eyebrows, to make sure the barb lands. I say, “I had a change of heart when you earned a knife wound, defending me.”

Logan turns back from climbing into the car, exasperated. “In point of fact, I only bloodied my knuckles defending you,” he says. “The knife wound’s from the day Sorokin brought his buddies, and jumped me in the Neptune Grand stairwell. Luckily, he chose the one with a camera Tina DIDN’T disable, so the cops got it all on film. The son of a bitch was actually ARRESTED.

“So see, Veronica? Miracles DO happen. There’s no need to worry your vengeful little head about me ever again. You can just…run along to your mildly alternative boyfriend with the world’s clearest conscience. By bedtime tonight, I’ll be out of your hair.”

Oh JESUS CHRIST NO. What is WRONG WITH YOU, Other Veronica? “I REALLY hope by ‘mildly alternative boyfriend’ you don’t mean Piz,” I say.

He quirks a brow. “Do you object to the terminology?” he asks. “You’re right, the guy’s about as alternative as those ‘Are you an UN?’ Sprite commercials. But SOMETHING about him must tickle your fancy.” He strips off the wetsuit, tosses it in back, mutters, “I’m not sure WHAT,” as he unearths a pair of cargo shorts. Stands there in his compression trunks and tee, waving khaki at me for emphasis. “Possibly the fact that Keith approves. Piz will never, ever end up a cautionary tale, telling his darkest secrets to Larry fucking King.”

“True,” I agree. Although now I want to take another shower; because this is MY body, and Other Veronica let Stosh Piznarski TOUCH it. “However, he’s also the human equivalent of a sand grain in the eye. Which is why he’s NOT my boyfriend, and never, ever, ever will be, EVER again.”

“No?” Logan snaps his shorts closed. “So did you track me down to make a public service announcement? Request my heart on a platter, so you can shred it one more time? Because in that case, I should explain-- I love you, always will, but I’m DONE begging for scraps.”

“When did you ever beg?” I ask. “HOW many days was it, after we broke up, before you started banging someone else? Do I need more than one hand to count?”
“What do you WANT from me right now?” he asks, leaning into my face, and yeah. This is MY Logan fighting with me, just the way I like. The rush to my groin sizzles, electric. “Penance? Blood?”

“I want to know where you’re going on a plane.” My voice sounds husky rather than mad. Which makes him smirk.

“Hawaii,” he says softly, gaze locked on mine. “Got to leave town before Sorokin makes bail, then STAY gone ’til he gets bored. Think I’ll live in a different hotel, for a while. Ride some big waves. Try to forget about you.”

“Want some company?” I ask, and his eyes widen in surprise. “I can’t PROMISE to be forgettable, but I’ll do my best.’

“YOU want to come with ME on a non-romantic, and probably drunken, trip to Hawaii?” he clarifies. “What about your FUTURE? What about the FBI Internship you busted your ass to earn?”

Holy shit, I got the internship? I feel a momentary burst of pride in Other Veronica’s hustle, before suspicion kills it. This HAS to be a setup--Agent Morris baiting a trap she thinks will lead to Duncan. Using my ambition against me to find the Kane/Manning baby would be right in her wheelhouse; she’s as ruthless as I am, and that’s saying something.

Nah, can’t risk it. In Ideal Reality, I’d be a sterling, even inspired, FBI choice. But here, I’ve got a kidnapper-shaped cloud hanging over all law-enforcement futures.

“I’m a college FRESHMAN,” I decide. “My future can wait. Besides, let’s face it, no way will this internship lead to a job. They probably want to lock me in a room for six weeks, and grill me about Duncan Kane.”

“Because you know where he is,” he says, with a faint smile. “Veronica, if I take you to Hawaii, Keith will cut in front of Sorokin in the rend-me-limb-from-limb line. And I’m still recovering from the LAST attempt to rip my guts out.”

“Did you know,” I ask conversationally, leaning against his car, “that the first time I tried to say I loved you, I had a panic attack? Like seriously, my mouth wouldn’t move. I hyperventilated so hard I almost passed out.”

He frowns, and his gaze shifts to my lips. His breath smells like cinnamon sugar.

“Do you get why I REALLY dumped you, when I found out about Madison?” I ask.

“Because you kept picturing us on a loop in your head.” He breaks eye contact and runs a hand through wet hair. “At least I THINK that’s what you said. I was distracted by the sound of my heart breaking.”

“I was trying on lingerie, to wear for you,” I say, mouth curling without humor. “Pretty, lacy stuff--Max’s hooker assured me it’d make you my slave. And Madison found my selection so pathetic, she LAUGHED. I felt…like the rich-boy groupie you used to call me, Sophomore year, learning my place.”

He shakes his head, automatic denial, and I say, “Yeah, that insult haunts me. Because you’re wealthy, popular and handsome, Logan, even though you can also be a dick--and you date large-breasted, free-spirited models. Whereas I’m a scrawny, emotionally-stunted mess from the wrong side of the tracks, who you rejected violently, once. I figured from the start you weren’t in our relationship to stay. That moment in Agent Provocateur felt like all my fears, coming true.”
He studies my face, and I don’t turn away, even though I want to. His gaze softens, something fatalistic creeping in. “Do you have a surfboard?”

I shake my head, and he says, “I’ll buy you one. You want to go home, pack a bag? Or are you spur-of-the-moment fleeing a grim future, like in that last scene from the Graduate?”

“I have half a quad caramel latte in my cup-holder,” I say. “And a cellphone in my purse. Plus my account’s full of summer-in-Virginia money, just begging to be frivolously spent.”

“I’m not going to sleep with you,” he warns, and his eyes confirm he means it. “I won’t sleep with anyone else, either, in case you’re worried. But the…story you just told me…I don’t know what to do with it, Veronica. I assumed we both agreed I’m the loser, here.”

“Oh, that’s a given,” I say, which ALMOST makes him smile. “But maybe I’m not quite as overconfident as I like to pretend.”

“In your defense, who could be?” He succumbs to the lurking smirk. “Regardless. I’ve fucked your brains out a million times, and laid my heart at your feet, which seems to have reassured you exactly none. So I’m done with the trust exercises, until you decide if anything WILL.”

“Can I leave my car in the Grand’s garage?” I ask, instead of arguing. Because he’s right. The question isn’t whether he’s EARNED faith…it’s whether I’m able to GIVE it.

“We’ll take this to the airport.” He pats the Rover’s hood. “Park yours in my spot.”

Logan buys me a first class ticket when I blanch at the cost of the round-trip.

“I’m not tagging along to mooch off you,” I protest, slapping his card hand. He pins me with a suppressive glare.

“Veronica,” he says, faux-patiently, “Quit demanding I sit with the huddled masses, or I’ll leave you here at the gate.”

I roll my eyes, gesture for him to proceed. He smirks, extends his Amex to the blonde behind the counter. “Give her the seat next to mine,” he says. “Make sure we’re as far from coach as possible.”

I glare, exasperated, and he says, “What? Isn’t this the kind of pampering rich-boy groupies LOVE?”

“Ugh,” I say, as the air hostess (who seems dead inside) prints a ticket. Because great—now he’s BROODING. “This is what I get for baring my soul. Can you NOT act like we’re back in tenth grade for the whole six-hour plane ride?”

“We’re allowed to board immediately— it’s good to be the king. Logan’s still in his beach clothes, though he took a quick shower to scrub off salt. He’s sprawled beside me now, paging through Sky Mall magazine, looking like a trust-fund bum off to Thailand, projecting attitude like whoa.

Apprently he’s offended that I think he’s fickle. Who knew?
I gaze at his long, elegant, flip-flopped feet, the mile of leg stretched carelessly before him… reflect that he even LOOKS like a thoroughbred, expensive, high-strung and glamorous. His freaking TOES are movie-star beautiful.

“Why are you staring at my shoes?” he asks, not taking his eyes off the R2-D2 home accessories. His voice has a volatile edge, razor-bright.

I shrug, unwilling to go there. This isn’t slipstream Logan, with whom I share an intimacy built on trust. This is the guy who hurt me; and when I dared to make myself vulnerable, he doubled down on snark.

“Second thoughts, right?” He glances sideways as the engine kicks on, vibrating beneath my seat.

I turn to look at him, resting my cheek on the leather, and he mirrors me. “No,” I say. “This is my actual life, and I’m going to live it the way I want. Besides, I hate to break it to you, Logan, but your bitchy theatrics aren’t all that scary.”

“I’ll have to practice my infuriating smirks in the mirror,” he says. Grins, because he loves that I’m not cowed. “If I can’t piss YOU off, I’ve really lost my touch.”

“Sorry. No bloodshed on vacation’s my policy, even when you DO deserve it. Summer’s our truce time,” I scowl, realizing this is true. “It’s claws-in when school’s out, and usually we end up fooling around.”

He arches a brow, and I realize abruptly we’re close enough to kiss. “Because our classmates are elsewhere, and can’t voice disapproval. It’s just us, independent of our social circles, getting along swimmingly. Our fights are ALWAYS about other people, Veronica. And the many ways they fuck up our perfect circle of two.”

“When I was staring at your feet just now,” I say, “I was thinking you look like a thoroughbred. It’s obvious, even in your less-than-groomed state, that you’re movie-star spawn.”

“All DAY with the un-ironic honesty.” He presses the back of his hand to my forehead. “Doesn’t FEEL like you’re running a fever.”

“I got nowhere with acid quips and avoidance,” I say, lightly. “I’m trying something new.”

“ARE you?” he asks. “Well then, game on. You know what I was thinking, while you stared at my feet?”

“That Star Wars night lights are both attractive AND affordable?”

“Nope. Just remembering the way you looked at me, the night of Sophomore prom.” He’s smiling, just a little, but seems serious. Overhead, the fasten-seatbelts light dings; the plane begins to move, gathering speed.

I laugh. “What, when you told me my knee socks were hot?” I shake my head, pretending disgust. “I admit my predilection for your fatal glamour…and you’re stuck on me in frumpy pink Jessica McClintock, tackle-kissing Duncan because virginity is cool.”

He frowns, thrown off guard, unusual for clever-clever Logan. His look becomes assessing. “Veronica,” he says. “There was NOTHING frumpy about you that evening. Especially not when you made eyes at me on the beach, all sand-spattered and naked. And as I recall? Your dress was this amazing, clingy, slinky cherry RED. Like a shiny, thin coating of candy.”
I stare, mouth opening and closing like a beached fish, because this is MY Logan, right? This is MY life?

The slipstream wraps around me as the plane takes flight, and yanks me ruthlessly away.

THREAD THIRTY SEVEN INVERTS

I’m spinning and spinning, and I realize Logan’s turning me; holding my hand over my head while I twirl, as he grins and drinks from a beer bottle.

We’re in a big dark room strobed with colored lights--electronica plays at deafening volume. A professionally printed banner at one end reads “School’s Out for Summer”; the junk food, booze and energy drink buffet marks this an 09’er party. Probably Logan’s, since the t-shirt he’s wearing reads ‘NO SCHOOL, NO RULES’. Plus, Enbom’s just paused to pat him on the back, shouting, “Dude, this dance fucking ROCKS!”

“We aim to please!” Logan yells back, pulling me against his chest, offering me the beer. “I have only one request, and that is, don’t puke on the food supply.”

“I threw up ONE TIME!” Enbom protests. Logan rolls his eyes and twirls us in a series of circles, dismissing him. I take a slug of Negra Modelo, and reflect that at least I know which reality this is.

“So where were we?” Logan asks, smiling down at me. “Oh yeah, I remember. I was saying THIS,” he curls a hand around my ass, “is a perfectly acceptable dance hold, and YOU were saying, if that’s how I grab Wallace’s mom….”

“SWITCH PARTNERS!” Dick screams in my ear, crashing into us from behind with Carrie in tow. They’re overly bright-eyed, laughing maniacally; Dick smells, as he spins me away, like even his sweat’s narcotic.

“Way to finally loosen back up, Rons.” He staggers sideways into Shelly and Bodie, laughing as Bodie shoves us off. “Dude, it’s SLAM square dancing! Chill! Anyway, A+ choice, signing up for party school with the rest of us awesome people. It’s gonna be frat bashes, wet t-shirt contests, and experimental college girls twenty-four-seven, which makes you officially the coolest girlfriend EVER.”

“As opposed to yours, I gather?” I watch Logan spin Carrie the way he spun me. She’s grinning, clearly snarking, and shrieks with laughter as he dips her.

“My almost-EX, you mean. Since she’s moving to New York.” He huffs, tossing sweaty curls out of his eyes. “One more unlucky lady who couldn’t handle the non-stop Casabunga thrill ride.”

“Dick,” I say, “Let’s make a deal. I’LL maintain my current level of coolness, if YOU loosen up a little less. I’d like to see you EXIT the highway to the danger zone.”

Logan’s fingers are entwined behind Carrie’s neck now, wrists resting on her shoulders. He’s talking very seriously, while she nods, also grave; they stand stock-still on the dance floor. She crosses her heart with one finger, and he smiles. Cocks his head, says something she finds funny. Spins her again.

The version on the plane just now had no right to get pissy. How can I be blamed for jealousy when he treats every girl on the planet like THIS?

“See, that proposal just lost you fifty awesome points,” Dick says, reclaiming my attention. “You NEED Hearst, Ronnie. I’m not dead, like some others I could name…and I plan to abuse the
privilege as much as possible.”

“Privilege isn’t the main thing you’re abusing,” I tell him. “But hey, you’re technically a grown-up, so YP not MP. Now, what’s the deal with the Carrie/Logan tete-a-tete?”

“Oh, she’s lining up her rebound bang.” Dick gasps in fake shock, pastes a hand over his mouth. “Oops, did I say that out loud? Nah, just joshin’ with ya, Rons. He’s probably telling her to lay off the coke. She did so much in the bathroom, she’s about to go into orbit.”

Because Carrie also lived, when others were less lucky…namely, her brother. Of course she’s taking that badly, while hiding behind a smile. And of course Logan’s stepped into the protector role; he TOLD me he feels guilty.

I need to pursue more constructive lines of thought. If I can’t trust SLIPSTREAM Logan, I might as well start collecting cats.

“SWITCH PARTNERS!” Dick yells again, handing me off to Wallace. He disappears stage left with Jessica, who laughs and smacks his arm.

“At last!” I say, while Wallace twirls me under his arm, pulls me into a comfortable hold. “I get to experience the fabled Fennel moves first-hand!”

Wallace laughs and does some fancy footwork; takes pity when I stumble, slows down. “Don’t want to get too advanced, here. I’ll spoil your dance experience with Logan forever.”

“You’re right.” I nod sadly. “I’m clearly not ready for moves such as yours.”

He spins me out, back in, and I say, “I notice you have that special girl on your arm tonight. Congratulations.”

“Don’t tell anybody this,” he leans in confidingly, “but it’s thanks to my mom’s advice. She said be loyal and patient, and court Jessica slow; sooner or later, her dad will come around. And that shit’s working. Maybe not as fast as I’d LIKE, but hey, good things take time.”

“You’re so lucky to have Alicia,” I tell him. “MY mom rates tactics for bagging rich boys—her favorite being tranq gun. Followed by clinging with all ten fingernails, no matter how much they scream.”

“Well, it worked for her,” Wallace concedes, then ducks and says, “Incoming!” He’s grabbed by Lilly, who drags him off, and I find myself in Casey’s arms.

“’Sup, Veronica,” he says, face a picture of bored resignation. “Do you want to dance as little as I do, or are you actually ENJOYING this game?”

“I literally could not care less,” I say. “And I wouldn’t mind one of those Red Bulls.”

“You rock,” he tells me, sighing relief. “And I’m not just saying that because Logan would kick my ass if I dissed you.”

“Oh, stop with the extravagant compliments.” I pretend-smack his shoulder, and follow him to the buffet.

I pop a Red Bull and take a deep gulp, because at this point I’ve forgotten what sleep is. Beside me, Casey’s chatting with a guy all in black, who I’m shocked to realize is Cobb. I guess the creep’s finally achieved his career dreams, by infiltrating the 09’er circle.
“Dude, you got any coke left?” Casey asks. He polishes off his beer, presses a hand to his chest, and emits a loud belch. “I spent all day surfing, and I’m fucking wiped.”

“I DID,” Cobb tells him, watching the dancers with arms folded and lip curled. “There was a run on supply earlier, though, and I sold it all. I have E.”

“Deal,” Casey says, and digs for cash. He sticks the tab Cobb hands him under his tongue, winks at me, and takes off running. Dives on Bodie’s back with a cackling laugh, almost knocking him over.

“Capitalizing on group PTSD to expand your client base?” I ask Cobb, leaning against the buffet beside him. I stay three feet away so he can’t grab me unexpectedly. “You really are a go-getter.”

“I provide a valuable public service,” he replies, unmoved. “And I’m willing to help out anyone with cash. What do you care, anyway, Veronica Mars? I’m surprised you even know who I AM.”

“I DON’T care about you,” I say. “But Carrie’s at a low point in her life, right now. I’d be pissed if someone took advantage for profit.”

I case the room for Carrie and Logan, so I can point out how wasted she is, because it’s all Cobb’s fault. She’s not in view, but I spot LOGAN, no problem. Dancing, laughing and flirting with HANNAH GRIFFITH.

My teeth grit, my neck muscles tighten, and my brain floods with a red haze of rage. I grab Bodie by the back of his shirt, yell, “Help a girl out!” Yank him into a spiraling collision with Logan before I fully process my actions.

I manage the partner switch by sheer angry stubbornness, spin Logan efficiently away—and clock Hannah looking wistfully after us, as we retreat into the distance.

“You don’t get to touch that girl,” I say, and my voice sounds growly. “EVER, EVER, EVER. Just put her out of your MIND.”

Understanding dawns in his eyes, and his mouth closes with a snap. “Mrs. R,” he says, stroking a hand up my spine. “Let me guess…one of your Logan’s conquests? I have to say, I’m sort of squicked by that. She looks TWELVE.”

“Agreed.” I nestle closer, mollified. “Her father’s also a Fitzpatrick stooge who tried to send you to prison. Which is the MAIN reason I suggest no fraternizing.”

“Jesus,” he says, resting his cheek on my skull. “Can’t a guy enjoy his ‘No School, No Rules’ party in peace, without anybody plotting to ruin him?”

“What’s the deal with Carrie?” I ask. “She seems...” Like Boat Reality Carrie, I think. Like Carrie in free-fall.

“Other than her brother being dead? She’s pissed we’re not moving to New York.” He speaks lightly, but minus his customary humor. “I think it’s mostly fear of living there on her own. She’s still pretty fragile, you know? Plus, she and Lils don’t get along so hot…and Lils might not quit flirt-fighting with Jackie long enough to notice Carrie’s woes.”

He sighs, cuddling me closer. Feeling the weight of responsibility for members of his pack, no doubt. “At least the move will separate her from Dick. Which can only benefit them both.”

“Also, it takes her out of the orbit of awful drug dealer Cobb,” I say. “He seems to have attached
himself to her like a lamprey. Or at least he’s hovering nearby, flexing his jaws.”

“Ugh, did that asshole show up again?” Logan asks. “Should I have him ejected? Danny and Bruce are around somewhere, providing security.”

“Look at you, learning and growing.” I pat his cheek. “Maybe no one will get murdered at THIS party.”

“You and your wacky sense of humor.” He flattens his brows, wry. “I’m invoking the too-soon moratorium on that joke, sugar bear.”

“Right.” I say. Because to me, Boat Night was just one in a steady stream of escalating disasters. To him, it was a life-changing event. “Sorry. I forget the whens and where, sometimes, and fail to display appropriate sensitivity.”

“You’ve probably got six more crises brewing,” he says, and I huff a laugh against his chest. Consider telling him about my latest fuckup. IE ditching Almost Real Veronica’s internship, because I mistook her life for mine.

I decide against it. For one thing, he’s got enough on his plate. For another, the trait that unites all slipstream Logans is their distaste for the Logan of Origin. And my response is always the same—I want to spring to his defense, even though they have a point.

Jesus, I’m so fucked up. Here I stand in a room full of PTSD victims, and even THEY can’t relate to my issues.

He dips and sways me, holding me by the waist; I arch backwards and my head spins, the room shivering. Whee, I’m drunk, on top of everything else. That should make this evening SO much more special!

“Hoo boy.” I cling to his shirt as he swings me upright. “I’ve gotta sit. All the beer Other Veronica’s drunk just went straight to my head.”

“Come on,” he says. “I saw Carrie plant herself on the couch next to Bodie. And she does NOT need to get more wasted than she already is.”

I sigh, because I’d rather not spend the evening babysitting Carrie Bishop. But neither do I want her to suffer, because I rolled my eyes and said ‘not my problem’. So I let Logan lead me across the room, where Bodie’s already holding a lighter to a pipe.

“Well, hey there,” Logan says, flopping down between them, donning that infuriating smirk that makes me want to punch him (then kiss). “How about we play this super fun game called ‘NOT getting so trashed we need a doctor?’”

“Dude!” Bodie protests, lighter flickering out. He continues to hold it to the bowl, not noticing. “It’s just a little weed. I’m not, like, liquoring the girl up. She’s my friend!”

“Yeah, Logan,” Carrie echoes, as I settle on her other side. “Don’t be such a spoilsport. It’s just a little weed.”

Logan grabs the pipe out of Bodie’s mouth, wincing as his fingers contact hot metal, and throws it across the room. “Scat,” he says, making a shooing motion with his hand. “Don’t cross me. Lately I’m NOT in the mood.”

“Man, we ALL had the shit scared out of us on that boat.” Bodie eyes Logan with trademark Zen
disapproval. “No need to get squirrely with a guy’s stash.”

Logan fixes him with the Stare of Disfavor, and Bodie sighs and leaves. “You’re not allowed to kill yourself to prove a point, Bishop,” he says, examining his burns. “Really, I’m surprised at you. Self-flagellation is so…middle class.”

“Oh, sure, make the heroic gesture while I’m sitting right here.” She reaches across him, grabs the lighter Bodie abandoned, flicks it to create flame. “Then forget me, once I’m out of sight. You two could have gone to New York on a free ride. It would have made your futures, and cost you NOTHING. But when it comes down to brass tacks, Echolls? I don’t MATTER in your grand scheme.” She glances sideways at me, runs a finger through the flame. “Or yours. Which hurts, Veronica, after all we’ve been through. You’re blowing off me AND Lilly, and I can’t figure out WHY.”

“If you're so attached to all of us, don't leave town,” I counter, because it’s not like I can explain. “Won’t you miss Dick?”

She bursts out laughing. “He’ll find plenty of girls to console him in my absence. Julliard trumps Dick Casablancas. Especially a Dick Casablancas who drinks himself unconscious every night, making MY issues seem small.”

“He doesn’t get to off himself dramatically either,” Logan says, with a sigh. “Look, Bishop, this college thing is just semantics. You need us, we climb on a plane. Veronica LOVES you. She’s not gonna leave you alone to suffer, if things get bad.”

“Awww!” Carrie leans back and closes her eyes. “Your speeches are so heartwarming. I’d say you have a future in politics, but I’m pretty sure you actually MEAN them.”

“I’d graciously deny,” Logan says, settling back as well. “But I’d kick ass at any career that involved manipulating people. My protests would ring hollow.”

She laughs, gives him a shove. He pretends to fall over, grins at her. Calls across her to me, “Hey, Ronica, you want to blow off this party and get tacos? We can invite our nearest and dearest, leave the rest of these losers hanging?”

“It’s YOUR party,” I point out, which elicits a sublimely unconcerned shrug.

“Hey, I’m paying the bills,” he says. “And I’ve sporadically attended.”

I roll my eyes and nod; he winks at me. “Jessica!” he shouts.

She pauses, halfway around the dance floor, fresh soda in hand. Approaches with a smile. “We’re ALL sitting out Dick’s punk-rock polka, I see.”

“What say we grab the inner circle, and go somewhere more wholesome?” Logan coaxes. “A prison, perhaps. Or a brothel.”

“Chinese or Mexican?” she asks, and he grins. “Fine, let me find Wallace and Lilly. We should probably lure Dick, too, or there’s going to be a scene.”

“Throw a hood over his head, and promise him a threesome with twins,” Carrie says, eyes once again shut. “That’ll get him into ANY car, no problem.”

“And they say romance is dead,” I mutter, which makes Jessica laugh.
“Meet you at the Range Rover in five,” Jessica tells us. “I assume you two can carry her?”

“Without even breaking a sweat.” Logan hops up, pulls me after. We each take a hand, and haul Carrie to her feet. “Come on Janis Joplin,” he says, getting a shoulder under her arm. “Nice, easy baby steps, you can doze in the car on the way.”

“Yeah that’s the line,” She frowns, head lolling sideways. “I’d trade all of my tomorrows for one single yesterday. You always do come up with the best quote, Echolls.”

“One of these mornings, you’re gonna rise up singing.” He yanks her upright as she stumbles, gesturing with his head for me to support her other side. “My sibling’s dead too, Bishop. The wound always hurts, but eventually it scabs over.”

I let go as he hauls her through the club door, beeps the Rover open. We’ve exited one of the renovated warehouses in Neptune’s club district; directly across from us is a pay-in-advance lot. I stand sweating in the muggy night as he hoists her into his back seat, then rolls her window down like she’s an overheated pet.

“Sorry Mrs. R,” he says in an undertone, as she slumps against the door, humming “Me and Bobby McGee” in throaty contralto. “You probably want to go on a mystery-solving spree tonight, but I just…don’t have it in me.”

“The mysteries can wait.” I put my arm around his waist. “Is everyone else as messed up as Carrie about the Boat? You and Lilly seemed mellower, back in New York.”

“It’s easier to maintain on vacation,” he says, looking down at his feet. “Less clear and present suffering to jog the memory. This town is a cesspit, Ronica, it sucks people under. I don’t blame Lils and Carrie for bailing, or Dick for wanting to.”

Danny Campos, in a Red Hot Chili Peppers t-shirt and jeans, emerges from the club; an incoherent Dick is slung over his shoulder. Jessica, Lilly and Wallace follow, talking amongst themselves.

“Baggage delivery,” Danny says, ranging alongside Logan. He’s got a neat white bandage taped above one eyebrow, but seems otherwise unharmed. “Where do you want it?”

“Back seat,” Logan says, opening the door opposite Carrie. “So they both have a window to puke from, if they feel inclined. We can draw straws to see which of you lucky individuals gets to sit between them.”

“You might want to add a straw for yourself.” Danny shoves Dick into the car, then peers at Logan’s pupils. “How many drinks you downed this evening, son?”

“I’ve got YEARS of practice holding my liquor.” Logan waves a dismissive hand. “I’m what you might call an amateur professional.”

Danny sighs, unmoved by this display of attitude. “Look into my eyes.” He points at Logan’s face, then his own. Curls his hand into a fist, flips Logan off. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Five?” Logan asks sarcastically, and Danny makes a game-show-buzzer noise.

“Yeah, I’m taking charge of this operation, on the grounds that you’re fucking wasted and won’t admit it. You and Xena Warrior Princess get in back with your drunk friends; the two of you can make out or something, if the fumes get overwhelming. These fine, upstanding, more-or-less sober people can ride up front with me.”
“Don’t you have an obligation to provide security, back there?” Logan asks. “Isn’t that the function for which you were hired?”

“You hired me to protect Veronica,” Danny says, which makes me do a double-take. “I left three guys behind, to manage the stoners waving glow sticks. I’m taking the critical task, on account of Veronica’s awesome…and I don’t want her turned into a pavement smear, because you drove on the wrong side of the road.”

Logan sighs theatrically, indicates the open door with a sweep of his arm. “Fine. But don’t get drunk with the power. Normally nobody drives my car but me.”

“Privilege,” Danny says, settling behind the wheel. “I LIKE it. Sometimes I wake up and my car’s not even THERE, because one of my sisters showed up while I was sleeping and took the keys.”

“How many sisters have you GOT?” Lilly asks, climbing in next to him. “Duncan wouldn’t DARE touch ANYTHING of mine.”

“Two,” Danny tells her. “And one brother, but he’s ten years older than me, so we don’t hang much. Well, age difference plus he’s an uptight dickwad. It’s mostly since the youngest got her driver’s license that I’ve been going without, though. She knows she’s got me wrapped around her finger.”

“I have three,” Jessica says, sitting beside Lilly, dragging Wallace up after. “Sisters that is. AND three brothers. Wallace is always talking about how chaotic his house is, with two little boys running around, and I’m like ‘You know NOTHING!’.”

“Piece of advice, Wally.” Dick’s voice startles me as I edge past him—I didn’t realize he was awake. “When it comes to relationships, the dude NEVER knows anything. Just accept that women think you’re an idiot, and only want you for your incredible hotness. Dating will get a LOT easier.”

“THERE’S a life philosophy,” Carrie says, without opening her eyes. Logan jostles me into her, to make room for him. I groan, because it’s gonna be a long night, if these two plan to fight the whole time.

“While Wallace IS incredibly hot,” Jessica says, and now I’m not the only one groaning, “It’s far from the main reason I want him around. He’s a genuinely good person, and he makes me happy.”

“Dude, my balls are retracting just LISTENING to this conversation,” Dick says. “Spare me.”

“Hey, back off my lady.” Wallace reaches behind him to smack Dick. “I may not agree with the way Vinnie hushed up the Robinson hit-and-run, once he figured out who Rashard was. But I am ENDLESSLY grateful to this girl for standing by me through that whole mess. She even convinced her dad to be a CHARACTER WITNESS.”

“I TOLD you I could handle him,” Jessica says, curling complacently beneath his arm. “Besides, he likes you, underneath all the bluster. Who wouldn’t?”

“Hey where are we going?” Logan asks, as Danny pulls onto the highway heading south. “There’s nothing this direction but slums. I thought we wanted Chinese.”

“We’re having an adventure,” Danny says. “You’re getting bored and self-destructive in your rich-kid bubble.”

“Dude, I’ve had ENOUGH adventures,” Dick grumbles, pressing his nose, dog-like, to the glass.
‘And the 02’s a total Mad Max zone since fucking incorporation passed. If I show my surfer face down there, I’ll end up shivved like old Woody.’

‘Did you SEE what Jennifer Stansfield said on the news the other day?’ Jessica asks, genuinely outraged. She lowers her voice in nasal imitation. ‘Other districts are free to incorporate also, if they want to experience the privileges we enjoy.’

‘Yeah, she’s a piece of work.’ Lilly turns the A/C vent to point directly at her face. ‘Madison’s dad’s just in it for the money, but SHE’S a real elitist believer.’

‘Is that true, Dick?’ Carrie shoves upright to pin him with a glare. ‘Is Madison’s dad on the take? I figure you’d know, since you spend so much time in bed with his daughter.’

I lift my brows at Logan, and he rolls his eyes. ‘How about you two quit taking pot shots until you’re not on my LAP?’ he says, acid. ‘Or did you WANT Veronica and I to join in?’

‘Oooh, THIS place looks interesting!’ Jessica deftly changes the subject, as we pull into the lot of a rose-pink adobe building. The walls are strung with twinkle lights, it smells like char-grilled meat and red sauce; strains of acoustic guitar drift out the scarred wooden door.

‘Friend of mine owns it,’ Danny says, parking. ‘Nice family joint, and the food is AMAZING. You’ve never had carnitas like these, I swear to fucking god. Pete cooks ‘em in a tub of lard, they’re crispy on the outside, and inside they MELT.’

‘You’re growing on me,’ Lilly says. ‘You have dimples, you care, and your priorities are straight.’

He winks at her. ‘Make sure you order the Tres Leches for dessert. It will blow your MIND.’

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We pile out and head in. Danny does the handshake-back-slap-hug thing with a beefy thirty-something guy, who emerges from behind the counter; they engage in a laughing conversation that’s half-English, half-Spanish. The man points, with a ‘go for it!’ wave, and Danny leads us to a table in the corner, beneath a colorful painting of flowers.

Before we’re all sitting the owner’s back, bearing an ice bucket of beers plus chips and salsa. He winks at Danny as he sets them down, and Lilly digs in with relish.

‘I thought you were the booze police.’ Dick eyes Danny with disfavor as he cracks open a Corona.

‘I’m the designated driver, not your mother,’ Danny tells him. ‘You got ID, right? And I bet it’s good, because I bet I know where it came from.’ He slides a significant glance at me, and laughs when I wrinkle my nose. ‘Although in your case, man, I’d say you’re about two drinks shy of puking on our dinner. Might want to line your stomach with chips before you get back to thrashing your liver.’

This shuts Dick up; he even sets down his beer. Logan lifts impressed brows.

‘I knew I liked this guy,’ I say, in an undertone, grabbing a chip.

‘Personally, I waver between admiration and loathing,’ Logan murmurs back. ‘But he knows his job. Their business had to scramble, after the owner bit it on the boat—I felt like the least I could do was throw work their way. Plus, honestly, I was sick of staying on high alert all the time.’
“Oooh, Hot Bodyguard’s got your number, Dick.” Lilly opens a beer, toasts Danny with it. “I, for one, am glad he’s here, protecting and serving. It’s not a nice feeling, knowing people want me dead.” She takes a deep drink. “Even Celeste’s running scared. Did I tell you guys she plans to sell the yacht? And you KNOW how much she loved screwing dad out of that in the divorce.”

“I don’t blame her a bit.” Wallace shovels in three chips at once. “For running scared, I mean. Personally, I’ve decided to change my ways. You know I have y’all’s backs; but when it comes to the Justice League shit, no offense, but I’m done. I’m focusing on basketball, and school, and my main girl here from now on, the end.”

“Did they ever figure out who was behind the attack?” Jessica asks, leaning her head against his shoulder. “I mean, beyond the left-for-dead Russian thugs?”

“Well, there’s Russian Mafia in Neptune.” Danny picks at the label on his beer bottle. “That’s the rumor, anyhow. But the law-enforcement organizations with acronyms are keeping a tight lid on this investigation, since it’s international in scope. My guess is, most details won’t EVER make it to the press.”

“I just wish we knew why they picked US as targets,” Wallace says. “What does the Russian mafia care about a bunch of recent high school graduates?”

“Carrie heard a rumor the target was me,” Logan says, but Carrie doesn’t corroborate; she’s building a house of cards with sugar packets, which keeps collapsing because her hands are shaking. “Of course they’re probably after Veronica now, too, since she got all their traffickers arrested. Just another one of our ninety-nine problems, right sugar bear?”

“The Russians are gonna lay LOW after this stunt,” Danny offers, like he thinks it will cheer us up. “That much product seized? Heads will LITERALLY roll.”

“They will if I find out who’s responsible.” Carrie looks up, and she doesn’t seem like she’s kidding. “I hold a GRUDGE.”

“How you gonna go all ninja from New York?” Dick asks, swiping bangs out of his eyes. “What can you do? Send a strongly worded letter?”

“God, you were such a mistake.” Carrie flicks her tower, wrecking it. “I don’t know what I ever saw in you. It’s not like you’re nice. Or even sexy.”

“MONEY is what you saw.” Dick grabs his beer, drains the rest in one long swallow. “You just want a rich dude, the details aren’t important. Well joke’s on you; I never intended to be your free ride.”

“You weren’t much of a ride, free or otherwise.” Carrie settles back in her chair, arms crossed. “And incidentally, you’re wrong. I’m DEEPLY discriminating, which is why I dumped YOU.”

None of us states the obvious—they came to the party together, and haven’t quit interacting since. But it’s good to hear she’s raising her standards.

Logan says, “Lay off, Bishop, you’ve made your point.” She grimaces, opens her mouth to comment, but gets distracted by the bell-tinkling entrance of a herd of teen girls. They shove past the door, looking around surreptitiously, and…yup. One of them is Hannah Griffith. She FOLLOWED US HERE.

Every nerve in my body goes on screaming Piano Wire Red Alert. The group spots our table, and erupts into giggle-whispers.
“Oh LOOK, sugarplum!” I say to Logan, acid. “Here comes that fan club you mentioned in New York.”

He glances quickly over his shoulder, groans. “Greeaaat,” he mutters, slumping lower in his seat. “Track team. Just what this evening needed; admirers I can’t outrun.”

They approach in a clump. The boldest, a dark-haired, take-no-prisoners type, says, “Hey, weren’t you all just at that party?”

More giggles ensue. “We WERE the party,” Dick says-- unfazed, as is his wont, by displays of immaturity. “But then we took our magnificence elsewhere. Hey, you lovely ladies care to join us? Since you were deprived of our company, back at the warehouse?”

“They’re JUNIORS, Dick,” Carrie says, with loathing. “You just keep sinking lower.”

“And very fine examples of the breed, too.” Dick winks. “What’s YOUR name, friendliest Junior of all?”

“Jenna,” The dark-haired girl says, smirking. She gestures for her friends to pull up chairs. “And THIS is Hannah. She was dancing with that guy, earlier.”

She shoves Hannah forward and points at Logan, clearly not inclined towards subtlety. He puts a defensive arm around me, and my jaw marginally unclenches.

Carrie cackles, clocking my expression. “Aaaand your slam-dancing polka claims another victim,” she tells Dick.

Logan sighs audibly, but favors clearly-embarrassed Hannah with a sweet smile; it makes her blush. “Hey, I’m no victim, I had fun tonight. I’m just lucky Veronica’s so secure, and wouldn’t DREAM of making a fuss over an innocent dance.”

“YOU are an ass,” I murmur in his ear. He kisses my cheek.

Jenna reaches for the last beer, and Danny snakes it from under her hand, making Lilly smile.

“You know what?” Jessica says, slapping her palms on the table. “I need to visit the ladies’. Veronica, want to be my plus one?”

“You bet,” I say. Pat Logan’s chest as I stand. “Don’t use Sharpie, if asked to autograph skin.”

He levels a sardonic look at me, and I follow Jessica past the kitchen, towards the bathrooms and rear exit. She removes her phone from a pocket and waggles it, with a sympathetic smile.

“My sister’s been texting me non-stop for the last ten minutes, I have to call her. Was I right in guessing you needed a break from the Dick and Carrie Roadshow?”

“So right,” I say, sighing relief. “Not surprised it’s getting cancelled, ratings must SUCK.”

She blows me a kiss and pushes out the door, and I seek sanctuary.

The ladies’ room is quiet and clean, walls painted deep ochre red, smooth gold-tone fixtures over hammered copper sinks. I splash water on my face, sternly quashing jealousy. Stare at my reflection, and wonder what to do.

In this reality, I’ve got machine-gun-wielding Russian hitmen targeting someone I love. In Ideal Reality, I’ve got Crazed Duncan Kane planning God-knows-what to showcase his obsession. And
then there’s Almost Real Reality—the place I likely went my first day slipstreaming, before I knew
time travel was a thing. I seem to have screwed the pooch THERE, too, hijacking Veronica’s
summer, because I mistook that life for mine.

Which raises the terrifying question…how will I even KNOW if I make it home? Is it POSSIBLE
to exit the slipstream, using my new-found navigational skills?

I want out. I want to be done with this mess. I want to sleep for a week, pick up the remaining
pieces of whichever life I land on, and never cope with precognition again.

“Good plan, hiding,” Lilly says behind me. I turn as she shuts the door. “Carrie and Dick are
fighting again, and those idiot girls won’t LEAVE. I could shame them into fleeing with one
sentence, no problem, but Wallace keeps asking me to be NICE. I hope all these existential crises
end soon—they’re starting to work my nerves.”

“Logan will fold, once the Juniors annoy him enough,” I say. “When he’s mad, he’s reliably
caustic.”

“As he should be.” She wipes away a mascara smudge. “Kindness only garners MORE
unwanted attention.”

“Of which he’s reached his quota tonight,” I mutter, and she raises her brows. “What? I could
care less about Logan and Hannah, if that’s what the weird look is referencing.”

She scoffs. “Good. Logan’s got no interest in blushing virgins. If you were threatened by HER,
I’d be worried about YOU.”

“I do wish, though,” I say, somewhat wistfully, “SINCE I’m wearing this gigantic ring, that
people would try respecting it.”

“Oh, don’t you fret, Ronica, I’ve got your back. I’ll make SURE no bitches cross that line.”

“Is it wrong,” I ask, smiling, “that I love you BECAUSE you’d shank someone in my defense?”

“Ugh, I’m going to miss you SO MUCH!” Lilly flings her arms around me, squeezes. “At least
we have the rest of the summer. We need to make the most of it. We should plan an
ADVENTURE!”

“First Danny, now you,” I say. “Lils, our lives are chaos. We’ve barely survived the daily rat
race.”

“All the more reason to remind ourselves we’re heroes…we’re the girls who saved Grace! Oooh,
I know! Let’s infiltrate Duncan’s sanitarium in disguise, and check up on those rumors you heard.
Clarence is annoyingly uncooperative, every time I ask for details.”

“Lilly,” I say, discouraging, “it’s a prison for crazy people. There’s no way they’ll just let us waltz
in.”

“Shows what you know, Ronica—they have like no security at all. And just think…we could
dress as Naughty Nurses, offer to take cute doctors’ temperatures! Plus you’d finally get to see the
Donut, even though you’re banned!”

I’m not sure I WANT to see Duncan, EVER; but this is a golden opportunity to solve the
Sanitarium mystery, which I know I can’t ignore. “Wouldn’t Naughty Nurses be…obvious? Actual
employees no doubt wear scrubs.”
“Ugh, fine, we’ll be Candy Stripers then! You and me, protecting Duncan from mistreatment and injustice! I sense a shopping trip in our future!”

“Lils,” I say, wry, “the one thing I know, with rock-solid certainty? Is that as long as you and I are friends, there will ALWAYS be a shopping trip in our future.”

“Truer words, Veronica Mars.” Lilly winks, zero percent chastened. “Now come on, nut up. Let’s go show all those wanna-be’s who’s REALLY in charge.”

I smile, because she’s right; if she IS New York-bound, we should make the most of our time. So I follow her out the door, prepared to enjoy her takedown of everyone who doesn’t meet her standards. IE, everyone.

When we emerge, though, Logan and Danny are missing.

Lilly narrows her eyes, scans the room; points at the big window that dominates one wall. Logan’s sitting on a bench outside, elbows on the back, staring up at the sky. Danny’s leaning on a post nearby, arms folded.

“I need to see what that’s about,” I murmur, and she nods.

“They’re probably hiding, too,” she says. “You can cope with the sulking, while I try those carnitas Hot Commando recommended. If they really ARE a religious experience, maybe I’ll save you some.”

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I exit through the back and walk around the building, because let’s be honest—I want to spy on their conversation. Logan’s been depressed and hiding it all evening, and when he gets that way, he’s unpredictable.

He’s not mouthing off when I approach, though-- just staring bleakly upwards, the exhaustion he wouldn’t show his friends etched across his face. Danny, beside him, is keeping up a cheerful monologue; intended, I guess, to keep the brooding at bay.

“You’re into astronomy, huh?” he asks Logan, tilting his face skyward. “Yeah, I was too, as a kid. Always sleeping in a tent in the back yard, tracking Jupiter across the sky. Had a junior National Geographic telescope I saved up my allowance to buy.”

Logan smiles, faintly, but says nothing.

“You know, in the military,” Danny continues, “post-combat, they always make you debrief. Like talk about everything that happened, in great practical detail. And if, DURING the debrief, you show any signs of being boy-band levels of emo, they make you see a fuckin’ shrink.”

“This is a FASCINATING story,” Logan says, closing his eyes. “Also, unsolicited.”

“Usually you’re a talker,” Danny tells him, blunt. “I’m asking if you’re hanging in there, because tonight the word count’s low.”

Logan nods, but says, “No.”

“Like I thought,” Danny shifts, head thunking back against the wood. “Feels weird, right? Just chilling, being normal? Like an old suit that doesn’t fit anymore. I was always that way, after deployment. Everything here in the US seems so…colorful and easy.”
“I can’t…” Logan pauses, gathering his thoughts. “I’m having trouble being around people. Of course, I was ALWAYS pretending, when I played life of the party, but lately the act feels like… constant, unbearable itching. I want to get AWAY. From my FRIENDS.”

“Your friends didn’t have to do what you did,” Danny says. “Your friends just hid from the bad guys, then escaped.”

“I didn’t feel ANYTHING when I shot those assholes,” Logan confesses, and my heart wrenches in sympathy—it physically hurts. “That’s the part that bothers me. Nothing but…I don’t know, excitement. Not about the killing, not, like, bloodthirsty; but just because…I could handle it. I was able to keep my shit together, and pull the trigger, and save people. As if all my hard-won experience, staying calm and strategic in fucking terrifying situations, suddenly had a purpose. And that makes me wonder…did violence make my old man more EFFECTIVE? Like did hurting people and asserting power THRILL him? I’ve fought SO hard against turning into that asshole, EVER; and now I’m afraid I backed into the fate without noticing.”

Tears burn my eyelids. This is the slipstream’s fault. Logan was never forced to kill, until we got caught up in its high-stakes chaos spiral.

“Dude, you can’t think about Boat Night in the same way as abuse,” Danny says. “Combat excitement is a THING. Your adrenaline’s jacked, some guys have told me they even get a boner… not me personally, I’m too fucking terrified when I’m being lit up. But the feeling is NORMAL. It’s your body’s way of helping you fight better. Thrills don’t happen because you’re evil, man, they happen because you’re HUMAN.”

“I’m in love with Veronica,” Logan says, instead of acknowledging this. He looks at Danny for the first time. “I asked her to marry me.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” Danny says. “Surprised she can lift her hand, with that huge fucking rock on it. Don’t blame you, though, dude. Veronica’s pretty…singular.”

“What if she gets pregnant?” Logan asks, in a soft voice. “How can I be with her, when she’s vulnerable like that? I’m DANGEROUS.”

“Dangerous how?” Danny scoffs, and he sounds ferocious now…pissed, though not at Logan. “You ever beat up a girl? You ever hurt a kid?”

“No, of course not,” Logan says.

“Then you’re not dangerous to her.” Danny stays in position…doesn’t move, doesn’t gesture… but his fingers turn white, as he clenches his biceps. “You’re a dude who protected everybody he loves from fuckers who kill people professionally. The lesson you need to take away is this…when the chips were down, PROTECTING is what you chose to do. You’ll protect Veronica again, automatically; and you have the skills necessary to do so. You should be PROUD of that, because man? You’re an untrained rich kid with zero combat experience, and you saved thirty peoples’ lives.”

“Also, this way you’re feeling right now, it’s just…our cross to bear, you know? Those of us who defend the weak. Once you’re military, once you know that really everybody’s capable of violence under the right conditions, your world view changes. You get less…naïve. But it doesn’t mean you gotta fall into despair, or run away from life. It just means sometimes, like you said…being around people who don’t understand is gonna itch.”

Logan cracks a smile, finally, crosses a foot over the opposite knee. “Yeah, thanks for the pep
talk, Dr. Phil. Don’t think this means I’m paying you extra.”

“Awww,” Danny says. “I KNEW you were glad I didn’t blow up on the boat.”

“Pretty sure that was luck.” Logan squints at him. “Didn’t sound like you had a clue what you were doing, bomb-wise. But your prayers must have been effective, because here we sit.”

“Yeah, my luck mostly saves me from disaster, instead of helping me get ahead.” Danny smiles. “I felt like fucking Gilligan, that night, robbed of my three-hour-tour. Least the food was good.”

This piece of understatement makes them both laugh. Danny pushes away from the post, claps Logan on the shoulder.

“I’m going back in, before someone eats my dinner,” he says. “You bear my wise words of wisdom in mind, man.”

Logan gives a thumbs up, and turns his face back to the sky. After a minute, I approach, and sit beside him.

“So how much of that did you hear?” he asks, resigned. “Half? All?”

“Thank you,” I say, instead of confessing. “For always making the hard choice to keep me safe.”

He draws me against him, buries his face in my neck. Grips tight—he needs this hug more than I thought. I stroke his back, soothing, and eventually he sighs. “Not mad anymore, about girls chasing me around?”

“You showed excellent sense, fleeing them to avoid my wrath,” I say. He laughs.

“Well, you’re here to protect me now,” he says, gentle. “Might as well go face them down.”

“Might as well,” I say, and link his hand with mine.

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When we walk back in, Lilly goes immediately on offense, donning a glittering grin. “Aw, look!” she chirps. “The lovebirds return. Just in time, we were talking about jewelry. V, show everybody your ROCK!”

I roll my eyes, because Lilly is not subtle, and she mock-frowns. “Hand on the table, Veronica Mars! When you’ve got jewels of this caliber, you FLAUNT them. Did my mother teach you NOTHING?”

I flash the ring, and the Giggle Squad emits a collective “Oooh!” Dick looks up from where he’s pretending to read Jenna’s palm, startled; even Logan falls in line, saying, “Only the best for my sugarplum.”

Carrie takes my hand, examining it, and flashes Logan a look from under her brow. “You are SNEAKY, Echolls. I hooked you up with that jeweler because you said the ring was for your MOTHER. He’s going to have fits, when he learns it won’t be featured in Vanity Fair.”

Logan shrugs, unrepentant. Takes my hand away from her, kisses it. “All’s fair, you know the saying. I like the greatest possible amount of fawning in my service providers. Especially when they’re crafting the key to my future happiness.”

I smile at him over our clasped hands, and Carrie groans. “Oh GOD, Dick’s right, this is too
shmoopy for words. Please STOP.”

“I second that.” Wallace accepts salsa from Danny, pours it over a taco. “I’m happy for y’all, but seriously, no more kissing.”

“Well, I think they’re ADORABLE!” Lilly elbows him. “And while I’m against marriage in general, as pertains to myself, I’m glad my two besties found dirty, dirty happiness. In FACT, we should have a toast! To surviving the shit hand we’ve all been dealt. And turning it into sapphires and happy endings!”

I lift my beer, clink glasses. I don’t know if we ARE creating happy endings—this Logan might disappear forever, the second I make a wrong choice. But I WANT my golden future, with the buffed-to-a-sheen Logan of my dreams. Our relationship’s worth striving for, even if it’s Gatsby’s green light… constantly receding, just beyond my reach.

He kisses me, sadness softening out of his eyes, and that makes the uncertainty almost worth it. I can handle the struggle, no problem, if it improves the days of people I love.

“To happy endings,” I murmur, against his lips. The slipstream swirls up between us, as if to prove this wish a lie; I relax back into it, and let the inevitable take me.
I'm Not Crazy, You're the One Who's Crazy

THREAD THIRTY EIGHT

I’m on a brand new shiny set of bleachers at Huntington Beach, looking down over the water by the south side of the pier. To my left, Alicia’s wrestling Dad for possession of a bottle of sunscreen, laughing as he cracks jokes out of the side of his mouth. To my right, Dick’s sprawled across our row and the one below, in Jams and a t-shirt that reads ‘Take Dick For A Ride’. Day-old salt’s crusted in his hair.

Dick looks exhausted, and an equally wiped Bryson’s asleep against his chest, clutching a stuffed manta ray and drooling. Darryl sits on his other side–he’s narrating an ongoing video game to anyone willing to listen.

I look down at myself. I’m visibly pregnant; and letting it all hang out, apparently, in short-short cutoffs over an orange bikini. The big blue rock is conspicuous on my hand. I’m wearing sunglasses, plus some kind of hat, the combination of which tints this scene sepia—and I’m thirsty enough to be glad of the Sunkist I’m holding.

“How long until Logan’s heat?” Alicia asks, elbowing Dad as she wrenches the sunscreen away. She squirts a puddle of it into her hand. “Do I have time to take Darryl for a hot dog?”

“Make Wallace do it,” Dad says, extending a palm. She gives him a dollop too, which he rubs over his already-red face. “That’s the supposed benefit of having grown kids at home…free babysitting.”

“WALLACE entered the hula hoop contest, because Jessica bet him he couldn’t keep up,” Alicia informs us. “If he’s back within the next hour, I’ll be surprised.”

“Did Slater go yet?” Dick cracks open one eye. It’s bright red, which makes sense if he’s nursing a hangover. Unprepared to do battle with sunlight, he quickly re-shuts it.

“Just now,” Dad scans a program. “Some guy named Mick Fanning is next, then Logan. You should stay put, Alicia. You and Veronica are his target audience.”

“This is the US OPEN, Keith,” she chides, giving him a look that screams ‘relationship’. “We’re ALL his target audience. Being invited to compete here is a major achievement.”

“Of course you’re right,” Dad says. “And I am fully prepared to cheer, although I don’t have a clue what’s happening.”

Alicia’s clearly in the know—this is a big deal. Thousands of people throng the beach, enjoying a large-scale festival. The sand at water’s edge is a sea of towels and striped umbrellas–fans are lined up three deep along the pier. A huge screen hangs from an announcers’ tower, and slo-mo video of surfers plays, while judges deliberate scores. So-Cal dude-speak commentary emits, staticky, from a loudspeaker.

Past the pier, booths bristle, selling food and merchandise, midway arcade games. Beyond that, an outdoor art market boasts a face-painting table, and there’s a BMX/Skate ramp in heavy use. Cops are seeded through the crowd, despite the many kids. On the watch for underage drinking, likely–or, knowing surfers, riots.

“Can I see that program?” I ask Alicia. She hands it over, and I elbow Dick. “Where’s Logan
He groans but revives, favoring me with a jaundiced look. “Here,” he says, flipping a page and pointing. “Men’s Championship Tour. Sponsored by the Association of Surfing Professionals. And Vans.”

“Well la-di-da.” I skim the page. “Wait, there’s ELEVEN other events this year? Overseas?”

“Get real,” Dick says, dismissive. “Like Logan’s gonna hop on the family jet and surf-bum, when you’re knocked up and feeling demanding. Even thought that WOULD be great for our bottom line.”

“But he COULD compete,” I persist, frowning. “If he wanted to? Like, he’s been invited?”

“Well YEAH,” Dick subsides, too tired to spar. “He’s one of the thirty-five best surfers in the WORLD. Or at least he will be until he tanks his standing, staying home with the wife. Dude gets dinged on power, sometimes, but his innovation scores are off the HOOK.”

I’ll bet, I think. He’s creatively juggled a teen pregnancy, a detective agency, a missing nutcase, a surf-gear business, and a drunk best friend for years. Plus he obligingly chases down the criminal of the hour, every time I hijack his day.

I’ve guessed for a while Logan’s life would be easier without me in it. But this is cold, hard proof of just how much he’s sacrificed.

“YOU’RE not on this list, even as an amateur,” I note, flipping pages. Dick fake-snores, pretending he can’t hear.

“He didn’t qualify,” Darryl informs me, not looking up from his game. “Mom told your dad while I was watching Dr. Who that he went to tryouts drunk.”

“Darryl!” Alicia chides, and Darryl rebuts, “Hey, YOU wiped the floor with the beginner’s round. How hard can surfing be?”

A bullhorn sounds, and Dad says, “No more arguing, kids. This is Logan’s heat.” I look around for my bag, spot binoculars by my feet, and grab them up so I can watch.

Two small figures paddle out towards anemic waves, one in red, one black-and-green. They bob on boards, waiting for I-don’t-know-what; MY Logan only entered contests that involved drinking.

“Waves are shit today,” Dick mutters, donning a pair of dark glasses so he can stand to stare at the sea. “Oh, yeah, here we go. Kowabunga, baby! Ride that big fucker hard!”

Both surfers pop up as I wince, head in opposite directions across a strong curl. They commence tricks, cutting sideways, spinning and reversing; green-and-black must be my guy, based on the flamboyant way he moves.

“Did you people not SEE that vertical snap?” Dick yells, personally offended by the crowd’s desultory response. He leans forward intently, peering at the surfers, who are bouncing on their boards between waves to stay upright. “Come on, dude, we’ve got a big one rolling in. Do that thing. You know that thing. Do it do it do it….”

Logan and the other guy crest the next surge simultaneously, and it must be difficult to stick because the crowd mutters and hums. The red surfer tries a sideways spin, and spectacularly face-plants. Logan does a rapid series of s-curves, followed by a FLIP, and the whole audience goes
insane. Dick flings his hands up, screaming joyous profanities so loud he wakes Bryson. Even Darryl pauses his game.

(Far from being upset at the cacophony, Bryson seems in his element. He raises sleepy arms in mimicry, yells, “FUH-IN-AY, LOAG!”, and subsides back onto Dick’s chest. Alicia favors Dick with a pugent look, but he’s too stoked to notice.)

We clap and cheer until my voice is hoarse, and they begin the paddle towards shore. Logan’s score turns up as 9.27, which even I know is good, and Alicia goes into full-bore Mom Mode.

“All right, people, hustle. We have to make it over there before the reporters grab him, you know how they hate to let go. Keith, remember, congratulations sound SINCERE. He brooded for a month, last time you cracked a joke. Darryl, put that game away and carry the cooler, you’re the only one here who’s strong enough.”

This is patently untrue, but Darryl buys it; hefts the strap over his shoulder, and follows her down the stairs. I descend in front of Dick, who lifts Bryson competently without waking him. The kid has a hand curled in his shirt, clinging; Dick’s tucked the manta ray in his armpit. Despite his air of stale debauchery, it’s actually kind of sweet.

Jesus, the slipstream has warped me. My comforting loathing of Dick Casablancas is forever compromised.

“You should have tried out sober,” I tell him, straightening Bryson’s shirt, which makes the kid whimper and shift. Because if Dick CAN do better than loserdom, why doesn’t he make the effort?

“What for?” He shrugs, truly puzzled. “Logan’s the one with talent, and Mackie can’t run that booth alone. Lot of agreements get made at shindigs like this--all the pros and manufacturers show. And let’s face it, I’m the point man for the business, Rons. The wheels of the wheelin’ and dealin’ come off, when Dick quits rubbing in grease.”

He squints towards the water line. “Check it out, ESPN lady’s on him already. She’s like…what are those things that move faster than snakes? The weasel with teeth, from the cartoon? Dude stands around looking studly with fucking endorsements bulging out, and sportscaster women get moist. He’ll be signing autographs for HOURS.”

I roll my eyes, because interviews and fans are Logan’s worst nightmares. “Guess it’s my responsibility, as his fiancée, to park my bare, pregnant PWT belly between him and those cameras, then. Save him from his hideous fate.”

Dick cracks a laugh. “Ronnie, you minx. You think I’m gonna stop you out of concern for your dignity, but nah. That shit’d be HILARIOUS.”

Logan runs off the reporter when he sees us, with a haste that speaks volumes about Other V’s jealousy. He hugs Alicia first, though, and grins as he shakes Dad’s hand; the smile goes crooked/tender as he fixes it on me.

He taps the end of my nose with a finger as I go on tiptoes to embrace him, displays the smear of zinc oxide collected. Drapes an arm around me to kiss my cheek. I yank the towel from his neck to wipe my face, and he says, “Now you’re going to burn.”

“You did great,” I tell him, elbowing his side. His smile gets bigger, displaying teeth.

“You know, I DID!” He winks. “I mean, I’m nowhere in Alicia’s league…SHE actually WON…but I’ve SLIGHTLY redeemed the family name.”
Alicia snorts. “You know I only participated because you boys dared me. Can’t have Darryl thinking moms don’t ‘shred’.”

“Well, we DANCED for you, so turnabout’s fair play,” Logan says. She flicks his arm.

“We should head over to the boardwalk, get some food before that skating demonstration,” Dad tells her, donning the Crocodile Dundee hat he’s been carrying by its string. “When’s the kickoff? Eleven?”

“Veronica kept my program.” Alicia takes Bryson back from Dick, settles him on her shoulder. He winds his arms around her neck.

I locate the pamphlet in my bag, and Dad checks. “Ten forty-five,” he says. “Let’s get a move-on before they run out of Sno-Cones. I’ll lose my chance to turn my tongue blue and embarrass Darryl.”

“You’re ALREADY embarrassing me, wearing that hat,” Darryl informs him, leading the way down the boardwalk. “That hat is NOT dank, Keith.”

“Neither is a bright red skull,” Dad says, adjusting the brim. He takes Alicia’s hand as they share a look, kisses the back, and waves as they walk off towards the booths.

“Turn up by the autograph table at noon,” Logan calls after them, “and I’ll introduce you to Tony Hawk, man!”

Darryl turns around, cooler smacking his back, gives two thumbs up. Logan mirrors the gesture, makes innocent face at grinning Dick. “What? I can’t help it if the kid likes me best.”

“So…” I say, to change the subject—Dad vs. Logan isn’t a contest to encourage. “Alicia won, you did a flip on your surfboard, Dad shook your hand, and Dick taught Bryson the F-word. It’s been an eventful morning!”

“And the day’s young.” Logan nonchalantly strips off his wetsuit; stands dripping in compression shorts, digging through a duffel, while cameras flash. He pulls on another logo tee--this one reads ‘Vans: Off the Wall’—and smirks at my cross-armed pose.

“Want to walk over to the booth? Check out our latest swag?” He shakes sand out of a pair of cargo shorts and dons them, which gives me a weird flashback to Almost Real Reality. He could not BE more different than hungover reckless Logan, riddled with stitches; but my response to both is prurient. “The latest slogan’s nuts, you won’t be disappointed.”

“Better than ‘Take Dick for a Ride’?” I gesture with my thumb. Our erstwhile companion’s chatting up a blonde in a tank-ini, while she applies sunscreen. “Because THAT approaches the nadir of taste.”

“Hey, lowest common denominator sells,” Logan shoulders the duffel and tugs me against his side. His palm curls over my belly, pats; I melt a little, because come on, I’m not made of stone. “I don’t DESIGN the market, I just profit.”

“Spoken like a true capitalist,” I say. “Or cynic. Which maybe there’s not a lot of difference.”

“Hey, capitalism is the American way,” he chides. “And I’m Superman, right? So I’m all about that, in addition to truth and justice.” Then, cupping a hand around his mouth, “DUDE, WE’RE ON THE CLOCK HERE!”

Dick gives Logan the finger, hands something to the blonde, and swaggers our direction. I watch
her drop it in the trash, the minute his back’s turned, and smother a laugh.

“Man, I LOVE being brand ambassador!” Dick spins to check out a brunette in a tank top. “ALL the wahines want to buy your boards.”

“Just remember the line between ambassing and harassing.” Logan squints against the sunlight as we turn onto the walkway. “It cuts into our profit margin when we have to hire lawyers.”

“Check you out, discussing trade like a member of the filthy merchant class,” I say. “Who are you, and what have you done to my boyfriend?”

“There’s no point taking a job and underperforming.” He spins to avoid a mom-and-toddler with ice cream. “Besides, my partners demand more than half-assed effort; one of them needs money, and the other’s too ambitious to work with slackers.”

God, sometimes the slipstream is like Bizarro World. In MY reality, Dick Casablancas has a trust fund, and Cindy MacKenzie is POOR. I’m pretty sure the baby swap, her only legit path to riches, hasn’t surfaced, here. So HOWWWW did the Dick-Mac status quo get reversed?

Ehh, I’ll just go ahead and blame it on Beaver. That little bastard had his sticky fingers in EVERYTHING before he bit the bullet.

“Well, you’re doing the Lord’s work,” I say, shaking off gloom. “Take me to your swag, and your resident business genius. Then I want funnel cake, though. Peanut’s starving.”

“Sure, blame the fetus,” Dick says. “We’ve all seen you eat, Rons.”

“Fine, I want funnel cake AND a turkey leg,” I say. “Let’s throw caution to the wind.”

“You got it, Caligula.” Logan steers me left into the maze of booths. “Let’s just give Mac her get-out-of-jail-free card, and you can raid my wallet at will.”

We stop at a blue booth decorated with white stylized waves, the logo ‘CASABUNGA!’ in cursive along the marquee. Mac lounges behind the counter in a posh camp chair, sipping bottled Starbucks and reading ‘Wired’.

She snaps the lid shut as we approach and rises. “Didn’t we discuss this morning how timeliness is next to Godliness, Dick? You’re forty-five minutes late!”

“We were watching Logan!” He circles around the back of the booth, plants himself in the vacated seat. “He caught some MAJOR air--that new coach is worth the bank.”

Mac turns to Logan, lifting her brows. He says, “Third place. Not too bad, considering how little I’ve been training.”

“It’ll keep you in the spotlight,” she decides, draining her drink and tossing it in the trash. “Headed over to sign autographs?”

“After we grab a shirt for Ronica.” He winks at me. “You can’t see your back, muffin, but it’s dangerously pink.”

“Oh, EW!” I recoil from the options—all of which feature grinning cartoon Dick, pulling some surfing maneuver. “I’d rather lose a layer of skin!”

“Plain logo shirt it is.” Logan pulls down a size small in blue, which replicates the booth’s design. “Mmmm, your eyes look turquoise,” he says, smoothing back my hair as I tug it on. “How are you so pretty? Did you sell your soul to Satan?”

“Now what would he want with little old me?” I bat my lashes.

He laughs and kisses my cheek; turns to address Mac, who’s packing up her laptop. “Mackenzie, walk with us? I need your valuable input.”

She shrugs. Says, “Remember to keep the cash register CLOSED, Dick, between transactions.”

Dick smirks like he’s pretending to find this funny, and she ruffles his hair as we leave.

“So what’s the deal with that Target e-mail?” Logan asks, as we head past booths towards the art display. “I saw your message this morning, but I haven’t had time to read.”

“Well, they were HINTING about a line for their kids’ department.” She twists her mouth sideways, mischievous. “Assuming, of course, we clean up the slogans.”

“And what’s Dick’s position on this crassly commercial venture?” He peels off an ice-cream wrapper that’s stuck to his flip-flop, pitches it in a trash can. “Does he actually WANT to be a role model?”

“Dick views any venture positively that increases the visibility of Dick,” she says. “I brainstormed some concepts, since the wi-fi’s too spotty out here for focused Duncan-hunting. I’ll scan and email, back at the hotel.”

“Make sure he reviews them,” Logan says. “If Dick’s not busy and engaged, the profit margin doesn’t matter.”

“Bite your tongue.” She waves at a guy in Quicksilver paraphernalia, taps her watch. “I didn’t pony up a thirty percent stake in this tackiest of enterprises so I could watch it dwindle. Dick’s self-esteem can survive a killer deal.”

Logan points at a table near the face-painting booth, where a handful of surfers sit. A long line of festival-goers queue before it, waiting semi-patiently to get glossies signed. “I’ve got an hour’s shift doing press duty, sugar lumps. You want to eat some junk food and come back, since watching girls smile at me raises your blood pressure? Wallace said to text him, when we were ready to hang.”

“Actually,” I say, because if I’m ever going to repair my friendship with Mac, I need to quit screwing around. “I’d enjoy watching Mac wheel and deal for the corporate cause. If that’s OK with you, Mac? And maybe discuss progress on our cases?”

She seems surprised, but says, “Sure,” then heads off. I blow a kiss to Logan, and follow.

“So what exactly needs discussing?” she asks, as we cross the field. “Seeing as we’ve made zero progress on the Kane case today.”

“Which was maybe a mistake. Taking a vacation day feels WEIRD,” I say. “I mean, this is a critically important, time-sensitive situation, and we’re blowing it off to frolic on the BEACH?”

“Because there’s a ton of money riding on this appearance?” She frowns, nonplussed. “It’s not
like Logan could cancel. Besides, Weevil and Victor will keep the home fires burning. If you’re so concerned, why’d you come?”

“I was being supportive,” I say, at random. “And that’s another thing. Why isn’t VICTOR here, supporting? I mean, Logan’s his only in-town family. He ought to be stage-center, cheering loudest.”

“Well for starters, he’s a recluse,” Mac says, dry. “I think his exact words, when invited, were, ‘I’m not wasting a whole day watching you show off. I already know you’re amazing.’ The only time I’ve actually seen the guy in public was at that Big Sur restaurant. My view is, agoraphobia’s involved.”

“Any updates on that other case?” I ask, somewhat desperately; my questions are misfiring, Mac’s a suspicious genius, and I’m running out of conversational topics. “The fake laptop repairman who’s stealing?”

“Yes, actually,” she says. “It’s pretty ingenious. He’s downloading a corrupted browser onto clients’ computers that accesses spyware online. We caught it with the old-school bug you recommended, so thanks for that. I’ll be taking the case to the cops, once we’re not in emergency mode.”

“That’s great!” I say. “Best we make our reputation now, while school’s out; when we start classes again, we’ll be strapped for time.”

“OK, what is with you?” she demands, stopping in her tracks. “You know as well as I do that the Hearst course load is a cakewalk. As far as I can tell, you only bother to show up for criminology, and that’s solely so you can schmooze Landry.”

I stumble, because shit, I forgot. This is Ideal Reality, with Peanut, and Victor, and the ring, and the Justice League, so I assumed we were still based in Berkeley. But Logan and I decided, in that suite in New York, to stay in Neptune, go to Hearst, and bring the bastards down. So Ideal Reality has shifted once again, and Berkeley’s vanished into the mist.

God, the slipstream is stressful. I don’t even have a clue where I LIVE now. I was fond of that house, too. And what about my DOG?

“The path to success is paved with schmoozing,” I say, because I have to say something. Then stop by a kebab stand, because I need a subject change, quick. “Oooh, look, pork and pineapple! Want one?”

“Veronica,” she asks, hesitant. “Are you…making up excuses to hang out with me?”

“YES,” I say, because that’s a better explanation for my behavior than ‘fishing for information about my own life’. “Thank you for ending the charade.”

“Can I ask…why?”

“Because.” I hand a five to the booth operator, accept a large skewer of roasted meat. “I think we’d make awesome friends, high school experiences notwithstanding.”

She raises a brow as I go after the kebab, and mmmm, charcoal-y deliciousness. “We ARE friends,” she says, fighting a smile. “I mean, you’re right, we definitely WEREN’T in high school. But when you made that graduation speech, I realized you’re not a complete asshole. Plus, you know, team spirit, camaraderie, whatever.” She does a self-conscious cheer. “Look, Duncan Kane being off his rocker and headed your direction, THAT’S a concern. But you and I are fine.”
“I’m not WORRIED,” I say, around a bite of pineapple. “I’m just…ugh.”

“Spectacularly bad at social interaction?” she suggests.

“Yeah, that,” I say. “Thanks, your support is comforting.”

“Tell you what.” She makes the faintest of grimaces. “I’m booked right now with both these cases and the Target deal, and there’s a guy over by the Billabong booth I promised I’d talk to five minutes ago. But in a month or so, when things slow down, we could…do team Karaoke Night or something? Cocktails would make this all easier.”

“Deal,” I say. “But just so you know. I’m WAY better at karaoke than I am at feelings.”

“You could hardly be worse.” She grins. Points at the Quicksilver-garbed guy we saw earlier. “There’s my appointment, stalking me. Gotta run. And seriously, Veronica, slow down and chew. You’re like a hyena over there, inhaling carrion.”

I make a face--she laughs and strides off. After which, I dig my Sidekick out of my messenger bag, and text Wallace to meet me by the Funnel Cake stand.

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An hour later, stuffed with carnival eats and the proud winner of a three-way hula-hoop standoff (despite my belly), I make it back to the autograph stand. The line still snakes around the corner, and Logan’s patiently flirt-signing; when he sees me coming, though, he murmurs something to the guy next to him and tosses down his pen.

“You must be thirsty,” I say, handing him a pink Slushee. “We’re meeting the Fennel clan at one o’clock at Buon Gusto. I’ve been instructed to tear you away no matter how much your fans scream.”

He takes a long sip, closing his eyes at the pleasurable cool. Rolls the cup along his forehead with a sigh, and pulls me in for a cherry-flavored kiss. “Yeah, they stopped by half an hour ago and I called a cab. It should be waiting by the entrance. I’m not even TRYING to retrieve the car from that lot until the crowd dies down.”

“Well, you are underdressed,” I say. “If the mob rips your clothes off before you lock yourself in, you’ll be wearing ‘Get Wet With Dick’ gear to dinner with Dad.”

He grimaces, offers his hand. I link it with mine, swing them between us as we walk off the fairgrounds. “So what did Mac have to say?” he asks. “Any movement on the Duncan front?”

I shake my head, point at the yellow cab parked crooked by the gate. “She solved the laptop case. And she wants to do Karaoke night after the red alert dies down.”

He turns his head sideways to grin at me, opens the rear door and ushers me in. “Nice work, Mars. I continue to be impressed by the way others do your bidding.”

“Usually it’s just threats,” I say, as he climbs in, bumps me with his hip to scoot me over. “This time I made overtures of friendship.”

“I hope she felt honored.” He turns his attention to the driver. “Forty-nine eleven Warner. Get there before one and I’ll triple your tip.”

“We need to talk about your surfing career,” I say. “During this rare moment alone. I noticed
today you’re skipping important events to babysit me; and for the record, I don’t need that level of cosseting.”

“Seriously, Ronica? We’re discussing this for the millionth time NOW? I KNOW you’re a one-woman strike team. But I’m not fucking off surfing while you’re enduring a rough pregnancy, especially with Duncan running amok. And I won’t be touring extensively ‘til Peanut’s old enough to travel, even if all ends well. According to the baby book, infants attach to the people who hold them. With my kid, that’s going to be ME.”

I can’t help but smile at the image of Logan Echolls, intently highlighting ‘What to Expect’. “But how will that impact your company? And your ranking?”

He snorts. “It’ll add to my air of mystery. Look, who cares? This is my CHOICE. I want a college degree, and I want to do the dad thing right. And even when I DO travel, it’s not like it has to be burdensome. I can take mom’s jet with a couple days’ turnaround, or in some cases, even the Cessna. Or the boat.”

“God, you’re such an aristocrat,” I say.

“Hey, I own a little plane and a LITTLE boat,” he says. “I’m not THAT disgustingly materialistic. The jet’s not even MINE.”

“You’re not disgustedly anything,” I tell him, then prove it with a kiss.

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The restaurant where the cab drops us is typical So-Cal Italian; red-brown brick on the bottom, grey clapboard on top, with standard red-checked tablecloth décor. Everybody’s waiting; Wallace and Jessica scrutinize a menu, Alicia tears apart garlic knots for Bryson. Dad’s listening patiently while Darryl raves about Tony Hawk.

I take a seat beside Dad, who drapes an arm around my shoulders, plants a kiss on my temple. Logan sprawls into the chair beside me. He gives the menu a cursory glance, and I say, “You know what you’re getting ALREADY?”

He points. “Pasta Gorgonzola with shitakes. No brainer, I need to carb-load.”

“How am I marrying you?” I ask, shaking my head. “Your taste in food is FREAKISH.”

Wallace glances up from his menu. “Seriously V? You’re ORDERING, after everything you put away at the festival? I thought we’d have to roll you out of there.”

“Oooh, pregnancy jokes, har har,” I say. “Those snacks were an appetizer. But just to ease your mind, I’ll go vegetarian this meal.”

“They must have cheese manicotti,” Dad mock-whispers, which makes me laugh.

“So how’s the True Crime Novel going?” I ask, giving him a shoulder nudge, because I need to get up to speed about the Thumper Orozco case. “Any exciting yet reprehensible discoveries?”

“Too many to count,” he says, in the low voice that means he doesn’t want his girlfriend overhearing. “Naturally, since I’m investigating Vinnie Van Lowe.”

I pretend to gasp, hand to mouth. “But Vinnie’s a war hero! Or at least he is, if you leave out the part about the dishonorable discharge.”
Dad favors me with a jaundiced look. “You know as well as I do he can’t be left in office, Veronica. He’s an ethically-challenged Fitzpatrick stooge, who supplements his income with bribes. Plus, I’ve already uncovered a connection to the Nautilus.”

“That can’t be right,” I say, also lowering my voice. Because the ‘stay out of Sorokin business’ edict might be in place here, too. “Those shooters were Russians! Vinnie told me himself he has nothing to do with that crime family, and for once, I actually believe him. He even warned me to watch out for the heir, albeit in code. I wish I’d listened.”

“Well it’s true Vinnie’s got no affiliation with the old-country mafia,” Dad says, raising his brows at this bit of information. “In fact, he seems determined to steer clear. But It’s my belief the crime family is undergoing a schism; and the newfangled American branch staged the trafficking operation you foiled. There were no prosecutions, Veronica, despite a lengthy investigation. And that’s likely because Vinnie staged a cover up, before the Feds made it on the scene.”

I open my mouth to reply, and Alicia says, “Keith, stop whispering with your daughter; you can put on your detective hats after lunch. We need to make our announcement before the food comes.”

“Announcement?” Jessica asks innocently, giving Wallace a grinning glance. “Do tell!”

“Well.” Dad clears his throat, puts his arm around Alicia. “I doubt it comes as a surprise to any of you that Alicia and I are…serious.”

Darryl mutters “TMI!!” and Wallace whacks the back of the head.

“Anyway,” Alicia says, with a quelling look, “about a week ago, Keith took me out to dinner at Mama Leone’s, and gave me this.”

She bends down to her purse, extracts a ring box; lifts the lid to reveal a square-cut diamond on a gold scrollwork band. “I accepted,” she adds, unnecessarily. “And we’re getting married.”

“It’s not the best timing,” Dad acknowledges, putting the ring on her finger. They share a private smile. “With Duncan Kane missing, and all of you changing schools. But we wanted our kids to know before we told anyone else.”

“As long as we don’t have to live in the same house with one bathroom, like the Brady Bunch, I’m cool.” Wallace leans over to give his mother a hug. “Although the idea of Veronica as a sister is scary. She’s ALWAYS in trouble.”

“Hey, I’m a responsible adult!” I protest, as Jessica removes a camera from her purse. Look to Logan for support. “Right?”

“If I am, you are,” he says, taking my hand. “Regardless, we should record this Kodak moment.”

“First the group,” Jessica says, and we all lean in and grin. “And now the happy couple!”

They pose, Dad’s arm around Alicia’s shoulders, rings proudly displayed, smiling into each other’s eyes. And I realize…this is the snap of Dad and Bettina from the album I studied, way back when the slipstream first started. It took him a year longer, and he proposed to a different woman, but still ended up in this place.

Which means even fated events are fluid; things I can’t stop, I can tweak. I saved Dad from marriage to Bettina, a relationship based upon lies. And I hooked him up with someone better, to almost everyone’s benefit.
This is not a small victory—this is triumph. The change will enrich all our lives.

I beam at Logan, suffused with happiness and he smiles back, charmed. I don’t know if he recognizes my accomplishment…but if he does, he approves.

Fingers crossed ALL Hail Mary rescues work out so easily. Because a lot of people left in the slipstream need saving.

I spin sideways, give Dad a congratulatory hug, which he laughingly accepts. Then blackness swoops down, and whirls me out of his arms.

THREAD THIRTY EIGHT INVERTS

I’m in a Maserati with the top up, skidding along a twisty dirt road through the woods—at way too high a speed, because Lilly’s driving. She’s in clinging black business-wear with her hair piled high, and the kind of eye makeup that screams Entertainment TV. She’s singing along with Xtina on the radio as we dip and swerve.

To the left, through a gap in trees, an antebellum-style plantation house flashes into view, shuttered and columned, grounds encircled by an iron gate. To the right, there’s only thin, deciduous forest, blocking out sun.

“Slow DOWN, Mario Andretti!” I brace my hands on the dash as she jerks the wheel sideways. “I’ve had my lifetime quota of motor-vehicle disasters this year.”

“Oh relax.” She twists around a corner into a clearing, kills the engine. “This is a high performance vehicle. It can handle a few ruts.”

“Says the girl who could pay cash for a replacement,” I mutter. Lilly’s not listening, though. She’s climbed halfway into the backseat, mini-skirt in the air, as she rummages along the floorboards.

In a minute, she’s back with a pink-striped beach tote, smirking. “It got wedged under the seat,” she explains. “Thank God for extra-strong manicures.”

Black-framed glasses emerge from its recesses, then a white lab coat, and she dons both. The tag on the lapel reads, “Dr. Sandman”.

Waving a hand at my apparent slackerdom, she hisses, “Get with the program, Ronica! Do a severe bun or something. You’re the one who insisted on looking non-sexy--work your disguise to the hilt.”

I glance down. I’m in hospital scrubs—scrubs printed with My Little Ponies, manes flowing as they dance on rainbows. Look back up as she undoes two more buttons, displaying a scary amount of cleavage, and sigh. I know what we’re up to, now. “Lilly, the point of disguises is to infiltrate places WITHOUT attracting attention.”

“Well, where’s the fun in THAT?” she asks, rhetorically, as I tie back my hair. “Honestly, Ronica. I know what Logan’s like in bed. How can you still be so uptight?”

I narrow my eyes, an expression which makes most people quiver in fear. She just laughs at me. “Fine,” I say. “But keep in mind, the staff of this sanitarium know what you look like; you’ve been here before, visiting. Turn your face away, when someone you’ve met comes close.”

“They won’t look at my face.” She widens her eyes to punctuate this statement, and I can’t help but smile. “The orderly I bribed to leave the gate open spent our entire conversation staring down my
shirt; I doubt he could pick me out of a LINEUP, unless he REALLY knows his triple-D’s.”

I grab my messenger bag and paw through, remembering the useful things it contained the day we stormed Stewart’s compound. Sure enough, there’s a baggie full of listening devices in the zippered side pocket. I tuck these into my own bra and follow her down the gravel road, amused by her sublime disregard for eight-hundred-dollar Prada heels. “Can we go over the plan?” I ask. “So we’re on the same page?”

“Ugh, I AM capable of remembering details, Veronica.” She stops, hands on hips, and recites as if by rote. “MY job is to infiltrate the office, and take photos of Duncan’s medical files. YOUR job is to interview the orderlies, since nobody knows who you are—dig up dirt about what’s going on, when the Medical Ethics Board isn’t looking.”

Too bad we didn’t send Weevil, I think, as I follow her down the trail. He could put on his air conditioner repairman uniform, bug the whole joint without raising brows. Then I remember Weevil’s in jail—highly inconvenient, from a needing-help perspective. I’ve got to devote brain time, SOON, to pinning Thumper’s murder on a free-roaming Fitzpatrick.

Lilly pushes open a wrought-iron gate, and I follow her into a formal English garden, lush with massed watermelon-pink roses. Stone benches scatter throughout, bracketed by urns of sage and bougainvillea; there’s a warm, herbal scent. It reminds me of Hearst Logan’s description of Provence.

That place sounded beautiful, the way he spoke of it. I hope he and Veronica are happy there.

I press my lips together, gaze at the big white antebellum house—a two-story winged structure with pillars, and a rocker-strewn wrap-around porch. It’s beautiful, but seems almost like a memory, an echo… the sprinkling of old men smoking desultorily in the yard, incurious ghosts. Not a single person stirs, on the lawn or past the tall, glazed windows—they stare off into space, ignoring us both.

“Great security,” I mutter. “The gate’s OPEN, and I see zero orderlies.”

“Oh, this is the non-violent patient wing,” Lilly explains. “They house helpless and unmotivated criminals here. The dangerous ones are kept over there.” She points off into the distance, where an electric fence topped with barbed wire peeks past a stand of trees. “My parents had to pay through the nose to keep Duncan out, after he stabbed that doctor in the face.”

“I’ll have to revise my opinion of Donut as idle bystander,” I murmur, mostly to myself. “It’s a paradigm shift.”

“So this is where I head that way,” Lilly says, pointing around the side of the building, ignoring my mood, “and photograph Duncan’s files, so we can study them for evidence of mistreatment. You go through there,” she indicates the back door, “and hang out in the break room. We’ll meet back here in half an hour.”

I straighten my top with determination. “Fine. I just hope people take me seriously in this outfit.”

“Hey, you ASKED for scrubs,” she chides. “I just jazzed them up. Learn to live a little.”

She waves goodbye over one shoulder and marches off espionage-ward. I head to the back door, discreetly fasten a mini-camera to the frame. Push my way cautiously inside.

It opens onto a two-story salon, with blush-pink walls, ornate crown molding, and white-upholstered French furniture. White sheers rustle at the tall, narrow windows, and a white marble fireplace sits dormant, silver-screened. Ceiling-center hangs a giant crystal chandelier. This facility is
just as luxurious as the place where Luke recovered, post-boat-disaster—but it’s a LOT more frou-frou.

A man and woman sit on one couch, chatting earnestly with a drugged-out girl in white linen lounge clothes; a blonde male aide in purple scrubs stands unobtrusively nearby. He nods at me as I pass; I smile, close-lipped, because I don’t want to be memorable. Hide the second of my cameras on the frame of a painting of grapes.

Outside the salon runs a long hall, separated at intervals by carved arches. The pale-wood floors are covered in Persian rugs, in shades of grey, pink and blue. Directly across from me, a spiral staircase curves up to the second floor. A discreet gold-lettered plaque bears an arrow and the label ‘kitchen’. I hear voices coming from that direction, so I follow the sound.

The kitchen décor is white, with black counters, and the floor is a black-and-white checkerboard; it reminds me of Bettina and Dad’s house in Ideal Reality, only that felt, weirdly, homier. At a large farmhouse-style table, several people in scrubs are sprawled, drinking sodas and chatting. The presence of snack machines along the far wall designates this the break area.

I dig a handful of change out of my pocket, buy a Sunkist—sit with the crowd at the table. Smile in my most non-threatening way as I stick an audio bug underneath.

“God, it’s COLD in this building! I should have brought a sweater.”

“Yeah, they keep it cool on purpose.” an Asian guy with a spiky frat-bro haircut leans back, cradling his coffee cup. “The patients move around less when they’re a chilly, so I’m told.”

“I haven’t see you before,” a red-haired guy says, clearly flirtatious, stuffs a wad of Swedish Fish in his cheek. I clock him as the one who let Duncan loose, and up the wattage on my smile. “You new?”

“Started today!” I confirm. “My maiden voyage. I’m Trixie. Trixie Belden?”

“Trixie,” The Asian guy says flatly, making the tall brunette beside him choke on her tea. “Seriously?”

“Family nickname.” I channel Logan with an elaborate shrug. “Bane of my existence. My real name is Patricia.”

“Why don’t they just call you Pat? Or Tricia?” the brunette asks, and I grit my teeth. I KNEW nobody would take me seriously in these scrubs.

“A mystery for the ages,” I manage. Favor the redhead with an even-more-brilliant smile when he says, “Whatever, Monica, it’s cute.”

“Aren’t you sweet!” I chirp. “So do you enjoy working here…?”

“Marty,” he supplies. “That’s Todd. Not really, I mean, would anyone? It’s creepy as fuck. But it pays more than your average nursing gig, and I’m saving up for a house.”

“Creepy because of the patients?” I ask. “I mean, I know you have some serving sentences. Isn’t the guy who killed Aaron Echolls in this hospital?”

“Yeah, but he’s harmless,” Todd says, dismissive, and sips. “Spends most of his time staring off into space; the only people he talks to are this old guy and a janitor. Whenever I’ve worked with him, he just rocks. Guess Echolls was a PRETEND action hero; this dude couldn’t take out someone who fought back.”
“Harmless my ASS,” Monica counters, tearing open a packet of Oreos. “He beat the shit out of Doctor Stanton during one of their sessions. Guy had to go to the hospital--that’s why he ended up quitting.”

“I hear Kane has a thing for another patient,” I say, swallowing back some soda. Because the ‘blonde in the ward’ story still bothers me, a lot.

“You’ve heard a lot, for your first day,” Todd observes. I give him a narrow look, because I do NOT need his attitude right now.

“He’s just confused,” Monica says, dipping a cookie into her tea. “Thinks one of the other patients is his girlfriend. She can handle it though, she’s scarier than he is. Murdered her own FATHER in cold blood.”

HOLD the phone, I think. MEG? I mean it makes sense that Crazy Meg would end up in the same ritzy private facility as Duncan, but it also kind of boggles the mind.

I’m about to inquire further when my attention is diverted by a lab-coated figure bustling past the door. At first I think it’s Lilly, but no; this person’s short but plumper, with grey braids wrapped around her head. She looks familiar. In fact…

She looks like my Ideal Reality OB-GYN.

Images flood my brain—Meg in that hospital bed in a coma, monitor attached to her belly. Meg, begging me to make sure Stewart never got her kid. The connotations of an OB visiting psych-ward patients are repellent. What if Meg’s pregnant here, too? What if she’s crazy, and knocked up, and trapped in a nuthouse, with no legal control over what happens to her child?


I make it past the door just as the doctor disappears around the corner; reach the hall as she rounds the top of the curving staircase. I follow her up, at a trot, and find myself in a foyer between the two wings; pale-grey hallways full of rooms extend down each side.

She’s on the right, pushing through a door. I lurk just out of sight, and watch.

In two minutes, maybe three, she exits, walks to the end of the hall and takes the stairs. I rush down the grey-patterned carpet, peer through the rectangle of glass.

Duncan’s inside, though, not Meg, sitting on a dark four-poster bed, rocking. Just like he did the night Lilly was killed.

XXXXX

I shouldn’t go in…I know I trigger him, and he’s dangerous. But I can’t bring myself to be afraid of Donut. And this may be my only chance to learn what’s up, with Meg, and Beaver, and his mis-wired brain.

He doesn’t react when I ease the door open, sidle inside. Just stares out the window, where the rose garden is attractively framed. He’s cross-legged on the mattress, one wrist shackled to a post.

The walls of his cell are painted soothing sky-blue, the furniture’s upholstered in silver-and-white patterned velvet. Family photos are arrayed in bolted frames across a slate-grey marble fireplace. It looks like the well-appointed prison of a captive prince, which I guess is appropriate.
“Hey Duncan,” I say, easing over to the window. I look out, to see what he sees, but there’s just one old man, in the same linen hippie gear as Duncan, enjoying the sun. “How’s it going, buddy? Hot time in the old asylum tonight?”

He keeps rocking—no acknowledgment. Duncan was never a conversationalist, but this is fugue-state extreme.

I edge over to the bureau, so I can fix a camera to the mirror’s rim, notice a torn bit of wallpaper behind. When I peel it away—it’s affixed with gum—I find a face carved there, maybe using a paperclip. Duncan’s art skills have always sucked, but the long hair and toothy smile make me suspect I’m the subject.

Great. Like this whole scenario wasn’t creepy enough.

“What are you looking at?” Duncan asks, disconcerting, because he’s still staring blankly into space. “Are there spiders again?”

I hastily readjust the mirror. “Nah, I’m sure they spray. You know who I am, right, Duncan? You recognize me?”

“Veronica,” he says, focusing with an intensity that drives me back a few steps. “You look different. Did you change your hair?”

I shake my head, mesmerized, slightly, by his creepy blue stare. “Nope. Just put it up in a bun. I’m dressed at the height of fashion, as you can see.”

“Did you pass Logan, on your way in? We were talking, a while ago.”

“Must have just missed him.” I cross my arms, defensive, because holy FUCK is he delusional. “How are you doing, Duncan? Are they treating you OK?”

“Sure, this place is great, for a retreat,” he says, unperturbed. “You know how it is, they have to recalibrate my meds before school starts. Speaking of which, you buy your prom dress yet? Because you know I’m going to ask you, right?”

“Sure,” I say, in a soft voice. Try not to think about my reality, and the baby who lives alone with this guy. “Lilly and I need to shop.”

“Pick something pretty,” he tells me, face grave. “Something white. Don’t forget, we have special plans for after.”

Bile rises in the back of my throat. There’s no air in this room, all of a sudden. I have to get away.

I back out, shutting the door, wishing I had a key so I could lock him in. Why isn’t it BOLTED? Why isn’t there a GUARD? That can’t be normal, right? Duncan KILLED someone!

I hurry on the staircase, tamping down memories of that morning at Shelly’s, of Dad saying “Aaaand….Woody had the clap.” Press two fingers between my eyes. I can’t look for Meg right now, I can’t deal with orderlies, I need to BREATHE, I need to get outside….

The salon’s mercifully empty when I rush through, out into the rose garden, slam the door behind me. Close my eyes. Suck in air.

Ten deep breaths, just like Alicia taught Logan. Visualize the future I want, make it happen.
When I rouse myself, calm, the old man on the bench has turned to study me, curly plumes of smoke rising from the cigarette in his gnarled hand.

The man is Victor.

He gazes at me for a moment, assessing. Then one side of his long, thin mouth tilts upwards in a half-smile. “Well, well,” he says, ashing. “Aren’t you a bright little ray of sunshine?”

I gather myself, as the puzzle comes together in my head. Victor, desperately wanting the sanitarium shut down. Victor bitching about meddling doctors. Victor, concerned about the fate of Duncan.

Victor, missing since Logan was five.

“That’s me,” I say moving forwards. I take a seat beside him on the bench. Plant my last audio-only bug underneath, and pray it doesn’t rain. “The human equivalent of pink frosting.”

The other side of his mouth curves up too, and he snorts, releasing a puff of smoke. “Things turn too crazy for you, in there?” he asks. “You’re new. You’ll get used to it.”

“Will I?” I ask, my heart breaking. “I assume you’ve been here long enough to know?”

“Thirteen years,” he confirms, leaning back on both palms, blowing a stream of smoke towards the sky. “Near as I can reckon. In the beginning they drugged me a lot, so it was hard to track the days. But I learned how to pretend-swallow the pills, then flush them, and it got better. I’m Victor Lester, by the way.”

He extends a hand, and I take it. His skin is warm, crepey and dry. “Trixie,” I say. “Belden.”


“Why are you in here?” I ask, trying not to sound as outraged as I feel.

“Ah, the usual reason for Hazelwood patients,” he says, with a wry sideways glance. “I was inconvenient to someone rich. Tried to protect my daughter from my son-in-law, which he didn’t appreciate. She married a powerful guy, he got rid of me. End of story.”

“Your daughter didn’t protest, when he locked you up?” I ask, but flatly. Because of course she didn’t.

“She doesn’t know I’m here,” Victor says, unexpectedly. “But if she had…nah, she wouldn’t have said anything. He kept her on a short leash, and daily handfuls of meds. Plus, Mrs. Lester’s dead, and Victor Junior’s a druggie mess. There’s no one left but Lynnie to save me. Son-in-law’s gone to an early grave recently, though…or so I hear. Couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy.”

“But if the man who put you in here is dead,” I ask, “why are you still around?”

“Well that’s a good question.” He leans negligently back. “I guess if I could financially incentivize this place to release me, they would. But as long as fat checks get deposited in their account every month, no one’s inclined to let me go.”

“How have you SURVIVED?” I demand. His brows rise at the fierceness of my tone. “I mean, you’re clearly not crazy.”
“I’m not?” He flashes a faint, self-deprecating smile. “Wouldn’t be so sure, after the life I’ve led. No offense, Trix, since I’m sure you studied your ass off for your nursing degree; but you really can’t tell with some people, at first glance, whether or not they’re off their rockers.”

“I can tell,” I say. “This is false imprisonment. And it’s illegal and terrible and wrong!”

He shakes his head, amused rather than upset by my fervor. “It’s not like this is the first time I’ve been stuck in a bad situation I couldn’t escape. The trick is to strategize, and wait, and take minimal damage. Eventually, your opportunity for freedom will come.”

“And killing yourself slowly with tobacco helps how?” I ask, acid.

He cracks a laugh, rusty. “Hey, smoking is the one vice they’ve let me keep,” he says. “No way am I giving it up. My wife used to hate the habit, too. I only ever did it when I wanted to piss her off.”

“I just got finished visiting Duncan Kane,” I say, because I feel like I need to tell someone; and Victor’s almost like…a priest. He’s proved trustworthy from the beginning, which is true of almost zero humans. “Do you know him? He scared me, a little.”

“Not surprised.” He takes a deep drag. “That kid’s got hidden depths. Killed my son-in-law, for instance, which is a point in his favor. Likes to come out here and talk, on cool days. Of course, he thinks I’m someone else. But it’s still nice to have a friend.”

“Apparently that’s his MO,” I say. “Assumes everyone he meets is a high school pal. What do you talk about?”

“Surfing, mostly,” Victor says. “I surfed some, in my youth. He’s full of plans for the future, raves about a girl he wants to marry. Not a bad kid, if you can get past the smug entitlement and the crazy. And the sudden bursts of violence.”

“The orderly, Todd, said he WASN’T violent, though,” I muse. “He told me Duncan just rocks and stares.”

“Yeah, Todd’s full of shit in myriad ways.” Victor taps ash off his cigarette and spears me with a glance. “He’s smart, but he’s a dick. And unsurprisingly, he’s wrong about Kane; you need to keep an eye out. It seems impossible, when he’s calm…but sometimes he goes off, and there’s no filter there at ALL. No restraint. He’s like the Incredible Hulk, turning green.”


“Just don’t talk shit about Veronica Mars,” he advises, “and you’re probably golden.”

He heaves himself up, stretching gangly arms over his head. “Gotta put out my smoke,” he says. “In the ashtray. We get in trouble for littering, and punishments here aren’t fun.”

I watch him wander across the garden, lost in thought, and jump with a shriek when Lilly taps me on the shoulder.

“Ugh, THERE you are, Ronica! I’ve been looking EVERYWHERE! I got pictures of all the files, and let me tell you, this is more than I EVER wanted to know about Donut.”

“We’re not alone,” I hiss, gesturing covertly at Victor, who’s stubbing out his cigarette in a planter. “Plus I’ve told everyone my name is Trixie. But here’s the important bit--see that guy walking towards us? GUESS who he is.”
“Albert Einstein?” she offers, with a nod at the wild white-hair. “Um, Gandhi?”

Victor’s close enough to hear this; he laughs. “Not even close,” he says, with a delighted and Logan-like smile. “Who’s your friend, Trix?”

“Oh, uh, this is the new doctor on staff,” I say. Lilly gives a finger wave.

“If all the doctors here looked like you, I’d enjoy my stay more,” Victor says. “Smart blondes were always my weakness. So what’s your name? No wait, let me guess, Honey Wheeler. Weird, you don’t look lonely. OR sheltered.”

“Dr. Sandman.” Lilly goes immediately into flirt-mode (while I mentally face-palm because yeah, Victor’s sussed out my alias). She touches the nametag on her boob. “See, it says, right here.”

“Doc, I was just talking to Mr. LESTER about his daughter LYNN. And his son-in-law, who DUNCAN KANE killed,” I say, with emphasis.

Lilly’s eyes get twice as big, and she turns a speculative look on Victor. “What a weird coincidence! Lynn Lester is your daughter?”

“Oh you’ve heard of her?” He folds his arms. “Many have, since she made that ‘Pursuit of Happiness’ crap pile. Not good for much, really, except looking sad while everything goes to shit around her. But she’s damn pretty.”

“ACTUALLY,” Lilly says, “in a bizarre twist, the two of us HAPPEN to be friends with her son.”

I flash her a dirty look for blowing our cover, but she waves me aside, unconcerned. Victor’s smirk lengthens.

“Reeeeally.” He cocks his head, studying her, the amusement deepening to almost affectionate levels. He’s clearly delighted by our ruse in a fundamental way. “Don’t suppose you could convince him to pony up a million bucks, bribe someone to spring me? Kid was like four, last time he visited Grandpa, so I don’t expect he remembers. But he was that boy who could lie in the grass for hours, petting the cat and staring at clouds; so I’m hoping maybe, despite his shit-for-brains father, he somehow grew up decent.”

“Oh, he did,” I say. “And don’t you worry. He doesn’t have to pay a thing. We’ll spring you for free.”

“Now how would you go about that?” he asks. “Trixie Belden? And why? I mean, I’m sure your heart’s in the right place. But what if I actually AM crazy? What if I’m dangerous and BELONG here? Wouldn’t it be wiser not to go off half-cocked, and practice common sense around strangers?”

“I’d bet that million dollars Aaron Echolls stuck you in here SOLELY to keep Lynn under his thumb,” I say, jaw clenching dangerously. My eyes are probably glittering, because the injustice poor Victor’s suffered makes me SICK. “Logan doesn’t have one single decent family member in his life. He NEEDS you.”

Victor smiles at me. “Your tender-hearted faith is touching,” he says. “I’ve got to admit, I’d enjoy seeing him. And if you really can rescue me, it’s not like I’m gonna say no.”

“Let’s go then,” I say. “The gate right there is open, and we’ve got a car parked around the corner.”
“And right behind you,” he corrects, “up on the wall, is a security camera. If I go with you now, they’ll stop us before we reach the highway. Like I said—people only leave here after greasing the wheels with bribes. There’s an under-the-table process involved.”

“Fine,” I say. “We’ll come back for you in the dead of night. And disable all the cameras, so we don’t get caught. How can I send word, so you’ll be ready?”

“Leave a note?” he asks, mouth quirking. “Under that rock? Twenty-four hours prior, reading ‘Jean has a long moustache’?”

I smile. “How about we just meet here at three AM, a week from today? We’ll spring you then.”

“Sure,” he says, with a lurking grin at Lilly, which she returns. “If you want to make it less of a caper.”

“If you need a code phrase,” she says staunchly, “You can HAVE a code phrase. Pick anything you like.”

“You’re a nice girl,” he tells her. “For a doctor. I pick ‘The Eagle Flies at Midnight’.”

“Fine choice,” I say, sarcastic. “Just don’t forget. The eagle flies a week from today, at three AM.”

“Trix,” he drawls, “You’re a girl with a heart of gold, even if you DO take all the fun out of everything. Whatever your name really is, I hope my grandson deserves you.”

I lift my brows, because perceptive. “Mmmm, my heart’s actually black,” I say. “But he’s got me, whether he deserves me or not.”

Victor kisses Lilly’s hand, which makes her laugh, and winks over it at me. Then heads up the stairs into the building, fists in pockets. Lilly turns to me triumphantly and says, “See Ronica! Imagine if we’d done this the boring electronic way YOU wanted. In-person disguised espionage is ALWAYS best!”

“In fact,” I say, frowning, as we head for the gate, “this visit opened two new cans of worms that need to be addressed. So while I agree it was worthwhile? I’m having a ‘Calgon take me away’ moment.”

She laughs. “Well, it IS summer,” she says. “Maybe once Victor’s free, we should all go on vacation.”

I open my mouth to say yes, and the slipstream grabs me. Sends me spinning, over and under, into the blackness and through.
I’m in an airport, leaning against a statue, and the phone in my pocket is ringing.

A quick glance around as I dig confirms the statue’s a Tiki. The wall to my left is painted with blue, Impressionist waves; the one to my right, orange streams of lava. Carved wood trim edging the ceiling depicts more stylized seascapes, so I guess I know where I am.

I thumb my phone on and chirp, “Greetings from sunny Hawaii!” while trying to spot Logan.

“I take it they moved Quantico, then, since last time I checked?” Dad’s voice is so dry it could wither crops.

“How bitchin’ would that be?” I check my watch and wonder what relation the number bears to local time. “Surf, sand, sun and criminal profiling, all wrapped in one festive package!”

“Veronica,” he says. “You climbed on a plane without a word, jettisoning your dreams? After all the work you’ve done, for YEARS, to make it this far? I’d ask what’s gotten into you—but this bears the hallmarks of a smirking Pied Piper with an infamous last name.”

“Aw Dad, be fair. I’m perfectly capable of going astray without Logan’s help.” I gaze at the big red sign over the entranceway, which reads ALOHA! HONOLULU INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, and try to feel guilt about letting Dad down. I can’t, though—guess the slipstream’s scarred over that particular Achilles heel. “I ran into him at the beach, we started talking; I decided processing the last few years with my oldest friend trumped the march to success. So I invited myself along on his trip. It felt…right.”

“And you couldn’t even check IN?” he demands. “I had no idea where you were! I was worried sick!”

“Oh, like you check in with ME?” I demand. “What about that time we were supposed to go to New York, and you stood me up at the terminal? Or the time you went missing for a weekend—then limped home with second-degree sunburn and a bullet wound, sobbing because you hurt some client? I STILL don’t know what happened! All I’m doing is holing up at a luxury resort, with a guy who insists we’re platonic. Maybe catching a few waves.”

“Veronica, you know there are cases I’m not able to discuss…” he says.

“Look, Dad, I love you. But there are aspects of my LIFE I’d rather not discuss, and that includes romance. I’m almost TWENTY. Besides, it’s not like I’m knocked up, and on the run from the Russian mob. That’s some consolation, right?”

“Don’t jinx yourself, Veronica,” he says, sounding resigned. “Remember, we live in Neptune.”

Logan enters the lobby via sliding glass doors, windblown, and waves; I wave back, pushing off the statue. “Dad, my cab’s here, gotta run. I love you, and we can talk when I get home. Oh, and congratulations on winning the election. When you do your humble acceptance speech, make me proud.”

“Are you kidding?” he asks, blankly.
“No?” I say, as Logan disappears out the door.

“No?” I say, as Logan disappears out the door. The allegations of erasing evidence, while not prosecutable, killed my chances. Especially combined with the 09’er robberies the Fitzpatricks staged, to turn the public against me. Vinnie’s your new Sheriff.”

“Come again?” I demand, as Logan reappears—hold up a hand to make him wait. “WHAT erased evidence? And why would anybody vote for that obvious STOOGE?”

“Jake Kane alleges I wiped camera footage of you breaking into his mansion—to steal a hard drive containing proprietary data.” The minatory note in his voice makes it clear Jake’s right. “Like I said, it’s unprovable. But the DVR WAS erroneously stored near a large speaker. And the public doesn’t know Liam was using Vinnie’s candidacy to blackmail me. They just see his campaign videos, and think he’s a righteous dude.”

“And Liam is blackmailing you…why?” I ask. Logan lifts his brows.

Dad sighs. “When I missed the plane to New York? I was helping Kendall Casablancas disappear, using profits from Cassidy’s real estate trust. She feared for her life. Liam sees that money as rightfully his.”

“Which is why she came to your office!” I say. “I thought she just wanted her hard drive back!”

Then it clicks. When Dad stole that hard drive from Kendall’s house in MY reality, she was SO anxious to recover it…but nothing in her files merited angst. Yet the drive Kendall gave Dad in Hearst Reality almost got us killed. It MUST contain something shocking we didn’t catch. Something not stored in a file.

Now, apparently, JAKE has a hard drive too, one important enough for me to nab. So is this coincidence? Or is the dirt Kendall’s leveraging here JAKE’S? I mean, the guy has ties to a secret society and the Russian mob, and he’s prepping a mysterious new product. All this data might damage his net worth, if it suddenly went public. My money’s on the Russian connection, though—Dad’s True Crime project relates to the Nautilus.

Was it Sorokin, then, who wanted that drive enough to attempt murder in Hearst Reality? Or JAKE? Did he dispatch Clarence to retrieve it, by any means necessary, then sit at my bedside and CONSOLE me?

And if so…what would he do to obtain the one Other V’s got squirreled away HERE?

“No?” Dad asks, and I realize I’ve been silent, wildly connecting puzzle pieces.

Logan mouths ‘WHAT’S GOING ON?’ I mouth back ‘KENDALL’. He grimaces, runs a hand through his hair, and grows suddenly interested in his shoes.

“So Kendall ran off with Beaver’s money,” I say circling back to the relevant topic. “And Liam’s putting the screws to you because he wants the cash himself. But of course, Sheriff Mars don’t play, so he was met with heroic refusal. Hence the election fiasco.”

“Honey,” Dad says. “I CAN’T hand over Kendall OR the money—both are gone. In fact, I’m pretty sure she’s dead. Liam didn’t believe me when I told him as much, though. Which puts me in a bit of a bind.”

“Don’t worry,” I tell him. “We’re going to fix this. Give me twenty-four hours to think, and I’ll call you back.”
“I thought you were on vacation!” Dad snaps, exasperated. “Veronica, you need to stay out of this mess. It’s FAR too dangerous.”

“Oooh, Dad, spotty reception in the cab,” I lie, which makes Logan smirk. “You’re fading in and out. Gotta run, call you tomorrow!”

I hang up, look at Logan, and say, “Dad needs our help. Kendall’s dead, there’s a very important hard drive floating around that bad guys would kill to possess. And Liam Fitzpatrick is once again stirring the pot.”

“OUR help?” He follows me out the door—indicates the SUV stretch limo he’s hired with a sweep of his arm. “Isn’t my job to get out of your way and keep my mouth shut, while you scheme to save the day?”

I snort. “Like you WOULD,” I say, climbing into the car. “Work with me, here. Where might Kendall Casablancas hide money—large amounts of money—if she came into it quickly, and needed to travel light?”

“Art,” he says promptly, and I lift my brows. Because Kendall did NOT strike me as an art lover.

He laughs at my expression. “Seriously,” he says. “She got drunk once and ranted. How paintings are the best investment, provided they’re authentic, because they appreciate in value, but don’t betray their worth. Kendall looks—looked, Jesus—decorative, but there was a devious fucking brain under all that hair.”

“That’s for sure,” I consider. “You’re the one with rich, bad-art-loving parents. Where would she purchase this cash-laundering museum piece? Also, WHAT would she buy, and how would she move it around?”

He stares at me for a long minute, and I look back steadily, confused. “Do I have food on my face?” I ask. Snap my fingers. “Step it up, we’re burning daylight.”

“You want my OPINION,” he says flatly. “You want me to HELP with a case in which I’m not directly involved? Like I MATTER?”

I blink. And it hits me…this is how MY Logan feels. Compartmentalized into the ‘guy I sleep with’ box. Forced to watch from the sidelines while I endanger myself detecting, and get his thrills in less savory ways. Shut out of the crucial parts of my life. “YES,” I say. “Because apparently the universe has turned upside down; the Fitzpatricks fixed the election in favor of Vinnie Freaking Van Lowe. Are we going to let them get away with this? And with killing your bitchy former fuck buddy? Or are we going to make them PAY?”

His face relaxes into a genuine smile. He sprawls back against the limo seat, stretching his arm along the bench. “Well the REPUTABLE way to buy art is at auction,” he says. “Like, you’ve heard of Christie’s. But if you’re looking to do things in secret, and you’re able to spot a forgery…which surely Kendall was…you can find things under wraps on the thriving black market. That was the route Aaron went. He preferred to avoid TAXES.”

“And you have access to this black market?” I ask, in a leading tone. “Or at least the relevant gossip?”

“You know it’s funny,” he says, nonchalant. “When you’re a presumably gullible orphan, with as much cash as I’ve got? There’s always some con man around, willing to open doors.”

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Logan makes a series of calls, while we wind through red-clay, verdant, rainbow-wreathed hills. The vista gives way to palm trees, sand, and crystalline, frothing waves; then a complex of white buildings comes into view, fanned star-shape on a green peninsula.

“Our hotel,” he tells me, hanging up with a snap. “Turtle Bay Resort. I rented a two-bedroom on the beach, in case Dick got sick of family togetherness. You can have his bed.”

“And what if he turns up?” I ask, gazing out at the sea.

“He can book his own place,” he says. “Dick has at least half a trust fund left to burn.”

“What did you find out?” I ask, gesturing with my chin at his phone. “That was some concerted wheeling and dealing.”


“Impressive!” I say, whistling. “You do good work. Let’s get inside, plug in my laptop, and see what turns up in a legal provenance search.”

“Because that’s the best way to spend our time, after arriving in tropical paradise?” He climbs out of the car, sounding resigned.

“Play your cards right, and I’ll let you take me out for seafood later.” I pat him on the chest as we head to the lobby.

“Promises, promises,” he mutters, holding open the hotel door.

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“Welcome to Turtle Bay,” Logan reads, from the brochure he found on the nightstand. He abandons his comfortable shoeless sprawl to toss back half his whiskey, flops back on the bed and continues. “A luxurious resort for the discriminating vacationer on Oahu’s beautiful North Shore. Enjoy the area’s seven miles of beaches; including world-famous Waimea Bay, Ehukai Beach, home of the Banzai Pipeline, and Sunset Beach. Because our resort is situated on a peninsula, surrounded by ocean, residents of our guest cottages can view both sunrise and sunset from our private beach.

“Activities available include surfing, paddle boarding, kayaking, fishing, snorkeling, horseback riding, hiking and outrigger canoe rentals. Or try some of our chartered activities, including helicopter aerial tours of the island, dolphin and whale watching excursions, and tours of local farms. Visit Waimea Valley Botanical Garden, a BREATHTAKING national park. Or drive into nearby Haleiwa, to explore shops, boutiques, art galleries and local restaurants.”

“I thought we came to surf,” I say, skimming an article on art authentication. “Why do we care about sightseeing?”

“Big waves happen here from November to February.” He abandons the flyer with a dramatic toss; crosses his hands behind his head to watch the fan spin. “Right now, it’s tourist season. Truthfully, surfing was just an excuse. I wanted to get away.”

“From me?” I turn my back on the computer to study his face.

“Not you per SE,” he says. “More, memories. Danger. I’m just…when I told you I was tired of being a disappointment, I wasn’t kidding, Veronica. Or fishing for validation, nice as that is to receive. It’s been a rough four years, and my emotions are fried. Mostly I planned to…drink for a
while. And forget, enjoy not being scared. As usual, you upended that, but I won’t…”

He sighs, closes his eyes. His face looks younger at rest, as shadows of fan blades slide across it, round with a sprinkling of freckles. The faintest ghost of innocence clings. “I’m not going to thrash around anymore, begging people to love me. I need to quit trying so hard.”

“Okay,” I say softly. My voice echoes in the room, gone so quiet now he’s still. “While we’re here, let’s drift, as long as we’re not drifting down the drain. I’ll stick to computer work, you relax. I could use the practice, unwinding.”

“Finish your research, then,” he says. “While I polish off my drink. Then junk food, beach, and stare at the waves? Experience this over-hyped sunset ourselves?”

“Sounds like a plan,” I say.

He smiles at me, across the length of the small, beige room. Tilts his whiskey to his lips, closes his eyes. The fan whuffs softly through the silence.

It takes me forty-seven minutes to find photos via Google, and confirm Gory Sorokin was the boat shooter; investigate new product launches by Jake (which apparently haven’t happened); then connect the dots between the painting and a donation to the Neptune Food Bank. That’s a dead end, because undoubtedly Dad did the giving. Between him and Logan, it’s the best funded charity in town.

The next twenty are spent showering. I plot ways to locate the hard drive while I scrub…and debate whether to tell Logan his beloved Jake’s a villain.

There’s a bag from the hotel gift shop on the counter when I emerge, dripping. Inside are a red and white halter dress, gold sandals…and a red fabric flower made to pin in my hair.

I dress and clip my bangs back, gaze at my reflection. Spritz perfume behind my ears, before I go in search of Logan.

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We grab fast food from a place by the beach called Zippy’s, an unassuming blue plywood stand. Logan’s brought the spare blanket from our room, because entitlement; he spreads it across the sand, then sprawls onto it sideways. Anchors one corner with a six-pack, starts unloading bags.

I tuck my feet under my butt and sip the drink he convinced me to buy, a combination of milk and Tang called, classily, Orange Bang. It has unfortunate associations, in light of the tacky (orange) Hawaiian shirt he’s wearing (over a too-tight black Rip Curl tee). Every twitch of his muscles shows through the fabric as he bends and stretches. It’s distracting, and knowing him, purposeful.

“Yours,” he says, setting a Styrofoam carton of chicken teriyaki in front of me. “And probably also yours,” he says of the box labeled ‘Kalua Pig Plate’ he claims. “But I haven’t eaten since that bear claw, so at least give me a head start.”

“Did you get the gist about recent Neptune events, from our earlier conversation?” I dig into my food, which is surprisingly tasty.

“Well, let’s see.” He takes a contemplative bite. “I gather Kendall stole shit, Vinnie Van Lowe’s corrupt, and Liam Fitzpatrick’s a violent asshole, looking to take someone’s money. In other news, rain is wet.” He licks grease off his fingers, smirks at me; and damn it, I want to do him on the blanket in front of holiday snorklers.
“A fair assessment,” I say. “Really, though, the true villain of the piece is Jake Kane.”

Logan chokes on his beer. “Wow, I am having the WIERDEST déjá vu.” He picks up a spork and twirls it, staring at me instead of his hands like he might be plotting mayhem. “Don’t stop now, Veronica. You can’t dangle bait like that, then jerk the line away.”

“Hey,” I say, stung, because I’m not used to this anymore. Slipstream Logan trusts my word; I’d forgotten how awkward justifying myself feels. “He may not have killed Lilly, but he’s far from Dad of the Year.”

“Well, he iced down his own daughter’s body to protect her presumed killer,” he says, Sahara-dry. “So I’ll agree with you there.”

“From what I can tell,” I say, “it all boils down to a hard drive, which contains proof of crime. A drive which used to be in Jake’s possession, then was briefly in mine. There’s also a copy, I’m guessing, owned by Kendall Casablancas—that’s now missing, just like her.

“I’m not sure yet what the crime in question IS. But clearly it’s bad enough that people would kill to keep it quiet.”

“Briefly in yours,” he parrots, shoving his food away. “Let me guess. Keith got you a new lockpick set for your birthday, and you had to christen it.”

“Jake’s not happy with me, apparently,” I say. “He’s taking it out on Dad.”

“Well Kendall’s not coming after either drive,” he says. “Since she’s dead. Vinnie only cares about Vinnie, and Liam’s not chasing YOU. The only person you have to worry about is Jake…and probably, he just wants his proof back. So just recover the thing, and figure out a non-incriminating way to hand it over; all is kosher, problem solved. We can continue not surfing with a clear conscience.”

“I would,” I say. “After copying the contents for insurance purposes. But I have no idea where either drive is.”

He starts to laugh. His whole body relaxes into it, this giant irony; he chuckles for a good minute before swallowing a ruminative slug of beer. “Well, then, prepare for Clarence Wiedman to show, and jog your memory,” he says. “We only broke up three MONTHS ago, Veronica. I’d ask how you got in so much trouble, so fast, but I HAVE seen you in action.”

“Well, you know,” I say, lightly. “I get mad sometimes, and…overreact.”

“There are few things in life I understand as intimately.” He smiles. “I’m not sure I get MYSELF as well as I do you, and all your buttons. Plus exactly what happens when I give each one a tap.”

“Yeah, I was your lab experiment,” I say, leaning on one hand. “Back in the day. You lavished considerable time and attention on perfecting your techniques.”

“Mmmmm.” He reclines fully, closes his eyes. “This conversation is segueing dangerously into double entendre. We need to focus on Clarence. I mean, he whacked my dad, allegedly. He’s no cuddly kitten.”

“Well, I didn’t tell anybody but MY Dad about this trip,” I say, lying down beside him. “And you paid for my ticket. As long as I don’t use a credit card here, I don’t see how he’ll find me.”

“So we’re BOTH hiding out?” His mouth curves into a smirk. “Why does this feel like the perfect
coda to an insane freshman year?”

“If I ask you a question that sounds like a non-sequitur, but isn’t personal, will you tell me the truth?” I realize I’m still holding my spork, tuck it into the bag.

“History says yes.” He picks at the beer label with his thumb. “Even if it comes back to bite me in the ass.”

“This year, at Hearst…were you invited to join a Skull-and-Bones-style secret society called the Castle?”

“ME?” he asks. “Oh, sure, Veronica. Because prestigious organizations like that most want, in their ranks, bad-publicity-garnering fuck-ups.”

Well I guess I don’t even need to ASK about Dick, then. Wallace, however, might still be a possibility; even if he’s not Logan’s best friend, here, he’s a basketball star with potential to go pro.

“Jake Kane runs the Castle,” I say. “And Gory Sorokin is a member. Maybe the disk drive contains damaging information about THEM. Which makes it something it’s in BOTH our interests to retrieve.”

“Are you suggesting a partnership?” He turns lazily towards me. Fixes me with that delicious, slightly uncomfortable stare, like the answer is important. “Have I been upgraded from assistant ALREADY?”

“Wonder Woman and Superman team up sometimes,” I say. “There’s precedent.”

He smiles, slow and sly, and I wonder what this Logan would think of the Justice League. If he’s ever even contemplated working well with others. “Did you find out what happened to the painting?”

“Donated to the Neptune Food Bank,” I say. “Looks like Dad was inspired by your Junior Year act of charity.”

“Or possibly, masochism.” He makes a face. “Let’s hope his fuck-you statement of ethics works out better for him than mine.”

“So that’s task two,” I say, afraid to ask what he means. “Find a way to get Liam off Dad’s back. And three, oust Vinnie--Neptune’s got enough problems.”

“So much for my relaxing vacation,” he says. “Can we at least buy a shave ice and watch the sunset first? It’s like a sno-cone with ice cream underneath, right up your alley. And Matsumo’s is over there on the corner.”

“Lead on,” I say. “Like I’d ever say no to THAT combination.”

“Some things never change,” he quips, and drinks the last of his beer.

Logan procures dessert from a red shack at the edge of the parking lot, licking drips off his hand before he gives me mine. He smirks when I look away.

We settle on a secluded beach, thin strip of sand between foaming tide and an outcropping of rocks, and watch the sun sink towards the waves. He seems content, but disinclined to talk; and I’m
glad, because I’ve got lots to ponder.

I can’t figure out why I’m here, in this reality that generates from my OWN past. The only thing that ties it to the slipstream is one red satin homecoming dream. I can’t travel back in time and change things. I can’t retcon this Logan out of existence. All I can do is…live, the same way I would back home.

It feels almost like Purgatory. Or the still, safe place to rest Logan’s name represents. I’m idling, here, in a pocket out of time, with a Logan indistinguishable from the original. He’s unpredictable and prickly, prone to evading questions—God knows what he’d be doing, if I wasn’t around. Hedonistic downward spiral, like I’ve always feared? Or would he get reflective and silent, the way he is now, and plot ways to fix his life?

Fiji never happened, here--this Logan won’t know about the slipstream. We’re not dating, clearly, and haven’t for a while; he seems to have reached his limit for antagonistic, sketchy commitment. And while he’s accepting my overtures of friendship…he’s not upgrading towards romance. Or really even trying to flirt.

Maybe, because he’s like MY Logan, he could help me understand. Why DOES he lash out, self-destruct, sleep around? Why won’t he be all he can be? Could he help me come to terms with my Logan’s real misdeeds, the stuff I don’t like to face? Events I’ve avoided, in the slipstream, by retoning them out of existence?

Because I love my Logan, I truly, deeply do; but some of the things he did were wrong. They were criminal, and cruel, and I haven’t been able to forgive. Not past lip service, anyhow, in a way that counts.

I need to end the resentment, though, for my own sake if nothing else. Get past my rage over nobody at Shelly’s party defending me. I have to forgive MYSELF, for putting on that white dress and going. And accept his apologies, even if I can’t forget…because I do believe they’re sincere.

Clearly I’ve changed—I can see the differences the slipstream’s wrought, in the shock and puzzlement of Logan’s responses. And maybe BECAUSE I’ve changed, our relationship can change as well. Maybe he’ll even DISCUSS our problems, if I don’t use his words against him.

Maybe, somehow, we can find a new path.

“Wow, you are thinking REALLY hard over there,” he says, peeling paper off his cone and tossing it on the sand. “I smell smoke.”

“Pick up your trash.” I gesture with my chin. “Don’t be that asshole.”

He lifts his brows at me. I lift mine back. He grins, snags the paper, displays it to me with an elaborate gesture, then wads it into the pocket of his shorts. “Are we playing Pygmalion, Veronica?”

“No,” I say. “It’s just, someone needs to have expectations of you that rise above failure.”

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He doesn’t respond; but as we wander along the shoreline, towards the cottage, he keeps sneaking sideways glances. Wondering what’s gotten into me, probably. Logan’s perceptive, and I’m not the same.

We settle in deck chairs on our porch, watch the moon play over the water. He offers me a beer, but I don’t feel like drinking. Instead I’m starving, already, again. I wonder if, like Hearst Veronica,
this one forgets to eat.

“I wish you hadn’t thrown out the leftover pork,” I say wistfully, dreamy in the humid warmth.

He takes another long swallow of beer, sets his bottle on the table with a clank. “Hold that thought,” he says. Points at me, and disappears into the room.

In a minute he’s back with another gift shop sack; this one contains dried fruit and nuts, beef jerky, soda and cheese popcorn. I smile down into it because Logan’s not a snacker. Which means he bought all this for me. “Wouldn’t want you fading away from lack of calories,” he says, resettling. Picks up his beer, and continues his march towards drunkenness.

“You’re a prince,” I say, which makes him snort. Choose a Sunkist, take a long drink, and decide, no time like the present for figuring out what’s up in this reality. “So Mac says Parker moved back to Denver,” I tell him. “You OK with that?”

He shrugs, that faint, old, self-loathing smirk appearing briefly. “Parker’s a nice girl. She deserves a boyfriend who doesn’t have to pretend to give a shit.”

“Why is it so HARD to care?” I lean my head against the cushion, rip the popcorn open. “I mean, you, Wallace, Mac, Dad, Lilly, maybe Weevil…I can’t think of anyone else who matters. Guess I’ll NEVER be a nice girl.”

“Kind and nice are two different things,” Logan says, with emphasis. “You’re capable of heroic acts of kindness, despite being abrasive. Besides, people suck. They only deserve as much kindness as they’re willing to show.”

“Sweet talker,” I say, and he laughs.

“Let me ask you something.” He fiddles with his bottle, not looking at me. “What’s so enthralling about ‘nice’ anyway? Like Piz is a perfect example—he’s passive and submissive and pleasant, aka nice, but there’s nothing going on UNDERNEATH. What makes people seek that out…I mean, other than revenge? Why is nice desirable?”

“It’s what we’re all supposed to want,” I say. “Makes the person we’re expected to be happy. Same reason people wear current fashions, and subscribe to mainstream social values. Humans are herd animals; deviation from the norm means death.”

“Which is why those of us who AREN’T nice are kings,” he says, reflectively. “Power goes to people not cowed by rules.”

He finishes the beer, cracks another. Fixes me with his trademark piercing gaze. “So why are you so eager to hide your predatory nature? Follow the herd?”

“Dad.” I don’t even have to think about this one. “For a long time, I was afraid he wouldn’t love me anymore if I didn’t. And he was all I had left.”

Logan digests this in silence. “Keith’s not going to stop loving you,” he says, finally. “Not ever, for any reason.”

“I know that NOW,” I tell him. “And even if you’re feeling too burned these days to date me? Neither are you.”

“Dating you HURTS,” he says, instead of contradicting me, and he sounds almost…plaintive. “I don’t want to be the guy I was after Lilly died, anymore. But you won’t let me be anyone else.”
“If I DID let you,” I ask, “who would you become?”

“Someone you admire.” He turns back to the ocean, like he can’t admit this and meet my eyes both. “Someone you hold hands with in front of nice guys. Someone whose calls you don’t send to voicemail.” He drinks more beer. “Someone I respect MYSELF, when I look in the mirror.”

“You know what, Logan?” I take one last long swallow of soda. “You deserve those things with or without my permission.”

I pat him on the shoulder as I stand, roll up the half-empty popcorn bag. “I’ve had all the introspection I can handle for one evening—time for bed. Don’t drink too much. I’m guessing this’ll be an eventful week.”

He toasts me ironically as I head into the room; but follows only minutes after I’ve changed into his Convulsions tee. Leans against the doorframe, watching me plump and arrange. I smile at him before switching off the light.

I study him through slitted lids as he strips to his boxers, illuminated by a stripe of moonlight from the partially drawn drapes. He settles into his bed, arms behind his head. Watches me, unblinking, across the room, his expression contemplative.

“Quit staring,” I say, when this has gone on for several minutes.

“Quit being so interesting,” he counters, “and maybe I will.”

“I gotta do me.” I deliver the line extra-perkily, and he huffs with almost-silent laughter. “OK you’ve piqued my curiosity. What’s got you so enthralled?”

“Just wondering if you’ve had a near-death experience,” he says. “Something abrupt I don’t know about, which has changed you profoundly.”


“I’d LIKE to believe in time travel.” His voice is contemplative, slow. “Imagine how much easier life would be, if we could go back and erase our mistakes.”

“Imagine,” I say, drily. “Even if your efforts backfired…at least you’d get a chance to say goodbye.”

“No, fuck that,” he says. “I’d SAVE Lilly. And Meg, so Duncan could have stayed. I’d stop my mom from jumping off the bridge; then I’d just keep driving, until I got her safely away. I’d take you home, the night of Shelly’s party. Dump the GHB down the sink.”

“I’d rescue you from Aaron,” I counter—because even though I didn’t, then, I’m pretty sure I’d manage, now. “Whether you liked it or not. If you’d gotten out of that house sooner, maybe you wouldn’t be such a Lost Boy.”

He’s quiet in response to this, for a long time. Then he gets up, walks across the room, and climbs into bed beside me. Curls around me, spoon-fashion, and tucks my head beneath his chin. It doesn’t feel sexual, or at least not more than usual. It just feels…right.

My thoughts drift randomly, touching on events of the last few days. Boat explosions, Logan’s proposal. Duncan’s weird stare, the Bentley’s grille.
"OK, now I'M curious. What are YOU thinking about?" He tucks me a little closer. Sand trickles off his cheek, tickling as it spills across my neck.

"Nothing, really," I say, smiling into the darkness. "Just…pirates."

Logan begins a chuckle, quickly stifles it. "What?" I ask. His chin moves against my scalp as he shakes his head.

"Nah, just…random memory. You won’t think it’s funny, I guarantee."

I sit up and lift my brows, cock my head. He shakes his. I widen my eyes, because I know DAD can’t resist when they’re big and pleading. Predictably, he caves.

"OK, but I WARNED you." He points an admonishing finger. "It’s…remember that time when we were sophomores, and Beaver was a freshman? The Halloween party? Everyone got all fucked up because it was just after…Lilly. And Beaver and Dick dressed like pirates, went around talking pirate-style all evening, threatening to make people walk the plank. It was ridiculous, and I was so, so wasted. I’m surprised I didn’t black out."

"Sorry," I say, because I DON’T remember. "I wasn’t there. That was right after you ostracized me, Logan. All my invitations got lost in the mail."

"Right." He sits up restlessly, too, staring out the crack in the drapes at the ocean. "Guess that makes it even less funny, huh? In my defense, I DID say never mind."

"Tell me the story now," I ask, instead of piling on. Because Beaver is something we’ve never talked about, even obliquely, since that night on the roof. And we OUGHT to. I mean as much as two massively avoidant people can. "What did the outfits look like? What did Dick and the Beav do?"

He sets his jaw, looks up from under his brow. "They went the whole nine yards. Full-on Princess Bride, you know? Big white puffy shirts, headscarves. Eye patches, black pants. Calling the girls wenches, they must have been really fucking high. I mean, now that we know what Beaver WAS, underneath, all those memories are tainted. But…God, Veronica, this is how it is with my dad, too. There are these moments of brightness, in my memory. These brief flashes where I still think of them as good."

"Love and hate get so knotted up," I say, taking his hand in mine. Because the experience of feeling both at once is something we have in common.

It’s why he was able to turn against me after Lilly’s death, while simultaneously still caring. To Logan, that’s how relationships work. He angers the people who ought to love him, and they get mean. He ends up hurt. He keeps trying.

Aaron gaslighted him throughout his childhood. Lilly too, when he pissed her off. Duncan and his mother didn’t care. Dick, with his Big Dick Tough Love Jerkwad training, wasn’t kind. And me, perennially jealous, always striking the first blow—I probably hurt him worst.

Honestly it makes me want to cry, sometimes, when I think about how little love he’s been given, but how much he still offers. My open heart couldn’t survive ONE bad year.

This Logan and I are two of a kind. Both damaged in ways that will never fully heal.

"Love and hate are opposite poles of the same emotion." He settles back down, pulls me into position as the small spoon. "Intense and specific non-indifference. That’s what binds us, Veronica."
No matter which end of the scale we’re on, in relation to each other? We’re not ever gonna stop feeling.”

“Do you wish you could quit me?” I ask, wistfully.

“Yes and no,” he says. “I don’t like the surprise attacks, or the pain. But I LOVE how big and beautiful the grand emotions get, inside me.”

THREAD THIRTY NINE INVERTS

I’m twined with him, back to front on the hotel bed, gazing out the window at the moon; then the world spins, shifts inside out, and we’re limbs entangled, face to face, wreathed in steam as hot water beats down.

It’s a bathroom, unfamiliar, blur of maroon and beige tiling the walls; I’m sitting on the tub rim, and Logan’s on his knees between my legs, kissing the bridge of my nose. His lips caress up my forehead, across my temple, his slick, wet, fully-aroused torso so close there’s a static charge between skins. I grip the edge tight with both hands... the rush of desire is like a flame held to ice.

“Whoa,” I say, as his palms curve around my knees; slide slowly up my thighs, thumbs stroking. “Awkward. I’ve slipstreamed into the last act of a super-deluxe seduction.”

“Mrs. R?” he asks, lifting his mouth from my throat, where he’s sucking gently in the way that makes me crazy. I nod, and he says, “Oh, fuck yes.” Kisses me deeply, closing the distance between us, pulls my legs up around his waist.

I make an eager noise as he lifts and shifts me, fingers digging into my ass, presses me to the wall. He kisses like he’s starving, hands sliding up to cup my jaw, rocking with luxurious slowness against my clit. Groans at the sensation, body tensing and yearning closer, nipples going taut. Pulls his mouth away and presses his forehead to mine, panting.

“I want to touch you really softly,” he says, voice hoarse. “And fuck you really hard. You game?”

I do a full-body shiver and nod, because Jesus, yes; he scrabbles across the tub rim for a condom and rips it open, grimacing as I scrape my teeth along his jaw. “Hold on tight,” he says, and guides himself in, breath moving butterfly-light over the corner of my mouth.

My lower lip sags as he penetrates, all in with one slow surge, and his hands curl around my waist, both thumbs converging on my clit. They ghost over it, barely touching, and then he draws back and drives deep, heavy, lascivious pressure, no attempt at delicacy.

I moan, low in my throat, and he does it again, scraping his nails very lightly up my belly, around the tip of my breast. Then again, long, deep, obliterating strokes, while his lips make faint ardent shapes against the planes of my face. I’m shuddering, gripping porcelain so hard my knuckles hurt, while lust twists and rolls in my sex like a hungry snake. His thumb presses gently inwards, drawing little crescents around my distended clit. He’s hissing through his teeth every time he drives home, and the tide of sensation swallows me. I come in wrenching pulses, while his thrusts grow frenzied; then his head falls back and he comes too, with a shout that sounds almost like pain.

There’s silence, broken only by us, panting. He kisses me, impassioned. I twine my fingers in his hair and give back all the emotion inside me, because I love him. I love him, and I want every version of him to know.

“Welcome back,” he says, with a bob of his brows, and I grin in response. His lips curve, like he
can’t help it when he sees me smiling, and he plants a hand on the wall beside me, grimacing as he pulls out. Tugs the condom off for disposal, then glances down, frowning. I look, too.

It’s in shreds.

He stares for a minute, impassive, then says, “No big deal. This is duplicate birth control anyway, you’re on the pill.” Climbs out of the tub and flushes the evidence, briskly towels off…calming himself with routine.

“Where are we?” I ask, pressing a hand to my belly. Because it’s too soon for accidental pregnancy, right? Peanut enters stage right at some point near Christmas, assuming I’m three months along in March.

“You don’t recognize it?” His tousled head emerges, squinting. “We’re at the Grand.”

“This isn’t the same suite,” I say, looking around. “Yours didn’t have a tub, just a shower.”

“Well that was a swingin’ bachelor pad.” He tosses the towel on the floor and collects a pair of jeans. “This one contains an extremely gorgeous engaged girl, and she loves long baths.”

“Logan, WHY are we at the Grand?” I ask. “What about Howl’s? I mean, your mother’s vacation cottage?”

“Too far to drive? It’s an hour away from Neptune proper, almost two from Hearst. Besides, I’m out of high school. Mom doesn’t feel the need, PR-wise, to keep up a charade of involvement in my life. She’s relocating permanently to LA, and putting her Neptune properties up for sale.”

“Are there no limits to that woman’s affection?” I ask, which makes him smirk—but the doorbell rings before he can respond.

“The hot girl in this suite ALSO loves food.” He pulls on a shirt made damp by splashing, kisses my forehead. “And that’s our dinner. Take your time getting dressed, I’ll meet you on the couch.”

I rinse off in the still-running, always-hot spray; this is another slipstream luxury I shouldn’t take for granted. Dress in clothes I find neatly folded on the counter. My brain’s careening like a pinball between the latest time-travel findings—I can’t make it settle. It’s all a stream-of-consciousness jumble as I zip my jeans and braid my hair—hard drive—Logan’s lips on my cheek as he sinks in deep—Lianne’s boozy breath fluttering over my face—Beaver dressed as a pirate…

Does Duncan’s kidnapper WANT me to think Beaver’s responsible? Is someone manipulating me via my hatred of Cassidy Casablancas, even though the asshole’s dead?

My reflection in the mirror gazes back, flushed and tight-lipped, giving nothing away. I don’t know the answer. I’m just trying to keep my head above water.

When I walk out into the living room, Logan’s signing a leather-bound receipt, and Jeff Ratner’s waiting by a room-service cart, arms crankily crossed.

I start when I see him, blurt, “What are YOU doing here?” Then have to backtrack when they both turn puzzled glances on me. “I mean…you’re Jeff Ratner, right? I thought you worked the graveyard shift.”

His brows lift, flatly disbelieving, as he accepts the receipt from Logan. “I’m shocked you even recognize me, much less have an opinion about which hours I’m present.”
Fuck. Stupid Ratner and his stupid suspicious nature. It occurs to me, though, that if I’m nice to the supercilious idiot now, he’s one less problem I’ll have to deal with, later. “Uh, you came up in conversation. I’m going to Hearst next semester, Criminology major, and someone told me you are, too.”

Logan’s mouth quirks—he’s figured out, now, that I’m scheming—and he says, “Searching out study buddies already, pumpkin? You sure are enterprising.”

“Just being friendly-like.” I shoot him a suppressive look. “Probably we’ll have classes together. Wouldn’t want Jeff here thinking I’m stand-offish. My name’s Veronica.” I offer my hand.

Ratner shakes, still nonplussed, maybe a little sour. Says, “Don’t expect top-of-the-class honors on a silver platter.” Wheels the cart out the door, with a muted, “Enjoy your dinner.”

Logan grins at me as he uncovers a plate, presto-changeo style—sets the dome on the coffee table. “Look at you and your noblesse oblige, befriending the help. I sense scandal.”

I roll my eyes, investigating the risotto he’s revealed, inhale the spicy, cheesy scent. “He accused me of plagiarism once, because he thought I was arrogant. Needless to say, I was framed. Just nipping a potential problem in the bud, before Veronica has to deal.”

“On behalf of Veronica, I thank you.” He gestures at the couch. “Now, eat. This stuff sucks when it gets cold, and I want cake.”

“There’s CAKE?” I spoon up a savory bite. “Mmm, the benefits of twenty-four-seven room service never pale. Hey, speaking OF slipstream magic—are you sure moving out of your mom’s cottage is wise? I mean, it’s maybe a vortex between the realities. I FREQUENTLY turn up there.”

He shrugs, focused on his food. “Well, there’s no reason we can’t build the exact same house somewhere more convenient. It’s not like I’m lacking in funds. Veronica adores that place anyway, calls it our love nest. So it’s not like she’d OBJECT.”

Hmmm, I think, second mention of What Veronica Would Want in less than a minute. Logan seems to be taking her ultimatum to heart and playing…peacemaker?

Does he really think he can reconcile her needs with mine?

Is Ideal Logan taking the thoroughly un-Logan route of refusing to recognize me, so as not to stir up TROUBLE? And if so…is this the seventh sign?

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We’re halfway through a decadent mini-chocolate torte, feeding each other bites and kissing, when Logan’s phone rings. He ignores it ‘til it goes to voicemail, easing me backwards onto the couch and licking my collarbone; he knows exactly where the sensation arrows. But it just starts ringing again, immediate.

With a massive eye roll he disentangles, sits up. Answers. “Busy right now, dude. Take a hint.”

Rapid talking ensues from the other end—sounds like Wallace, but I can’t be sure. Logan groans as he listens, falling back against the couch and staring at the ceiling, rubbing a hand tiredly over his face. “Jesus. What exactly does vodka DO to a Picasso?”

“Yeah,” he concedes, in response to more talking. “Right, on our way. Be there in ten. Try to keep her away from sharp implements.”
He hangs up, tosses the phone on the couch, and says, with exasperation, “Carrie’s at it again. Apparently she caught Dick and Madison doing the deed in Enbom’s bathroom, and now she’s trashing the house. They don’t want to call the cops, but sounds like she’s a fucking mess. Wallace wants you to come save the day.”

“Great,” I say. “I don’t even LIKE Carrie. Besides, is it just me, or is her post-boat meltdown approaching Hollywood Babylon proportions?”

“She’s just hanging with the wrong crowd.” He grabs a hoodie from a chair and dons it inside out. Fishes in the reversed pocket for keys. “You know how things are in the 09 all summer. Bunch of entitled assholes with too much money and time, drinking premium liquor in swimming pools and fucking each other’s dates. It’s worse this year because everybody’s splitting up to go to college; booze and drugs are flowing freely, and Carrie’s not practicing moderation. Fingers crossed Julliard straightens her out. Her parents are still too catatonic to intervene.”

Honestly, I don’t know what to do with this data. Carrie was so stoic and TOGETHER in my reality, eye firmly planted on the main chance. And she didn’t give a fuck what anyone thought. She brought the drama pretty hard in Boat Reality, though; so I guess the tendency to self-destruct was lurking, somewhere. “Fine,” I say, with a heavy sigh. “I’ll try. Although I warn you, nurturing people of whom I’m not fond is hardly my forte. And FYI, I’ve seen you entangled with Carrie’s problems in another reality. It affected your relationship with Veronica in not-beneficial ways.”

“Undoubtedly. Carrie’s a pain in the ass.” He tears the last bite of cake in half, gives the bigger piece to me. “But I let her brother drown, so I owe her. I’d feel even shittier if I helped her self-destruct.”

I eat the cake, say, “Always playing hero,” and kiss him softly.

He smiles down at me, gaze softening, making me melt. “Come on, sugar lumps. Let’s team up and save the day.”

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Enbom’s party, when we arrive, looks like the ‘after’ scene in an Eighties teen movie. In contrast to the last, lame, festivities I attended here, this fete’s ramped up to the house-destroying stage. “Stupid 09’ers,” I mutter as I cross the lawn, surveying a puddle of barf next to a girl’s pink sweater. “And their stupid Caligula-esque romps. I guess, unlike Lamb, Vinnie has no interest in busting these things for the kegs?”

“Enh, he accepts bribes.” Logan pockets his keys, nonchalant. “In this case, I doubt he’d bother. I’m tonight’s Caligula.”

I start laughing. “You threw ANOTHER party and ditched it? Is that your modus operandi this summer?”

He shakes his head, leading me towards the thundering-bass emitting from the pool area. “In point of fact, this one was thrown FOR me. It’s my birthday, Ronica. We took off several hours ago, because hotel sex sounded more fun than chatting with drunk assholes.”

“It’s your BIRTHDAY?” I demand, hands on hips. “You got me half-dressed slaves and sparkler cake last year, and I’m standing here empty-handed?”

“Hey, the gift you gave me in the shower was unbeatable,” he leers, and I smack him. “Seriously, pumpkin. You showed up, and that’s enough.”
I tug his arm around me as we pass through the side gate, and step into hardcore swarming chaos. He kisses my forehead, then frowns, searching for the epicenter.

Cobb’s the first person I spot, leaning on the canopy support of the outdoor bar. He’s watching the action inside a knot of people with a faint, loathsome smirk. I can hear glass crashing, followed by screaming, which stops momentarily as Cobb calls something over the crowd. Then resumes, which actually makes him smile.

My elbow digs into Logan’s ribs and I point at the guy, saying, “Instigator.” His face goes intent, mouth twitching in barely-detectable anticipation; I’d pity poor Cobb if he didn’t have it coming.

Logan’s head tilts down, he moves swiftly and silently—he’s got Cobb by the jacket front, up on his toes, before the guy notices he’s being hunted. “This is a private party,” Logan says, cheerful and conversational. “You were not invited, because you’re garbage. My advice would be, get the fuck out the second I let you go, and never make me look at you again. Because if you piss me off more, I’m going to beat you unconscious, then leave you lying in the fucking street. And you know how these friends of mine drive.”

He tosses Cobb off like he doesn’t want to touch him, and the creep glares, shadows of rage shifting beneath the flat black surface of his eyes. Logan raises his brows, arrogant invitation; Cobb takes a step backwards, then spins and starts walking. With a jerk of his head, Logan summons Enbom and Casey, murmurs, “Make sure he leaves.” They nod and follow.

“Oooh, big man, pushing around people who can’t fight back,” issues from the center of the circle. I can’t see, because I’m short. But when I push through the crowd, there’s Carrie, weaving-on-her-feet wasted and surrounded by broken bottles. She’s glaring at Logan like HE’S done something wrong.

“That guy’s gonna get you hooked on smack, Bishop, and you’ll end up dead,” Logan says, and the crowd parts to let him pass. “You can obtain coke elsewhere. He is not an asset to your life.”

“He’s my hanger-on,” she counters, with a brittle laugh, waving the broken bottle for emphasis. “And the only person who cared about Corny like I did. Like, did any of YOU love him? Did you pay attention at ALL, unless you wanted to get high?”

“Corny knew his fucking PLACE,” Dick shouts, and I shoulder through bodies to spot him sitting on the diving board, his arm around a pissed-off Madison. “He wasn’t one of us and neither are you, Carrie. But HE never embarrassed himself trying to creep up the social ladder.”

“Shut your stupid mouth, Dick,” Carrie calls back, tossing the bottle away and grabbing a new one off the bar. Ashley Banks tries to stop her, gets elbowed in the gut. “Nobody cares about your so-called thoughts. Go resume sticking your namesake somewhere unsavory, and leave me the hell alone.”

“Hey I am NOT unsavory!” Madison demands, turning on him. “My father is the goddamn MAYOR! And I can have you arrested for drunk-and-disorderly with one phone call, you pathetic, low-class, drunken bitch.”

“You tell her, Maddie.” Dick lifts a bottle of tequila to his lips and swigs. “You’re the HIGH-dollar easy lay. She’s the bargain basement version.”

“Seriously?” Madison demands, turning on him. “SERIOUSLY, Dick? After I have tried for YEARS to make this work between us, because for whatever idiotic reason I actually CARE about you? You call me an easy LAY?”
“Well you screwed me in the bathroom at a party,” he offers helpfully. “While my loser girlfriend was in the den doing Jell-o shots.”

“That is IT,” Madison says, and shoves him in the pool.

He surfaces, sputtering, trying to tread water and hang onto his now-chlorine-filled tequila simultaneously; she lets him have it, standing on the diving board to get a better angle.

“I have HAD it with you, Dick Casablancas,” she snaps. “With you, and your string of girls, and the way you act vulnerable, then screw me around. I thought you broke UP with Carrie, as a matter of fact. I mean, that’s what EVERYBODY thought, but apparently not. So how about I save you the trouble of making a choice? You and I are DONE. Like PERMANENTLY done; like never speak to me again without a lawyer present.”

She climbs carefully off the board, precarious in four-inch heels, and turns for a parting shot. “Carrie did get one thing right, though. You ARE a selfish shit in bed. I’ve had better, and I date the boys in THIS crowd.”

Carrie starts cackling; watches the trickle of Jack Daniels from her bottle’s lip with morbid fascination as it spills. Logan turns to me. “New plan. You deal with the Bishop-shaped disaster. I’ll fish the blonde one from the pool, and take him out of Jerry Springer range. I’m not in the mood to play shrink for Dick’s harem.”

I high-five him and he heads off towards Dick, who’s obtained another bottle, and appears to be chugging. Then turn to Carrie, arms crossed and head shaking, because what the HELL? “You know, you’re only embarrassing yourself.”

She looks up at me from under a curtain of hair. “At least I’m doing it with flair.”

“So you believe.” I gesture with my chin at the broken glass. “In actuality, you look like a weak-willed druggie who let Stuart Cobbler wind her up. He wants to alienate you from your friends, Carrie, and make you dependent. He’ll manipulate you into a submissive position, where he’s the only one you trust; then he’ll torture you for fun, because he’s a repulsive worm.”

“When did you get so holier-than-thou, Veronica Mars?” she asks, stumbling sideways. I grab her arm to keep her feet off the shards...she leans into me, tearing up, in direct contrast to her words. “For reals. What makes you think you’re so much better than me?”

“Because when I experienced tragic loss?” I hiss in her ear, fed up as Madison. “When MY best friend died, and I was ostracized? I didn’t turn into a useless whining drunk, picking fights with my ex. I figured out how to FIX things, and protect myself from predators.”

“You’re not Veronica!” she accuses, jerking free. She actually seems SCARED. “You’re her! Get AWAY, you creepy fucking ghost! You’re not taking me over next, and ruining MY life! Somebody get her OFF me! Where’s LOGAN? I want LOGAN!!”

“Carrie,” I say tiredly, holding a hand out. But she shoves me, hard, and I go staggering back into...Logan’s chest.

“Really?” he says, into my ear, watching her stumble against the bar and catch herself on the support post. “You couldn’t contain the attitude for the FIVE minutes it would take, to calm her down and get her in the car?”

“She recognized me,” I murmur, with a shrug. “And she’s not fond of disembodied time-travelers, as it happens.”
“Ronica, it’s my BIRTHDAY.” He sounds slightly plaintive. “Can’t you put a lid on the wanton disregard of social mores for ONE evening? It’s like you don’t even care, lately, how much destruction you leave in your wake. You just barrel along, making messes, and I’m the one who has to clean them up.”

“Well excuse ME,” I snap, turning to face him. “I told you before we CAME that I wasn’t the ideal candidate for this. And it’s not in your best interests to cater to Carrie, either. But by all means, go ahead--encourage her weird dependency on you, while allowing Dick to drink himself into a coma.”

“YOU keep an eye on Dick.” Logan shakes his head. “I’LL find someone trustworthy and sober to take her home.”

I stare at him as he walks over, puts an arm around Carrie, who promptly collapses sobbing on his shoulder. And I have to admit; despite the fact that I KNOW he’s helping for platonic reasons--that he’s in love enough with me, specifically, to put a ring on my finger--I feel jealous. I don’t like him acting tender with other girls. Especially girls who have the ear of Other Veronica, know incriminating stuff…and don’t appear to be fans.

Logan’s in a mood, though, and doesn’t seem inclined to discuss slipstream issues. Plus he apparently thinks I’m turning him into a sidekick and man-of-all-work, which seriously…would I do such a thing?

Well, maybe four months ago. But not NOW.

As mentioned, however, Dick’s still a mess and threatening to get messier. So I spin on my heel and head his direction. Because far be it from ME to turn DIFFICULT. Or leave a…what did he so charmingly call it? Wake of DESTRUCTION behind me?

Dick is, fabulously, bawling now. And describing in earnest tones to Wallace and Mac the myriad ways his life sucks.

“…he didn’t even CRY,” Dick says, as I seat myself next to Mac on the lounger; she nods in greeting. “His hands and feet lost all this skin, when they un-taped him from the bike, and he was, like, dehydrated from being in the sun…you know, pedaling around. But he just sat on the couch drinking juice, glaring at nothing. And then mom came in, to see if he was all right, and his face went BLANK. He said he was fine.”

“Dick, man, you were a KID.” Wallace is elbows on knees, hands clasped, a sincerely worried look on his face. “And your parents are messed up--they didn’t teach you the right way to behave. You wouldn’t do that to someone NOW. You got to let the past GO.”

“Dude, he was my BROTHER.” Dick stares down at his palms. “And I treated him like SHIT.”

“Because your dad made it a GAME.” I sit beside Wallace, drawing his attention. “A let’s-be-men-by-crushing-the-weak game, which is how Big Dick saw the world. And look where it got him. He’s a fugitive, because he cared so little for others he had no qualms about stealing money. You don’t have to follow in those footsteps, Dick. You can be like your friends instead. You can CHOOSE.”

“How screwed up is it,” Dick says, “that he took all those peoples’ money…funneled it into holding companies, so he could live high in South America…and the main thing that bothers me is, he didn’t funnel any towards us?”
“What if you took a nap?” Mac claps her hands, clearly past her comfort zone with the over-sharing. “Just stretch out on this lounge and rest. Things will look brighter when you’re semi-sober.”

He smiles at her blearily, reaches out to pat her knee. “You’re a pal, Mackie. Even if you are, you know, poor as fuck and desperate for my dick.”

“Yeah, thanks for that vote of confidence,” she says, easing him down. He closes his eyes, once horizontal, then just lies there breathing slowly, tears leaking out.

Honestly, it could not BE more pathetic, and great. Now I’m SAD.

“WHILE we’re on the topic of holding companies,” I say to Mac, in an undertone, because no opportunity wasted, “Does the name Herbert Tufton Enterprises ring a bell?”

“You mean beyond the obvious?” Mac nudges Dick’s leg back on the lounger as he rolls and it falls. Then, off my blank look, “Bettina’s maiden name? Tufton? Jeez, Veronica, you’re slipping. Don’t TELL me you didn’t investigate every second of her past, back when she was dating your dad.”

“Must’ve slipped my mind,” I say, thinking frantically. Because if HTE is a Casablancas shell entity, that means Big Dick, or Wife Number One, must have paid off Weevil’s mother.

Which means Dick’s not an Only Surviving Child.

Fuck, I think, gazing down at his dozing, slack-jawed face. This won’t make either ONE of them happy. Weevil doesn’t benefit, because the Casablancas financial carcass has been picked clean. And Dick…well, there’s no need to wake him up and mention it, right this moment. Or, possibly, ever.

“How could you forget TUFTON?” Wallace asks, at the same time Mac wonders, “What do you care?”

I elect to answer Mac. “It’s no big deal. Just a favor I’m doing for Weevil.”

“Why’s the Mars family so generous to that guy?” Wallace shakes his head. “First Keith traces ballistics back to the Fitzpatricks, gets him plea bargained down to assault, and now this? Way I see it, Weevil Navarro owes YOU.”

“And I MAY have just found a way to collect.” I pat his arm.

Logan approaches, grim, running hands through his hair, the agitated gesture that never bodes well. “So MacKenzie,” he says. “You appear to be the only sober person LEFT at this party. You mind giving Carrie a ride? I tried to get her into my car, but she seems to have confabulated Veronica and Satan. Mere mention of the V-word makes her scream.”

“Sure.” Mac shrugs. Nudges Dick’s foot onto the lounger one more time as she stands. “I’ll need help wrangling her into the seat, though. She’s a foot taller than me in heels, and NOT in a good mood.”

“I’ve got it,” Logan says. “You guys just...make sure Dick doesn’t choke on his own vomit for the next five minutes. If you think you can HANDLE that task.”

Wallace watches him go with raised brows, turns to me. “What crawled up HIS ass and died? You two were so touchy feely when you left, I was SURE you were headed off to park.”

“He’s mad I mishandled Carrie,” I say, flopping sideways against the lounger. Elect not to
mention the torn condom. “Ever since the boat, he’s been Helicopter Parent overprotective, thanks to his raging hero complex.”

“Logan takes that situation PERSONALLY,” Wallace agrees, sympathetic. “I don’t see what else he could have done, myself--he was busy swimming Dick to that cushion. But lately seems like all he does is work out, brood, and hang with that mercenary dude he hired to protect you.”

“Danny?” I ask. “Should we ENCOURAGE that friendship, do you think?”

“Well, the guy shoots people for a living,” Wallace says. “But he seems to understand what Logan’s going through. I dunno, V, our boy’s not self-destructing, like some others I could name.” Wallace kicks Dick’s lounger. “But he’s closing himself off, and that’s not his way. Logan may not LIKE people, but he needs attention.”

“True.” I watch the topic of our conversation stride back through the gate. Instead of approaching, he arrows to the bar, pours himself a shot. Drinks it and fills another. Says something sarcastic, which makes Casey elbow him and laugh. Pours a third.

I wonder why he’s angry now, despite being thrilled to see me when I first appeared. Why he’s acting like my slipstream efforts are a burden, when I’M the one he wanted to marry. And worst of all--why’s he trying so hard to be considerate of everyone ELSE? Because that ‘cleaning up your messes’ crack hurt, and he doesn’t seem inclined to apologize.

I wonder why Other V wasn’t wearing the ring in New York, when she’d already said yes.

“Hey V?” Wallace’s voice distracts me from staring at my boyfriend (who’s studiously avoiding my gaze, while downing his fourth shot). “Since we’re talking, just us, can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” I say, attention recalled. “What’s on your mind?”

“I remembered where I heard about that kittenfancy email.” He leans back on his elbows, puts one heel up on the seat. “Logan told me one time how you guys used to prank him. So my question is, why did you ask me to send boat party information from you to yourself? Then keep quiet, like it was all urgent and secretive?”

I sigh, because honestly, I’m tired of games and lies. And I don’t care how things fell out in this reality, Wallace is still my BFF. “Because I’m a disembodied time traveler from the future, Papa Bear. And I’m spinning helplessly back and forth between multiple realities, trying to change my own fate. I needed you to warn this version of Veronica that something was going to happen on the boat, before time ran out, and people died.”

“Funny,” he says, shooting me a jaundiced look. “If you didn’t want to answer, all you had to do was say so. No need to get all sarcastic and…crazy-sounding.”

I smile, because Wallace. “You really are amazing.”

“I know it,” he says, serene. “Now let’s go pry Logan away from that bottle. See if we can get him to stop living in his own head.”

We approach. Logan watches us come without obvious hostility--I guess the booze took the edge off his mad-on. “Done enough plotting?” he asks, as I approach. “Any chance of more cake?”

“You sent my ride away with Carrie Bishop.” Wallace takes the glass out of Logan’s hand, sets it on the bar. “And I’m pretty much done celebrating. Any chance you and V can take me home? We’ll bring Dick along, let him sleep it off on my couch.”
“Sounds like a plan,” Logan says, hopping up. Pats his pockets, failing to remember that his hoodie’s on inside out. “If I can just remember how to reach my keys.”

“Unh-unh, Richard Burton.” I slip my hand inside his lapel, take the ring away. “We’ve seen enough reenactments of Virginia Woolf this evening. Your precious car will survive if I do the driving.”

“Long as you don’t detour to run bad guys over,” he says. I guess he IS still mad.

“Aw, muffin, you know I only crush people who REALLY deserve it.”

This makes him smile in spite of himself. “Well, we ARE fighting. Will I get advance notice, if I make the list?”

“It’s your birthday.” I kiss his cheek. “One-time-only special deal—no death or dismemberment for the full twenty-four hours.”

His hands come to rest at the curve of my waist; his gaze softens. “Fair enough, truce,” he says. “Come on, dude, let’s gather up Dick and toss him in the back. You grab his legs, I’ll take the barfing end, you know the drill.”

“At this point, I’ve got hauling passed-out Dick down to a science.” Wallace sighs, and follows Logan across the patio.

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Dick rouses sufficiently in the car to start muttering again about his shitty youth; coherent enough to evoke splinters of sympathy, without requiring a response. Logan leans against the window, gazing out and brooding—he responds gently to Wallace’s kindness, but seems glum and tired. I drive through quiet night streets in the smooth-running car, and think about Beaver.

That pirate story NAGS at me. Duncan’s abduction unfolding so bizarrely feels like a deliberate fuck-you; and tying it to Beaver seems personal. A swipe at ME, slipstreaming me, from an alternate-universe ghost who CAN’T be at fault.

(We’re Neptune Pirates, Beaver says, all too often in my dreams, jabbing the Taser into my arm, relishing my pain. And this is like I’m making you walk the plank.)

I’ve never told anybody what he said on the roof, that night. No one who’s alive has knowledge that needs erasing.

No one except me.

“Hey Dick?” I call into the backseat, as we turn the corner towards Dad’s little Craftsman. “Do you remember a party Sophomore Year, where you and Beaver dressed like pirates?”

Logan turns to me, eyebrows raised, and Dick starts laughing. “So pissed,” he says, pressing his face into the seat. “Wanted to play baseball.”

I frown, hoping Logan will elucidate, and he says, “Cassidy tried out for the Pirate baseball team, but didn’t make the cut. He got mad—said he’d design his own pirate uniform, so Dick did too. You know, for solidarity. They wore ‘em all day long, went to a school dance and a party. Lils and I were there, it was ridiculous. That was, you know…when you were dating Norris. He had a thing about not going places where shit got wild.”
“Loved to mess with people when they made him mad,” Dick contributes from the back seat. Wallace sighs pointedly.

“He certainly loved to mess with me,” I mutter, and park in front of the Craftsman.

“Okay folks, last stop, all drunks and good citizens out.” Logan claps his hands and rubs them together.

“So, not me, then,” I say, as Logan hops down; circles around to help Wallace remove Dick. “You mind if I wait here? I’ve heard Dad’s underage drinking lecture.”

“No problem,” Wallace says. “Bet you ten Logan drops Dick and runs, leaves me holding the bag.”

“Can you blame me?” Logan hoists Dick out the car, unrepentant. “If Keith Mars decides he hates me, my life goals are almost certainly doomed. You, on the other hand, can piss him off with impunity.”

“Yeah, but my MOTHER’S a different story.” Wallace lifts his end of the drunk and waves. “Later, V. And quit worrying. It’s all gonna work out fine.”

“Experience dictates otherwise,” I murmur as they head to the door, and Wallace drops Dick’s legs to fumble for his keys. “Things go straight to hell when Beaver Casablancas gets involved.”

I lean back in my seat and let my mind drift—wait for that moment of calm serenity when deductive magic happens. Duncan’s abductor dressed like a pirate. Beaver dressed like a pirate. Beaver didn’t make the baseball team. Luke Haldemann DID make the baseball team. Luke Haldemann lost his leg on the boat. Beaver was dead BEFORE the boat. Randy Johnson didn’t even MAKE it to the boat, but he talked to someone from Martha’s Kitchen on the phone….

Or at least, SOMEONE talked to Martha’s Kitchen on Randy’s phone.

The connection forms with a click, and I sit bolt upright, fumbling with my own cell. Dial Mac—listen, toe tapping urgently, while it rings.

“Kinda got my hands full here, Bond,” she says, when she answers. I can hear Carrie in the background yelling “Men are such SHITS, you know what I mean?”

“I can tell,” I say. “And I am truly, deeply sorry, and I owe you BIG. But I have ONE Felix Leiter question that can’t wait.”

“Shoot,” Mac says. “She’s quit flailing for the moment, so we’re not in danger of crashing.”

“Has Randy Johnson turned up, since the last time I asked?”

“Is that Logan?” Carrie yells. “You tell Logan he should have better taste, because his best friend is a SHIT.”

“It’s not Logan, it’s Veronica,” Mac says. “But I’ll pass that along. IN RE Johnson, not as far as I can tell. I’ve been checking up, just as a matter of unsolved-case protocol. But he’s making all contact by phone, so my guess is he’s holed up out of town.”

“Don’t tell Veronica ANYTHING!” Carrie shrieks, and I roll my eyes. “She’s not Veronica, she’s an evil ghost! She’ll steal your SOUL, Cindy, I’m totally not kidding!”
“Riiiiight,” Mac says. “Can you take your foot off the steering wheel, please?”

“Mac, I need Johnson’s number,” I say. “His cell. Can you pull over somewhere and text me?”

“Yeah, she just unbuckled her seatbelt and tried to dive and roll,” Mac says. “Thank God for child safety locks. Look for it in about thirty seconds.”

“You’re a true pal.” I wince as Carrie screeches.

“You know, I really AM,” she says. “You must have been a much better person in another life to deserve me.”

The call goes dead, and I sit, clutching my phone, waiting. Less than a minute later, a number flashes across the screen.

Logan hops in the car as I’m staring at it, dusting his hands together theatrically. “Signed, sealed, delivered,” he informs me, buckling in. “I’m yours.”

I glance up at him, flash my best and brightest smile, and he says, “Uh-oh.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I apologize in advance, but…I have to do some detectiving. And it can’t wait. Like it’s super-ultra-mission-critical that I resolve this issue before I slip.”

He sighs. “And if I told you Veronica doesn’t WANT you detectiving right now, would that make a difference?”

“I hold his gaze, steady, shake my head. “This is about the Sharks Killer,” I say. “And Duncan. Lives are at stake.”

“Right here, right now, at stake?” he asks. “Or at some point in the one remaining possible future?”

“Actually there are two futures again,” I say. “But that’s another discussion for another day. Do you want to help? Or would you rather I drop you somewhere cake-adjacent, and handle this on my own, so you don’t take the blame?”

“Do I WANT to help?” he asks. “No. I WANT to go back to the hotel and fool around some more. But I will. Because I DON’T like you doing dangerous things alone, and taking Ronica along for the ride.”

“Fine,” I say, stung. “Please direct me to Martha’s Kitchen.”

“Take a left at the light,” he says. “For all the good it will do. It’s the middle of the night, they’ve GOT to be closed.”

“Like that matters to me and my dubious skill set.” I squeal a turn, which makes him frown. “Relax, Logan, this is technically illegal but not risky. I just need to use their phone.”

He nods, watching me. Flexes his hand, then cracks each knuckle efficiently--preparing for things to go wrong.

“Have you ever encountered Martha?” I ask, turning left and then right when he points. “Over the course of your party-throwing escapades?”

“Yeah, she’s about fifty,” he says. “White hair, electric-blue glasses, overly cheerful, dresses in bright colors. Comes from Michigan or something, some place up north. Says things like ‘worshipping
machine’. Calls everybody hon.”

“Perfect.” I drive past the fuchsia Martha’s Kitchen storefront, around the back.

We park in the lot for the adjacent store, creep over to the back door; it sits in the shadow of an aromatic dumpster, beneath a fortuitously broken streetlight. Logan stands in front of me pretending to text, while I pick the lock, like this is a routine he’s practiced. We slip into the darkened shop.

It’s all pink and gilt, excessively frou-frou, the silly colors bleached faint by moonlight. I locate a phone as Logan assumes guard position near the front window--hold a finger to my lips while I dial.

Seven rings later, a male voice answers, groggy with sleep and not friendly. “Yeah?”

“Is this Randy?” I ask, doing my best perky, middle-aged Youper. “Sorry to bother you hon, but I’m in a BIND. I’m paying quarterly taxes and have to verify number of employees; and I can NOT for the life of me find your W-2. Can I mail you a new one, have you sign and fax it back?”

“Yeah, just send it to my brother,” the voice says, bleary. “Anything else?”

“Not a darn thing,” I chirp, clenching my jaw tight to keep the shudders at bay. “Go on back to sleep, hon. I know how to find you now.”

I hang up, my hands clumsy with the receiver; then the shakes overtake me. I have to plant both palms on the desk so I don’t fall.

“Ronica? Are you all right?” I hear Logan’s voice behind and to the right, but I can’t talk yet. I can barely think.

Because I recognized the voice on the line just now, though thankfully, I disguised mine. And it twists the ills I’ve suffered during slipstream travels in a new and scary direction.

Randy Johnson’s been missing for months because he’s very much dead. And Beaver Casablancas is walking around with, and answering, his phone.
I'm A Product of My Environment

THREAD FORTY

I’m shivering in Martha’s kitchen, gut knotted, knees threatening to give; then I’m palms flat on the counter of a standard-issue office lounge, while my belly ripples and cramps. I’ve got a wad of paper towels in one hand, an espresso cup in my right, and I’m staring at a pricey coffee machine. In the next room, men argue, loudly.

Eyes shut, I try Alicia’s ten-deep-breaths maneuver; I got rid of Beaver once, I can do it again. He’s not committing any more crimes, while I’m still in the slipstream to stop him.

It all makes sense now. Beaver LETTING Logan tail him in that super-obvious yellow XTerra… posing calmly at the car wash, reading ‘And Then There Were None’. He WANTED me to suspect he’d faked his death; to guess he was the killer, but have no proof. He wanted to watch me SQUIRM.

I spin, in search of the arguers, because hopefully they include Logan; overbalance, trip, and catch myself on the counter. Which is when I realize my center of gravity has shifted, because I’m TWICE AS PREGNANT as I was yesterday. And an entirely different, spherical shape.

Well, this development sucks dead donkeys.

I press my hands to my belly to contain the painful squirming, and realize it’s Peanut, WRITHING in there. She’s an actual, wiggling, freakishly strong HUMAN, not an adorable dancing shrimp. I must be nine or ten months gone, if my calculations are correct; which, according to Ms. Hauser, means this bomb’s about to explode.

God, Improved Past Logan’s gonna be PISSED. Plus, it’ll seriously impede our Duncan investigation if I go into LABOR.

Time is of the essence, though, so I’m Scarlett O’Hara-ing this development, and moving top speed…OK, bad idea, walking…waddling….Jesus, my shirt doesn’t even cover my stomach, and the air conditioning is COLD.

Being pregnant BLOWS. Imagine having to do it for real, unable to slipstream away.

I drag my unwieldy self into an undecorated office, along one tasteful-taupe wall of which sits a brown leather couch. There are boxes all over; the only other furniture is a desk where Mac works, engrossed in three separate monitors and a steadily-whirring printer.

I give her a vague wave, realize I’m still holding the coffee cup, and follow the voices to a room down the hall. There I find Victor assembling an ergonomic chair, while Weevil and Logan argue over proper Ikea desk construction.

“This must be why you failed second grade,” Logan chides, taking a section away from Weevil and applying a little tool. “You turn this thing CLOCKWISE. Which means the direction a CLOCK hand moves.”

Weevil makes a face, picks up another piece. “How’d those Swedes get so rich with this dumbass business strategy? Why didn’t they design their shit so guys could use TOOLS? This…” he brandishes the Ikea key, “Is a screwdriver for Barbies. It’s NOT a fucking TOOL.”
“Takes one to know one,” Logan says, finishing the procedure smugly and consulting his instructions.

Weevil snorts. “Look who’s talking, mister Barbie-accessories-are-my-specialty.”

Logan tsks, winks. “I’ve just got a steady touch. And magic hands.”

I roll my eyes at Victor, who grins, because no—my schedule can’t accommodate prickly, fighty bromances. “I need Dick,” I announce to the room at large. Conversation ceases as everyone looks up at me.

“Man, when they’re extra-pregnant like that they get DEMANDING,” Weevil says, and Logan shushes him.


“Did you have a brainstorm?” Logan stands, fishing his cell from his pocket.

“I had THE brainstorm,’ I say. “You know how cleaning helps me think. But I need to talk to Dick to be sure, and I don’t know where he is.”

Logan speed-dials, waits while it rings. Victor serenely adds coasters to chair legs. Weevil drops the Ikea key again, curses.

“Yo, man, what’s up? Yeah, you busy?” Logan laughs as the call connects. “No, dude, I’m still building furniture, Ronica’s nesting via Detective Agency. She has a question, can you…”

Sick of waiting, I yank the phone from his hand and waddle into the relatively quiet main office. “Dick, I need to know how you identified your brother’s body.”

“Say WHAT?” His voice goes shrill, muffled by yelling and laughing. Probably he’s at a party; seems like that’s all post-high-school 09’ers DO. “Whoa, downer. Not even gonna ply me with booze and sympathy first, Rons?”

“You have ALL my sympathies,” I say. “I expect you’re going to need them. Now, how?”

“I dunno, the usual way? The…chunk they found was the same size and shape. Had on Beav’s clothes. And his Medic Alert bracelet was there, which, he NEVER took that off. Asthma, you know? Dad thought sports would help…get him past the wheezing…”

“Dick, spiral on your own time. I need DETAILS. Did the body have hands or feet? Did it have a head?”

“What the fuck, Ronnie?” he shout-whispers. The background noise goes quiet, like he’s moved to a vacant room. “NO, it didn’t have a head, I TOLD you. Missing fingers, missing toes. One of the legs was gone. And you’d better have a GREAT reason for harshing my buzz.”

“Well, your brother’s not dead,” I say. “How’s that, for starters?”

I hang up, turn, and find Logan standing behind me. Toss him the phone.

It immediately begins ringing, but he doesn’t answer. “Not DEAD?”

“Randy Johnson’s missing because Beaver killed him, then used the body to fake his own death,” I say. “Beaver’s been fielding his calls ever since.”
Mac’s cell rings behind us, and she picks it up. “Hi Dick,” she says. “Yeah, that seems to be the theory. No, I’m not fucking kidding, would I joke about this?”

“I’m almost positive Beaver’s our Pirate,” I tell Logan, thinking out loud, “Because A) he dressed like a pirate Sophomore Year, in order to mess with people he hated and B) he hates, but loves to mess with, ME. Plus we caught him trying to roofie me, and use me as his personal canvas. So if he’s the Sharks Killer, he’ll want to erase that knowledge permanently.”

“Dick, I can’t TELL you what she’s saying if you don’t shut up. All I hear right now is you, shouting.” Mac sighs at his response. Weevil appears in time to catch this, attracted by my monologue, and rolls his eyes in sympathy.

“But WHOEVER the kidnapper was,” I continue, “He had access to Hazelwood in advance, because he knew to avoid the cameras. Which means, if Beaver’s the guilty party, he used cover to sneak inside…a false identity, maybe, or a disguise.”

“Look, we all have good reason to hate Cassidy,” Logan says. “But this theory will require evidence, before anyone…like, say, just at random, Clarence…takes it seriously.”

“I need a photo,” I tell him. “Of Beaver, I mean. Do you have one on your phone?”

“After he tried to drug and cut you?” Logan demands. “Did you eat a whole pie and get high on sugar again?”

“Take the phone from Mac, and talk Dick down,” I instruct him, then tell Mac, “find me a picture of Beaver on the internet, would you? It should take less than five seconds.”

“On it,” she says, clicking. “Printed?”

I nod, and the scanner starts to whir. I grab the page—an obituary—and carry it into my office, where Victor’s calmly finishing up the chair. Fold it, so only the photo is visible. “You recognize this guy?”

He squints at the paper, and I belatedly remember his aging eyes. “WEEVIL, I NEED YOUR READING GLASSES!” I call. Weevil saunters in, digging the case out of his pocket.

I hand them to Victor, and he studies the photo, smiling without humor. “This is one of the janitors at Hazelwood,” he says. Looks up at me grimly. “He works the night shift.”

“Perfect!” I chirp, although this is, in fact, a train wreck. “Evidence!”

“Only as far as we’re concerned,” Victor reminds me, getting up with some difficulty. “I’m an escaped mental patient on the lam, just like Duncan. Unless you want the Hazelwood bruisers coming after me with butterfly nets, I’m useless as an official witness.”

“Damn it,” I say, because I honestly forgot. “Okay, everybody huddle. We need the Hive Mind.”

Weevil and Victor follow me out to where Logan’s still placating Dick, and Mac’s typing furiously. Weevil takes the phone away; says, “Grow a pair, Casablancas. You’ve been crying about his death for a year, so today’s Christmas.” Hangs up.

Ah, brotherly love. Something tells me, if I spilled the beans, their bonding might not play out in Hallmark-card fashion.

“Victor just ID’d Beaver as the night-shift janitor from Hazelwood,” I tell them, as Mac’s phone
starts ringing once again. “But Clarence can’t know Victor exists; and my theory about Randy Johnson’s phone is just that, a theory. We need actionable proof.”

“There must be video of janitors, making rounds,” Victor says, lounging against Mac’s desk. “That’s always damning.”

“On it,” Mac informs him, still typing with concentration. “Have been, since Logan took my phone away. But the kidnapper’s got a track record of avoiding cameras, so I’m not optimistic.”

“Only the ones he knows about,” I say, smacking my forehead. “I planted bugs all over Hazelwood, the first day I met you, Victor. I’ll bet he shows up just fine on those.”

“You planted bugs a YEAR ago?” Logan puts a palm over the mouthpiece to ask; when I nod, he runs a hand into his hair and clings. “And it didn’t occur to you to mention this before NOW?”

“Pregnant brain!” I maintain, which makes Victor crack a surprised laugh. “My mind’s a SIEVE. Weevil, you got that AC repairman uniform handy? I’ll make a list of locations, you can be in and out in twenty minutes.”

“Never leave home without my duffel,” he says, accepting his glasses back from Victor. “But it’ll take a couple hours to do the run. And I gotta go now. They’ll get suspicious if I show up after five.”

“Be careful,” I admonish, scribbling on a sheet of printer paper. “Their security is lax beyond belief, but that one guy Todd notices things.”

“I’m just glad I don’t have to make like a janitor MYSELF, this time,” he says. “I hauled SO much trash last year, and we didn’t even solve the damn case.”

Hmmm, I think, as I watch him exit. Janitor. At Hearst? That means Dad DID get him out of jail. And I must have given him a job to comply with parole.

God, I don’t have TIME for noodling! If Beaver’s got Duncan, Shit Creek just flash-flooded.

“OK I’ve found video of three different janitors from earlier this week,” Mac says, recalling my attention. “Morning, afternoon, night, looks like they do regular shifts. None of them resemble Cassidy, IMO, but maybe Victor can double-check?”

He moves behind her, leans down and squints. “Nope,” he says. “The guy from your photo works nights, but this isn’t him. Our suspect’s blonde…bleached blonde. I guess that’s his cunning disguise?”

I press fingertips to my temples, trying to recall Clarence’s briefing. “The Kanes said Duncan was back to normal, nine months ago. Then, abruptly, he got worse; lost major ground, sanity-wise. Does that jibe with what you saw? And did his deterioration start when our fake janitor appeared?”

“It’s hard to say.” Victor resumes his lean against a stack of boxes. “Duncan almost always seemed normal. Just a regular kid, excited about surfing and girls and school. Then something would set him off—a reference to you, usually--and he’d go violent or blank. I’m not sure he knew where or when he was, or who anybody else was, for that matter. But every time we talked, he sounded rational, not…crazy.”

“Well SOMETHING set him off,” I say. “Duncan was always complacent and medicated, but we didn’t even realize he HAD…incidents…until high school. That’s how infrequent they were.”

“Maybe his family covered them up.” Victor crosses his arms, somewhat defensively. “Look, I
had my own problems in that place. There wasn’t a lot of freedom or mingling. I liked the kid, but I couldn’t watch him twenty-four-seven.”

“I frown, because why so prickly? It’s not like I’m BLAMING Victor for Duncan’s deterioration. Before I can respond, though, I hear thumping in the stairwell. Logan sighs, hangs up the phone, and says, “Yeah, sorry about this, but we’ve got company.”

The office door slams open, cracking against the wall; Dick storms in, hair wild, weaving on his feet. “What the hell do you mean NOT DEAD, Ronnie? Don’t screw me around, or I swear to GOD…”

“The body you identified belonged to a guy named Randy Johnson,” I say. “Or at least so goes my working theory. I think your brother used it to fake his death, and this whole situation ties in with the Sharks Murders.”

“Randy JOHNSON?” Dick asks, arrested mid-lurch. “That name’s made up, right?”

I shake my head and he looks at Logan. “Dude, is she doing the thing where she messes with my head because she thinks it’s fun?”

“We don’t have proof, man,” Logan soothes. “But Veronica called Randy’s phone, and she’s positive Beaver answered.”

“She!” Dick slumps onto the couch, covers his face with both hands. “So he’s hiding out, right? To keep the killer from offing him?”

“We don’t know,” I say. “But it looks like Beaver took Duncan out of the mental hospital, and they’re currently in hiding. We need to locate them, fast, because there’s no telling what Donut might do.”

“He took DUNCAN?” Dick runs his hands through his hair, flabbergasted. “WHY? Not only is that dude double-straitjacket-crazy, he’s boring as FUCK.”

“There’s no accounting for tastes,” I say, which earns a smile from Mac.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Dick protests, rubbing his eyes. “If he went to these lengths to hide out, the LAST thing he’d do is spring Duncan. The manhunt for Aaron Echolls’ escaped killer will be the media event of the DECADE. Even I’M not that dumb, and Beav was…is… a shitton smarter.”

“It DOESN’T make sense,” I say. “Yet. But it will, I’m sure, once we know all the details.”

“So what can we do?” Logan asks. “While we wait for Weevil to liberate the bugs? Dig up an employee list for Hazelwood? Do you know the name Beav was using, Pop?”

Victor shakes his head. “I just saw the guy pushing a broom. We never spoke.”

“You and your eagle eyes get back here and scan video,” Mac tells Logan, and he circles around behind her. “I’ll pull up the staff roster for the rest of you to read, maybe something will jump out. I’M going over my notes about Randy, since Beaver’s so-called death. Hopefully his movements will clue us in as to what Cassidy’s been doing.”

“Waiting is SO frustrating,” I mutter to Logan three hours later. I’m lying against his chest on the couch, after an exhaustive analysis of data comes up empty; he’s feeding me popcorn, one kernel at a
time. “You’ll be shocked to hear I’m terrible at it.”

“Enh, the lull’s temporary.” He strokes back a sweaty hank of my hair. “Another month and you won’t HAVE moments of inaction. I hear SLEEP might even be off the table.”

“Wonderful,” I say. “In addition to our usual bad-guy-battling insanity, I have to push an entire human out of my body--then protect it from all comers. GOD I hope I’m elsewhere at the critical moment.”

“Just ask for drugs,” Dick suggests, from the card table where he’s playing poker with Victor. He’s losing, badly, but remains unfazed. “My mom tells everyone to schedule a Caesarian, and have them knock you out. Says it’s the only way to go.”

“See?” Logan smirks. “Just follow the foolproof Bettina Casablancas parenting model.”

I elbow him and he laughs. “Seriously, though, Ronica. You’ll be OK. You’ve been practicing like crazy.”

“But that’s just it,” I murmur. “I HAVEN’T practiced, SHE has. I mean, maybe body memory will carry me through, like it did with surfing; but if I turn up at an inopportune moment, the way I did at the deb ball, I expect disaster.”

Logan’s silent, and when I glance back, frowning. And I realize…I’ve just casually brought up the slipstream to the Logan who won’t acknowledge it. Maybe the scowl’s a warning to back down, but I’m sick of uncertainty. So screw it. “Don’t make that face at me,” I mutter. “I KNOW you know all about the time traveling.”

“Veronica,” he whispers back, and he sounds frustrated. “There IS no she--there’s only YOU. And even if you rely on body memory? I’m POSITIVE, after all this Lamaze, your subconscious can handle it.”

“Logan, what happened that you won’t acknowledge me?” The words are a cascade of frustration, pitched low. “Is it because Veronica asked you to quit helping, the night of the boat disaster? Because even right after that, in New York, you were still ALL about us. So why turn a blind eye NOW? Are you just SICK of me, and my mysteries and long absences and drama?”

“Veronica,” he says, with that passionate intonation only he gives my name, “I could NEVER be sick of you, but I…”

“Why are you two whispering over there?” Dick interrupts. He collects cards and ineptly shuffles as Victor rakes in winnings. “It always makes me nervous when you start hatching plots.”

“We’re canoodling, not plotting,” I say, gritting my teeth at the cockblock. “And I hope you aren’t betting money.”

“Swag,” Victor says, with dry emphasis. “I’ve got my eye on the long board Logan made him. It’s just sitting in his condo, gathering dust.”

“That board is my CHILD,” Dick protests. “Would you take your CHILD out to a raging ten-footer and ride around on his back?”

“Of course not. Which is why I plan to win YOURS,” Victor retorts. “Now quit hassling the lovebirds and deal.”

“Bingo,” Mac calls from the desk. “Cease all desultory time-killers and get over here--I found a
It’s like they’re CONSPIRING to keep me from learning anything. I think as I struggle to my feet, assisted by a push from behind. GOD it’s frustrating, trying to second-guess Logan Echolls. Maybe I should regress to time-honed methods, and spy on him for answers.

I need some method other than bugs, though; Other Veronica remembers what I’ve done. Which is a pretty big advantage on her part, now that I think of it. Because I have no clue what SHE’S up to, when I’M not around.

Outwitting a better-informed version of yourself—always a challenge. Good thing I ENJOY those.

We assemble behind the desk and Mac says, “I set up a back door in the Sprint record system, last time I investigated Randy. Based on bills, his phone’s a thing of the past; auto-debit payments began bouncing ten months ago, when his last paycheck ran out. But I WAS able to access Randy’s GPS movements prior to termination. I plotted them on a map.”

“Wait, you made this phone call TEN MONTHS AGO?” Dick asks, with unfortunate perceptiveness. “You’ve suspected Beav was alive all this time, and you never told me?”

Victor shoves him. “Quit with the outrage. It’s not like Veronica had proof. And shut it, because what Mac’s saying is IMPORTANT.”

Mac smiles gratitude, and gestures at the screen; Dick huffs and folds his arms. “After studying this, I can tell you two things. One, Beaver was staying at the Camelot motel until three months ago. And two, he visited THIS place a LOT.”

She brings up a website for Atomic Tattoo, which features a colorful strip mall storefront. “Camouflage?” I ask.

“Bleached-blonde hair and tattoos,” Mac confirms. “Nobody would associate THAT guy with the trust fund suicide from Neptune High.”

“Who has blonde hair and tattoos?” Weevil asks, shoving the door open and striding in. He’s still wearing his AC tech coveralls, and carrying a battered gym bag. “Not me, ever. My hair’s so curly, if I went blonde, I’d look like Art Garfunkel.”

“And here I figured you shaved it to hide a bald spot,” Logan says. Weevil fake-laughs.

“Beaver’s in disguise,” Mac says. “If my theory is correct. You familiar with this shop?”

“Sure,” Weevil confirms, after a cursory glance. “My friend Oscar works there, he did my neck tattoo. You want me to visit, find out who inked Casablancas? I’m getting a magic-hat rabbit on my shoulder anyway.”

“Bugs first,” I say. “If we find video of Beaver at the scene, no need to involve a third party.”

“Got you covered.” He plunks the bag down on the desk. “I found everything on your list, piece of cake. Remind me to plead insanity if I ever get busted. Breaking into that joint was CAKE.”

He slides a handful of baggies from the side pocket, hands them to Mac. “I separated and labeled ‘em so we’d know which was which. I can’t believe these sat there undiscovered for a YEAR.”

“There won’t be a year’s worth of data,” I caution, as Mac uploads the one labeled ‘exterior
door’. “They’re set to overwrite every three months unless cleared. But we should have video of the abduction on some of them, as well as several weeks leading up to it.”

Mac rubs her hands together, because there’s nothing she loves more than crunching data. “Well, then. In the immortal words of Perseus, let’s get Kraken.”

XXXXX

It takes so long to study a season’s worth of video even Mac gets tired. She sprawls across the couch, chugging Red Bull and eating Twizzlers, while I take over; Victor ranges behind me, adding a dubious backup set of eyes.

Logan calls in an order to the Cuban place down the street, tries to drag Dick along to fetch it. But Dick refuses, on the grounds that, “He’s my fucking brother, and Duncan was sort of my friend.” He ignores the case, though, once Logan’s Casper, and spends his time seeking comfort from Mac. Weevil ranges along her other flank, periodically slapping him back.

“Which one do you think she likes?” Victor murmurs near my ear, when I hit pause to rub my eyes. I glance back; he’s watching the competition with a faint appreciative smirk.

I snort. “The million-dollar question. Mac’s the most romantically flexible person I’ve ever met. I honestly can’t tell if she keeps emotions close to the vest, like I do, or if she just doesn’t…have many.”

“Hmmm, she’s an intellectual.” He offers me a Twizzler, bites into one himself. “You’re an ass-kicker. It’s not that academic types DON’T feel—they just filter their passions through their brains. Whereas YOURS connect directly to your fist.”

I laugh, as Dick goes in for a hug, and Mac smilingly shoves him back. “My money’s on Casablancas,” I say. “If, and ONLY if, he gets his shit together. Weevil lives closer to the edge than I think Mac prefers—mutual criminal propensities notwithstanding. It’d take a persuasive, conventional girl to make him want to change his ways, and Mac really isn’t the latter.”

“Personally, I doubt she’ll choose either,” he says, through a mouthful of candy. “I mean sure, for a fling—but long term? Ten bucks says they’re wasting their time, and she ends up with a super-smart nerd like herself.”

“Isn’t it enough you won Dick’s prize surfboard?” I accuse. “You’ve gotta treat your future granddaughter-in-law like a mark?”

“The ability to take people for all they’ve got,” he says, with a wink, “is sometimes lots of fun.”

I mock-scowl, but I’m distracted from my retort by Weevil’s raised voice. “Yeah, one dumb surfboard’s a real loss, when you own a company that MAKES them. Why do you encourage this asshole to whine about his bank account, Mackenzie? It’s not like you were overly compassionate about his cash flow, during his time of woe.”

“Well, I’m certainly compassionate now!” she retorts, flushing. “I’m basically RUNNING said surf company! And it’s a huge success, too, despite the limited amount of time I’ve got, after factoring in school and THIS job!”

“Yeah, step off leather boy,” Dick adds, always the loyal lieutenant. “Mackie does kick-ass work on the website. I’ve been a shitty friend to HER, in the past, but she’s ALWAYS been a good one to me.”
Weevil snorts, Mac turns even redder, and that’s when it hits me. What if Dick is wrong?

What if, when Mac discovered Big Dick’s secret Cayman account summer-before-last, she saw an asshole 09’er pigeon ripe for plucking? What if she funneled that cash into her OWN offshore bank, leaving all four Casablancases high and dry? And what if all the lost blood money, which makes her so comfortable now, set in motion the desperation shuffle of three criminal elements and Dick—creating a clusterfuck I’m STILL untangling?

It makes perfect sense. Big Dick doesn’t HAVE money to give the IRS, so there’s no way he can cut a deal. Beaver lost his covert funds, then faked his death to buy time to regroup. Kendall stole from the Sorokins when the cupboard grew bare, and Dick was bailed out by Logan via this partnership.

Weevil figured it all out, too, the day Lucky shot up our school—THAT’S what piqued his admiration. And Mac, despite her protestations, felt guilty enough to make amends.

“Veronica,” Victor says, startling me from my reverie. I turn to discover he’s been watching video. “Check this, I found…what’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I just…figured something out. For an unrelated case, no big deal. What’ve you got?”

“The back of Cassidy Casablancas’ skull.” He points. I get a blurry impression of white-blond bedhead and green coveralls; then the door swings open, and in sweeps Logan.

“Lucy, I’m home!” he calls, waving three white bags. “I brought you two of those sandwiches you like with the little pickles.”

“Good man,” I say, abandoning detecting in favor of food. “Victor just found footage of our missing person. Blonde as predicted, and with tattoos down one arm. But we still lack a definitive ID.”

Logan comes over to look, squints intently at the sequence. “There,” he says, holding up a hand. “Stop, rewind.”

He shoos me out of the way, does it himself, and bingo; Beaver Casablancas, in profile for a split second, freeze-framed on the screen.

“Holy shit,” Dick says, behind me, and sinks to the floor with a thud.

“Clean it up and print it,” I tell Mac, then vacate the chair so she can comply. “This plus a positive ID from Tattoo Shop Guy should be enough to convince Clarence.”

“We should review the rest of the bugs, just in case,” Mac says. “Search for a full-on face shot. Redundancy is key when establishing identity via video.”

“This is the last of ‘em anyway,” Weevil says, dangling a bag between two fingertips. “Only I’m not sure this weird ass thing even DOES video. It looks more like the audio bugs you planted.”

I yank the Ziploc away, the one labeled ‘Duncan’s room’, peer inside. My bug’s in there, all right. And so’s another, bigger, fancier model.

“These were BOTH behind the mirror?” I demand, pulling the strange device out to examine it.

“Yeah, like you said. What is it? A recorder?”
“This one records AND transmits,” I say. “Like a teeny-tiny walkie-talkie that’s always on. And I didn’t put it there, which means some other intruder DID.”

“Celeste said Duncan was doing better, then abruptly got worse,” Logan reminds us, grimly. “Insisting he’d talked to people who weren’t present. Maybe he was telling the truth.”

Beaver, I think, but don’t say, because Dick’s on the floor next to me, one harsh truth away from losing it. That asshole piped his voice into a hospital room, to mess with a damaged mind. The rush of rage I feel is immense; this is ten times worse than wrong.

We have to find Beaver ASAP, even if we can’t track his cell. We have to rescue Duncan, before he’s further victimized.

The slipstream threatens, and I leap into it with a vengeance—back towards the past, where it’s easiest to fix fate.

THREAD FORTY INVERTS

It’s dark when I surface, and Logan and I are kissing.

His hands are on me, my thigh and my (thank God flat) belly. There’s something wedged between my knees, cardboard, greasy—I’m panting into his mouth. Colored lights flash over him, tinting his hair, the smooth plane of his forehead; his lashes flutter against his cheeks in counterpoint to the sound of explosions.

Movie theater. We’re in the back, making out.

A glance at the screen informs me it’s Casino Royale, which means I’m in Improved Past. Which further means even though I don’t SEEM pregnant, I AM, and Duncan’s still in that hospital, getting tortured by Beaver. And Logan acknowledges the slipstream, and Weevil’s kicking his heels in jail, and nobody even knows Victor EXISTS, except some nurses and Lilly and ME….

“Hey, where’d you go?” Logan murmurs, kissing my temple, lashes slowly lifting. “Fooling around in the last row of action movies is usually your FAVORITE.”

“What day is it?” I demand, removing my hands from his shirt. “Day, month, year? I promised someone I’d show back up in a week, and I need to know if Other Veronica DID!”

“Oh, look who popped in. My fiancée.” He kisses me gently, and I can’t help it, I kiss back. Sigh, when his thumbs slip under my skirt. “It’s August nineteenth, around five. And I promise, there are no crises brewing. Unless you count the situation in my jeans.”

“Says you.” I push him gently away. “I don’t have time for this highly enjoyable activity, sweet cheeks. We need to raid a mental hospital, stat.”

He sighs against my hair. “Of course we do,” he says, resigned. “Can we get lunch, at least, while you fill me in? I’d rather not storm an asylum on an empty stomach.”

“You got it.” I pull him to his feet. “The end of this movie sucks, anyway.”

We walk out of the theater hand in hand, blinking against the bright mall fluorescents. Logan says, “This has something to do with Duncan, I presume?”

“Unfortunately,” I agree. “Cheesecake Factory work for you?”
He shrugs, and I drag him inside. “OK it’s a long story, and I’m not sure how much you already know, but here’s the short version; Duncan’s not safe in that hospital, and Beaver’s not dead. We need to stage a rescue and liberate your grandfather, so he can help us solve the first two problems. It’s also imperative we figure out what Beaver’s brainwashing Duncan to DO; but I guess that can wait until today’s job is done.”

“Wait, WHAT?” He shakes his head as if to clear it. “Explain, please.”

I think back furiously. “OK, so the last time I was here, when we went to Martha’s kitchen, I called Randy Johnson’s phone. And Beaver answered.”

“THAT’S what that was?” he asks. “FUCK! I thought it was just more slipstream weirdness. Like the time you passed out at Mom’s vacation cottage, after seeing multiple realities at once.”

“No, this time I had a panic attack,” I say. “And I’m still pretty terrified. I just got video confirmation that as of a year from now, Beaver’s alive, kicking, and abducting Duncan from his not-so-cozy cell—after gaslighting him into doing God knows what. So first things first, that hospital is NOT safe. We need to get Donut out of there stat, before something terrible happens.”

“Yeah, that isn’t as easy as it sounds,” he says, drily. “Duncan’s not some random mental patient we can convince Celeste to resettle. He’s a convicted murderer sentenced to Hazelwood in lieu of jail, and he’s got nine more years to go. If we want him moved, we have to convince the COURT there’s a problem.”

“The staff’s giving patients weekend passes,” I say, tartly. “THAT’D persuade a judge, right? Your grandfather tells me employees take kickbacks in exchange for all KINDS of perks.”

He starts to speak, but the perky hostess appears, flashes a flirtatious smile as she leads us towards a table. He completely ignores her, gazing up at the ceiling, making a praying-for-patience face that lasts until we’re alone.

“Veronica,” he says, serious and low, leaning across the table to take my hands. “Both my grandfathers are DEAD. There isn’t anything left, at this point, to rescue.”

“She didn’t tell you?” I demand. “Other Veronica?”

“Tell me WHAT?” he asks, exasperated.

“Your grandfather’s locked up in the same sanitarium as Duncan,” I say. “I met him day before yesterday, which would be…very beginning of summer, for you?”

“Veronica went to HAZELWOOD?” he demands, running both hands into his hair and gripping tight. “She can’t! She’s not allowed! He gets violent as FUCK when her name is mentioned!”

“Lilly took her,” I say. “Or rather, me. Undercover, to investigate. I planted bugs all over the building, dressed as a nurse. Talked to Duncan, who by the way is BONKERS, but he never got the least bit violent. Lilly went to the office and photocopied his files. On our way out, we ran into your grandfather in the garden. I knew him from the future, he’s been helping us research the sanitarium in between rounds of surfing, so I recognized him right away. But I had no IDEA…”

“You knew him from the FUTURE?” Logan asks, voice going up an octave. “My grandfather is alive and NOT incarcerated in the future, and you didn’t think this was important to mention? Old man Echolls was an ANIMAL, Veronica—even AARON was scared shitless of that guy. If he’s alive, I’m taking out a restraining order, not staging a RESCUE.”
“No, muffin,” I sigh. “Victor Lester. Aaron had him locked up, because Victor tried to convince Lynn to divorce him. He’s been wasting away in there for fourteen years.”

“Are you sure about this?” Logan restively rips a sugar packet open, scattering the contents. “Could he maybe be some crazy person who THINKS he’s Victor? The guy was a famous actor, a zillion years ago. There’s bound to be impostors around.”

“Sugar lumps,” I say. “He looks and acts just LIKE you, and knows things only a family member would. If he’s not your grandfather, genetics are a lie.”

Logan plants his elbows on the table and covers his face with his hands, which are trembling. A middle-aged waitress shows up, gets a look at him, drops our menus silently, and scurries away.

“And Beaver’s alive?” he confirms, voice muffled by his palms. “And Duncan’s in danger?”

“Yeah, I think Meg’s locked up there somewhere, too,” I say. “And she might be pregnant, like she was in my reality; but I didn’t set eyes on her personally, so I can’t be sure. Sorry to spring all this on you. I didn’t realize Other V was keeping so many secrets.”

“No, it’s fine, it’s just…a lot to take in. I remember you being worried about Duncan, back at the debutante ball. But Beaver…Dick’s gonna fall APART. And if Cassidy faked his death, then busted out Duncan, it MUST have something to do with you. Which means you’re once again in clear and present danger.”

He sighs, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “So what’s your solution, Ronica? Break Duncan out first, and hide him?”

“Of course not,” I chide. “Like you said, he’s a convicted murderer. But if we spring VICTOR, he can help get the proof we need to move Duncan someplace safe. And Victor doesn’t belong there, Logan—he’s funny and kind and…ugh, it breaks my HEART. Also,” I add as an afterthought, “I want to get a look at Duncan’s files. It’ll give me a better idea of what Beaver’s been telling him, and what he might be primed to DO.”

“And Lilly has copies?” he asks.

“As far as I know,” I say. “She was holding them last time I saw her. Is she still around, or did she leave for New York?”

“She’s here,” he says. “And she’ll be answering a few questions, shortly, about why she KEPT THIS FROM ME.”

“Make the call,” I say. “In the meantime, I’m having cheesecake. You want a slice?”

XXXXX

Lilly turns up while Logan’s in the bathroom; probably splashing cold water on his face, and wondering how his life became a farce. She slides into the booth, digs unapologetically into Logan’s dessert, and says, “I can’t BELIEVE you told him about his grandfather! I thought we were making sure Victor’s a good guy, before unleashing him on Mr. Needy?”

“Victor cares about Logan, Lilly. And Logan DESERVES one decent family member. Plus, we promised we’d help him, and I for one KEEP my word!”

“Ugh, whatever. I thought Grandpa was adorable too, but don’t blame ME if this plan of yours backfires.” She digs around in her three-thousand-dollar purse, pulls out a stack of files. Slaps them
on the table. “Oh, and I brought these, like Logan demanded. Although I have no clue why, since you said YOURSELF there’s no evidence of wrongdoing.”

“I want to check again,” I hedge. “Maybe I missed something subtle.”

XXXXX

Logan returns when Lilly’s halfway through his lunch, reading a Jackie Collins paperback she’s extracted from her bag. I’m deep down the rabbit hole of Duncan’s file, writing notes on a takeout menu; I pay minimal attention to their confrontation.

“Oh, look who decided to come clean…if only when her HAND was forced.” He sweeps up to the table and sprawls beside me, a martial light in his eye.

_The patient became highly agitated, insisting he’d conversed with a high school friend that morning._

“Ugh, you’re such a drama queen.” Lilly doesn’t bother to close her book. “Ronica and I were trying to PROTECT you.”

_The patient was found rocking, repeating, “I’m not going to hurt Veronica.” When asked to explain, he attempted to strangle his questioner, while screaming the phrase over and over._

“By hiding things?” Logan demands. “Have I EVER enjoyed being jerked around by you, Lils, when sex wasn’t involved? Hmmm, let me think about it, oh YEAH…the answer to THAT would be NO.”

_The patient has no recollection of the crime for which he was incarcerated. When pressed to explain why he committed murder, he replied, “Aaron’s dead? Well he deserves what he gets for killing my sister.” When it was explained to him that his sister is not, in fact, deceased, he said, “I KNOW she is. My friend wouldn’t lie.”_

“Logan!” I snap, interrupting before Lilly can retort. “Quit picking fights and read this, now!”

He sighs theatrically, glances at the paragraph above my finger. Frowns, focuses. Writes, below the menu entry for lemon meringue pie, “This is what happened in YOUR reality.”

I nod, take the pen, and write below that, “But how does DUNCAN know? You didn’t say anything, right? Not even by accident? Because you’re the only person I’ve told.”

He shakes his head. Looks out across the restaurant, lost in thought.

“You’d better be telling Logan to apologize,” Lilly says, licking the last of his cheesecake off her fork, turning a page. “Because otherwise passing notes in front of me is RUDE.”

“Lils, has anyone visited Duncan other than family? And Logan?” I ask, resting my palm on his thigh to keep him quiet.

She shakes her head. “Logan, Celeste and Dad,” she says. “Sometimes me. I used to go more often than I do now--it’s hard when I’m traveling so much. There’s nobody else on his approved list; my parents vetoed all his pals.”

I bite my lip, because this is big. Carrie couldn’t be the leak. She didn’t make the cut, and she doesn’t know Aaron killed Lilly in my reality. Neither could Other Veronica; Hazelwood makes a concerted effort to keep HER out. If Logan didn’t spill—and it’s unlikely he would, Logan’s NOT
loose-lipped—there’s some other reason Duncan’s confabulating events.

Someone else knows about the slipstream. Someone with access to Duncan, who’s managed to keep their knowledge secret. Which limits the list to Jake, Celeste, Lilly…and Beaver.

Could THAT be how Cassidy Casablancas has stayed one step ahead of me this whole time? Could he be a castaway, like myself, from another reality where we’ve gone toe-to-toe? Could this Beaver hold a grudge because he comes from a timeline in which we’re enemies?

If Serial Killer Beaver IS a time traveler, we’re all in serious trouble. Because not only will his knowledge of other timelines cause trouble in the present... he can change things here, just by messing with the past. And if he does... if he makes this reality shift.... we might not even REALIZE what he’s done.

“Could Beaver be slipstreaming?” I write on the menu, nudge Logan so he looks. He stares down at the words for a long time, then meets my eyes. His expression’s as grim as I feel.

“Let’s go spring Grandpa,” he says. “I want to find out what he knows. And you can read me every LINE of that file along the way.”

XXXXX

We’re in the car, following Lilly to her house so she can drop her Maserati. I’ve been narrating descriptions of Duncan’s creepy delusions for five minutes (Patient believes his father’s security chief has killed to protect Veronica) when something occurs to me.

“Question,” I say, setting the file on my lap. “IS Clarence protecting me? Because the last time he appeared in this reality was the day Meg killed Stewart. At which point he offered to guard me from the Sorokins, due to Kendall’s rip-off gone wrong. So why didn’t he stop them from attacking the boat? Because I found a photo of the main shooter in another reality, and super-big surprise, it was Gorya.”

“Sugar lips, I hate to tarnish your naive and clear-eyed view of the world, but good old Clarence was fibbing. Jake and Gory are PALS. And that offer from Jake’s faithful attack dog was a bald-faced bid to gain our trust—so he could mislead us, defuse our efforts, and erase Sorokin’s tracks. You notice nobody managed to tie those dead mercs to the crime family? And nobody got prosecuted for the seized drugs? It smacks of cover-up, which began local... thanks to the sterling honesty of our police force.”

“And YOU TOO could have Wiedman clean up your messes, if you formally joined the Castle,” I say.

“Yeah, hard pass,” he mutters. “I didn’t want the honor BEFORE things got weird. The Kanes have been so stressed since we got back from New York, I’m even less inclined now. Something’s WRONG in that boardroom.”

“But WHAT, exactly, is my question,” I say, watching Lilly exit Celeste’s building. “Maybe I should saunter inside and ask about Duncan? Take Big Mama Kane’s temperature?”

“Your thermometer would freeze. Let’s just follow your plan, rescue my dead grandfather, then use him to track down the time-traveling serial killer. Aaaand I can’t believe that sentence actually came out of my mouth.”

He shakes his head, resigned, as Lilly opens the back door and hops inside. “Why the long faces? We’re having an adventure!” She frowns. “It’s because we didn’t bring costumes, right? For the
record, I’m totally cool with swinging by the mall on our way out of town.”

XXXXX

It’s dark this time, when we drive up the dirt road to the Sanitarium—the elegant building’s shadow-washed, geometric shapes against the indigo sky. The iron gate, formerly ajar, stands firmly shut; the garden beyond is deserted.

“Can you pick the lock?” Logan asks, running his thumbs over it in one of his typical why-is-this-sexy moves. “Or was our afternoon of revelations a lot of sound and fury?”

“No sweat.” I dig through my messenger bag, hoping—as it happens, successfully—that Other Veronica hasn’t changed her petty-criminal ways. Add, while I insert the guide and pick, “Our major obstacle is, we’re here after hours. The patients are likely locked in their rooms—and we have no idea where Victor’s luxury suite IS.”

“I still don’t understand the rush.” Lilly crosses her arms, gazes up at the moon, clearly annoyed and contemplating drama. “If you want that shameless old flirt out of here so badly, why didn’t you rescue him on schedule?”

I glance at Logan, because it sounds like Other V tried to protect him; he shrugs, denying responsibility. “I was waffling,” I hedge. “But now I’ve made up my mind. You raise a good point though—the poor guy has no idea we’re coming. And he might be the weentsiest bit mad about being left hanging?”

“Lils, you raided the office,” Logan says. “Is there a floorplan on the computer that shows who’s in which room?”

“Probably,” I say when she shrugs, sighing satisfaction as the lock clanks open. “But guessing the password would take longer than looking through every window.”

“Well at least this is foolhardy,” Lilly says, striding through. “Walking balls-out into an asylum in street clothes, then wandering around peeping. I’ll say this for you, Veronica Mars; your spur-of-the-moment ideas have charm.”

“If by charm you mean they’re INSANE.” Logan flexes his hands, limbering up, as I go to work on the rear door. He smirks when I scowl. “Not like that’s a BAD thing.”

“And this is why the three of us are friends.” The door swings ajar, revealing the cavernous, dark and deserted salon. I rummage through my purse for bugs, find two. “Let me just switch out the camera on the frame. Then we’ll spot-check the fourth Beatle, and make like Steve McQueen.”

I pocket the possibly-containing-images-of-Beaver bug; we creep into the hallway like the Mystery Machine gang in a haunted mansion. Noise from the kitchen is boisterous…the staff’s taking yet another ‘break’. Logan shepherds us up the stairs, glancing, anxious, over his shoulder, but we make it into Duncan’s wing with no trouble.

Logan grabs my wrist before I can enter the room, peeks inside. “OK, he’s strapped to the bed,” he says, motioning at the knob. “Knock yourself out.”

“Overprotective much?” I roll my eyes. “I told you, I’ve been in there before. He was as normal as he ever gets.”

“Ronica,” Logan says, with a sigh. “No offense, but you need all the overprotecting I can manage. The chaos vortex around you has only grown with age.”
Lilly rolls her eyes at our bickering, tests the door—it’s unlocked, AGAIN—and shoves her way through. I stick my tongue out at Logan and follow.

Duncan is indeed buckled to the bed, TV remote in hand; he’s watching an old episode of ‘Alf’, and giggling. When he sees us, his grin grows.

“Hey guys!” he calls, waggling the remote in a wave. “Glad you stopped by! I’d come over and shake hands but I’m a little…tied up right now.”

He collapses into laughter, and I hold a finger to my lips, to silence Logan’s exasperated retort. Creep over to the mirror, find the hidden two-way transmitter. I crush the thing beneath my highly-motivated heel; then plant my new bug, and pocket the old one for review.

Lilly frowns, on alert that something’s wrong. I thumbs-up at Logan, who says, “Dude, you know I love you, but you’ve got the WORST sense of humor EVER.”

“Forgive me if I don’t take comic advice from a guy who loves the Big Lebowski,” Duncan replies. “What are you all doing here this late, anyway? Usually I only get visitors after breakfast.”

“We BROKE AND ENTERED.” Lilly raises her brows mischievously. “We were bored out of our minds, so we decided to visit you and Victor.”

“Victor?” Duncan frowns, puzzled. “I can never remember anyone’s name. Not even the doctor…I got in trouble once, because I forgot.”

“Old guy? Looks like Logan, but with mad scientist hair?” I prompt.

“Oh YEAH!” Duncan nods. “He likes surfing, and laughs at me when I sing. Sorry, I get confused. I think it’s all the pills they make me take.” He grins, confiding. “I’ve started spitting them out into the plant, when the nurse isn’t looking. I’d rather watch TV than sleep.”

“You have any idea which room is Victor’s?” Logan asks, checking his watch.

Duncan shrugs. “Pretty sure he’s in this hall. Sometimes we walk down to breakfast together, then sit in the garden.”

“Hey, question,” I venture. “Does anybody besides us ever visit you? Not your parents, I mean, but any of your friends?”

“Nah, just you guys,” he says. “And the nurses.”

“Not Beaver Casablancas?” I ask.

Lilly shoots me a sharp look, Logan tenses, and Duncan says, “Well I THOUGHT he did, for a while. But the doctor said Beaver’s dead? So he can’t have, right?” He laughs heartily. “See? This is why I spit out the pills. My head feels clearer without them, even though nothing stops the voices.”

“Yeah, I just crushed the ‘voices’ with my shoe,” I tell him, grimly. “That should help a LOT.”

“You’re such a good girlfriend, Veronica.” He turns back to the TV with a smile. “Always looking out for me. We’re going to have SO much fun at prom. Hey, want to watch the rest of Alf? This is a really funny one—I can rewind.”

“Love to, can’t.” Logan gestures with his chin at the door. “We have to complete part two of our secret spy mission.”
“You guys are so crazy,” Duncan says. “Don’t keep Veronica out too late. She needs to study for Ms. Hauser’s test.”

“No problem, D,” Logan promises, gently. “Enjoy your terrible broad-comedy puppet aliens, in your comfy bondage bed.”

Lilly runs over to the four-poster, in blatant disregard of her safety, and hugs him. He shortles, pats her back with the remote.

I retrieve the bugs while Lilly’s busy, hand them surreptitiously to Logan. “Make sure these get analyzed if I slipstream away, and keep the data safe. We can stop the kidnapping and future Sharks killings, if we catch Beaver earlier.”

He nods, pockets them as Lilly bounces back. “Step two?”

I smile, apologetic. Logan peeks out the door, gestures, and we follow into the hall.

“Start peeping,” he directs. “Lils, do the rooms behind us. Ronica, you handle right side, I’ll go left. Meet you at the emergency door on the end.”

“But you haven’t seen Victor since you were five!” I protest, then smack my forehead. “Right, family resemblance.”

“I’ve looked at lots of photos,” he reminds me, with a wink. “He was my childhood hero. Now go team, go!”

We scatter, searching; I’m two doors from the end, feeling like a serious perv, when Logan whispers, “Here!”

I rush across the hall, peek in, and there’s Victor—drinking what looks like booze, watching Apocalypse Now, unrestrained, on the couch. I guess his fee runs to SOME luxuries, I muse, as I test the (also unlocked, what is UP with this place?) door.

“Well look who came to visit,” Victor says, mouth quirking, as we enter. He tosses back the last of his Scotch. “Trixie Belden, intrepid pixie nurse, and her impossibly gorgeous friend. You here to give me my sponge bath, or is this the long-delayed rescue?”

“R-rated hygiene’s not on the menu,” Logan says, edging past me. He’s staring fixedly at Victor, and seems stunned. “But if you keep propositioning, she MIGHT throw that drink in your face.”

Victor’s brows lift as he studies Logan, and his faint smirk morphs into a grin. He clicks the TV off with a casual gesture, not looking. “I don’t doubt it,” he says. “Trix strikes me as spunky. And YOUR tastes haven’t changed much, kid, since the crush on Gosalyn in Darkwing Duck.”

Logan barks a surprised laugh as Lilly shuts the door. “We never speak of that,” he says. “Jesus, it really IS you. Pop, I thought you were DEAD.”

“Not so much.” Victor plants a hand on the couch arm to help him stand. “I’m not the spryest, this decade, but my brain’s intact. No thanks to all the punches I took, back in my salad days.”

“If THAT gives you brain damage, I’m doomed.” Logan tries to smirk, but he’s too happy; he hugs Victor tight, the second he approaches. “Wow,” Logan says, softly, the look on his face indescribable. “Wow, it’s SO good to see you, man.”

“Same.” Victor pats his back like he understands. “You grew up well. And I’m not just saying
that because you look like me.”

Logan laughs, pulling away. “You remember Lilly from last time, I guess?”

“Is that her name?” Victor grins, offering her his hand. “She called herself Dr. Sandman, and tried to distract me with her boobs. Like anyone could forget this face.” He flashes the charming smile as she shakes. “Nice to formally meet you, Lilly…Kane? I’d apologize for complimenting looks instead of brains, but I’m sure you’re well aware you make men idiots.”

“Why Grandpa Victor, you’re a cad!” She widens her eyes, flirtatious. “But yes, to answer your question, I MAY have an inkling.”

“And this other girl with the questionable alias is my fiancée, Veronica.” Logan smiles at me proudly, and Victor raises his brows.

“Quick work,” he says, shaking my hand. “Are you even twenty-one yet, kid?”

“Not quite, but I know what I want,” Logan says. “I don’t see myself ever changing my mind.”

Victor’s grin softens as he gazes at us, warming in his sharp dark eyes. “Probably not,” he agrees. “Once I settled on my wife, I never did.”

“OK as heartwarming as this is, we need to make tracks before someone decides to do their job,” I say. “How about we postpone the pleasantries?”

Logan peers out the window. “I wish there was a safer route of escape. I can’t help feeling like this abandoned hall is temporary—how long can a break room bacchanalia LAST?”

“You’d be surprised,” Victor says, dry. “They hang out there non-stop, during visiting hours and evening lockdown—when the patients are occupied, there isn’t much to do. But I know a back way out, if you’re feeling anxious.”

“Wait.” I rest my hands on my hips. “You know how to escape, but you HAVEN’T?”

“How far could I get with no money or transportation, Trix?” he asks. “Dressed in slippers and white pajamas? I can’t go all evening without a smoke break anymore, though, and they put alarms in our rooms. So sometimes I sneak down to the garden in the dark. That’s how I learned about the weekend passes.” He checks his watch. “In fact, they’re due for a field trip soon. Come on, we’ll watch ’em leave. You can get some pictures—might help your case with Duncan.”

He leads us along the hall to an employee-only door; slips a card and paperclip from his pocket, then effortlessly trips the lock. Winks at me as he lets us in, while Logan and Lilly share a brows-raised glance.

There’s a bank of security cameras on one wall, unmonitored and feeding directly to tape. Victor points, and I clock a tour bus, idling under trees at the edge of the compound.

“Waiting for passengers,” he says. “They do front-door delivery to clients that pay. I’ve never SEEN anyone spring Kane, but doesn’t mean it hasn’t happened.”

I snap photos as four patients emerge, led again by the red-haired nurse, and climb aboard. I don’t recognize any of them, but it’s proof of malfeasance.

“This is bullshit,” Lilly growls, watching. “This is WRONG. I’m going to make these assholes squirm; nobody endangers my idiot brother.”
“Where do the patients go?” I ask, as Logan nods agreement. “Do you have any idea?”

Victor shakes his head, wild white hair bouncing. “I’d guess the person paying chooses. Some no doubt want to indulge their loved ones; one guy comes back every week hungover, talking about parties. Others…might have less savory motives.”

“Seems like the best way to kidnap a patient, if you wanted to avoid notice, would be pay to have them delivered. Then just quietly disappear,” I say, which makes Logan look at me sharply. I have GOT to remember to tell him about the pirate.

Victor winks. “Yeah, but your approach is more fun. Come on, let’s hustle. Maybe we can make it outside before they leave. Get some photos that aren’t through a screen.”

“You know how to erase the record of us liberating you, by chance?” I ask, studying the myriad feeds and switches. “Then turn surveillance off, so they can’t watch us leave?”

Victor nods, presses a series of buttons. The camera bank whirs, and all the screens go blank. “Presto,” he says, gestures towards the back of the room. “Onwards and downwards.”

There’s a service elevator on the rear wall. It opens at the touch of a button and he says, “This lets out in the basement, near an employee’s entrance. Leads straight to the parking lot; it’s used for deliveries.”

“You’re a good investigator,” I muse, as we pile in and ride down. “Maybe I should hire you, once I start my detective agency.”

He laughs. “I’ve got to warn you…I won’t come cheap. I have expensive tastes.”

“Oh, Veronica doesn’t PAY us,” Lilly puts in, arch. “We just risk our lives and fortunes out of love. Also, boredom.”

Logan snickers, still wearing that incandescent I’ve-got-a-grandpa look, and I roll my eyes. The door dings open.

And we come face-to-face with Beaver Casablancas, in a one-piece green coverall with bleached-blond hair, dumping hot water into a mop bucket.

For a long, frozen moment none of us move, shocked by the appearance in real time of familiar and loathed faces. Then Beaver grins without humor, and says, “Veronica Mars, about six months too early. You REALLY need to work on your timing.”

Logan strikes, leaping at Beaver like those words are his mayhem trigger, and slams him to the ground.

“You son of a bitch,” he grunts, grabbing my memory’s biggest bugbear by one arm and yanking, savage. He kicks him in the side while Beaver gasps for breath and yells, “That’s because I used to TRUST you!”

He puts an elbow on Beaver’s neck while I fumble for my taser, worried Logan will do real damage; there’s a blur of motion. Lilly rushes forward yelling, “Look out!” while Beaver swings the mop handle he’s grabbed, vicious. It breaks in half against Logan’s knee.

Logan grunts, falling backwards as Beaver makes it to his feet. Lilly throws a wrench, catching Beaver in the shoulder before he can impale Logan with the broken handle--I rip my taser free. Victor grabs up the mop bucket and tosses the contents on Beaver as he runs for the exit.
Beaver screams as the steaming, chemical-laden fluid hits, but manages to yank the door open. He sneers at me, palm to his slightly boiled face. “You’re REALLY going to regret this, Veronica. Starting right now.”

He smacks a button beside the frame. Alarms start ringing, red lights flash, and the door clangs shut behind him, then latches.

“FUCK!” I shout as I power the taser down. “What the HELL did he just do?”

“Triggered a facility-wide lockdown.” Victor tosses aside the bucket, starts searching the room with grim intensity. He rifles a toolbox, gives Lilly a hammer, grabs a screwdriver for himself. “Keep that thing handy,” he directs, indicating my taser with his chin. “In case we run into resistance. And help the kid—I doubt he can put much pressure on his leg.”

I get a shoulder under Logan’s arm and Lilly takes the other side, since he weighs as much as both of us. “Why do we need weapons?” I demand, as Victor leads the way into the hall. “Prison rules? Because I’m seriously not down with murdering people to escape.”

“Always so VIOLENT, Trix.” Victor scans for danger, then gestures with his head for us to follow. “We’re gonna break a window and unscrew a screen. We just need to reach the employee bathroom without being spotted.”

He heads down the hallway at a confident trot, while we haul Logan after…his leg’s not in great shape, but he’s walking.

“When you said make like Steve McQueen,” Logan mutters, grunting exertion as we speed up, “I thought you were speaking metaphorically.”

“Your mistake,” I retort, wincing against the assault of the siren. “Gotta keep you on your toes.”

“I take back what I said about this not being exciting.” Lilly leans against the wall to rest while Victor cracks a door and peers through. “Good thing your grandfather’s a badass, Logan. I guess you learn LOTS, being a POW.”

“Yeah, the hardest lesson was ‘keep my mouth shut’.” Victor favors us with an exasperated glance. “First rule of escape—no clever quipping until AFTER you’re safe.”

He slips into the bathroom, moving quietly if creakily; very softly through the crack I hear him mutter, “Fuck me.”

A second later he’s back, shaking his head. “They put bars on the window, since last time I checked. We’ll have to go out the front.”

“But the door’s code-locked.” I heft Logan as Victor strides down the hall. “And we don’t have equipment to CRACK the code, right this minute.”

“In other words, the amount of planning you put into this rescue is zero.” Victor shakes his head. “I’ll say this for you, Trix, you and your friends have balls. Luckily, there’s an easier way to get the password.”

“Teleportation?” Logan asks, but Victor’s taken off at a run.

We struggle around the corner, and there’s Todd, sipping a Mai Tai through a straw and watching Monica climb the stairs. “The doors auto-lock,” he calls, clearly still invested in being a dick. “Security will shut off the alarm in a minute. Get back here, and finish your drink before it melts.”
“Procedure,” she says, disappearing down the hall. Which is when Victor, who’s crept into Todd’s blind spot, strikes.

It’s faster than I thought an old man could manage; one second he’s crouched, observing, the next he’s got Asshole Nurse in a headlock, screwdriver pressed to his throat. The Mai Tai glass shatters on the floor.

“Hey Todd,” he says pleasantly, maneuvering the smaller man towards the entrance. “Nice work ethic—Hippocrates would applaud. How about since you’re not busy, you do me a favor?”

“How the hell did you get down here?” Todd demands, trying to yank free. He ceases when the Phillips-head presses into his throat. “The doors AUTO-lock!”

“Mmmm, and if I was in my room, that would have foiled me for sure.” Victor drags Todd three feet to the door, and adds, “Code. Enter it. You’ve got five seconds before I break the skin. And you know enough anatomy to realize what happens next.”

Todd whimpers and types. Tells Victor, “Man, you won’t make it far. Security from the other building’s already conducting a sweep.”

“Twenty bucks says you’re wrong.” Victor smiles, feral. “Trix, cuff this guy to a chair. After which, we need to move.”

I rummage through my messenger bag for handcuffs. Logan takes them from me, limps over to Todd; chains him to the handicapped rail with zero attention to comfort. “Gag?” he asks. I produce two bandannas, which he efficiently applies. “Sit,” he orders the nurse. “Stay.” Then, to Victor, “Our car’s around back by the garden. We should go.”

“Move like you mean it, kids,” Victor says, ducking under Logan’s arm and taking his weight easily. “Time to get the hell out of Dodge.”

We run across the lawn. There’s a searchlight fixed on the woods beyond the building, and several flashlights approach, beams sweeping rhythmically over the dark grass. “The seek-and-destroy team,” Lilly murmurs, gripping my hand to pull me. “Faster, Ronica! THIS is why I’m always trying to get you to exercise class!”

“I only run when chased,” I retort, as we surge past the garden benches, out the still-open gate. I’m pegged with a flashlight beam as I exit, which can only be bad. “Luckily, or unluckily, that happens a LOT.”

“Get him in back,” Lilly tells Victor, when Logan beeps open the Rover. “He can’t drive with that knee. Keys!”

Logan tosses them forward, and she adjusts the seat with a yank, flinging hair out of her eyes. “Hang on tight,” she advises; her eyes enlarge to anime proportions as she goes focused and cold. “We were spotted escaping, which means someone will follow.”

She squeals a u onto the rutted road, flooring the accelerator—even through closed windows, I hear sounds of pursuit. We swerve, skidding around a curve. Three men run onto the road in front of us, dressed in security uniforms, waving guns.

“SHIT!” Lilly snaps. “BRACE YOURSELVES!” Then she jerks the wheel left, and drives straight into the woods.

We jounce down a deer track, weaving through gaps in trees, with a bone-jarring rattle every time
we hit a rock; Logan lets loose a string of curses as he’s thrown against the door. An engine roars behind us as some suicidal lunatic gears up to follow. Victor mutters, “Fantastic,” bracing Logan as best he can.

“What were you saying about FASTER?” I ask, watching over my shoulder for signs of pursuit. “If they get a good view of our plate they can TRACK us!”

“I CAN’T go faster without killing us all,” Lilly retorts, jerking the wheel right to avoid a log. “Can we stick to HELPFUL advice, please?”

“Just dump the car somewhere later, and report it stolen,” Victor says, conciliatory. “And make sure you’ve got a good alibi. Problem solved.”

“Ditching the Rover won’t do jack.” Logan winces as we burst through the trees, onto a black-topped road; Lilly punches the accelerator. “We left an eyewitness at the asylum.”

Just past the horizon, a prison van comes into view, engine roaring as it tries to match our pace. It lags out of sight again as Lilly floors the gas.

“You think they’ll report me MISSING?” Victor scoffs, tensely scanning the road. “With Aaron dead? Unlikely. Todd would have to admit to drinking on the job, and helping a patient escape. My money says they’ll keep cashing checks until some accountant gets nosy, at which point I’ll abruptly ‘die’.”

Lilly squeals right as the highway branches, filling the air with the scent of burnt tire. Drives straight for a closed, dark gas station, and jerks to a grinding halt behind it, nose pointed towards the road. “Let’s hope this tricks them,” she says. “Because otherwise we’re re-enacting the chase scene from the Long Haul. And nobody in this car wants that.”

We watch in tense silence as the prison van hoves into view. Slows at the junction, flashlight splaying out from one window; continues down the main road, picking up speed as it passes. I press my thumb between my brows, going dizzy as adrenaline lets down hard.

“You DID call me Mario Andretti.” Lilly nudges me with her elbow, which elicits a reluctant smile.

Victor grins. Lets go of Logan, who slumps back, eyes shut, and groans. “I call you the seventh wonder,” the old man says.

“You know, I really AM.” She favors him with a radiant smile, clenching the wheel tight so her hands won’t shake. “And I LOVE it when people are grateful.”

“So what will you do with your newfound freedom, Victor?” I turn in my seat and touch Logan’s knee gently—I can tell it’s swollen, even though his jeans. He smiles, takes my hand and squeezes, conveying without words it’s not bad.

“Hmmm,” Victor strokes his chin with one thumb, contemplating; Lilly pulls out from our hiding place, and continues sedately down the road. “Buy a drink, first off. Hell, maybe a bottle. The rest of my plans can wait ‘til I’m done enjoying my bender.”

Lilly laughs. “Sounds like a blast,” she says. “Mind if I join you?”

He grins. “I’ll start composing toasts.”

“Make ‘em FAWNING,” she advises, gaining speed.
I settle back against my seat, arm stretched behind me, fingers still tangled with Logan’s. Hold his hand as we drive through the night—navigating a maze of neighborhoods and country roads, which lead inexorably home.
THREAD FORTY ONE

I’m still seated and leaning back, eyes closed, music playing in the background. But it’s beachy instrumental, not the Top Forty station Lilly chose, pitched under a background of lively chatter. Warm breeze musses my hair instead of too-high air conditioning; I realize, even before I open my eyes, I’ve fallen asleep and slipstreamed.

I peek through my lashes and there’s Logan, sweaty in a dark red tee beneath a green Hawaiian shirt. He’s smiling at me, flushed and indulgent, and I realize he’s as tipsy as I feel. “A toast,” he says, holding up a boozy blue smoothie with a pink umbrella. “To newly wedded bliss.”

My brows rise, involuntary; did this Logan MARRY Other Veronica in my absence? But then I note the laughing couples around us, also raising glasses, and realize he’s just playing life of the party. I lift the yellow concoction in front of me, tap my drink against his.

We’re seated at a long trestle with a cheerful green-and-brown cloth, on a lanai in a tropical garden. Six similar tables, packed with young, well-off tourists, lie between us and the stage, where a hula performance is ongoing. Looks like our vacation’s progressing well.

“You still hungry?” Logan sets his daiquiri down with a clank, gestures at the meal between us. There’s not much left—scrap of rice, a lone sweet potato on banana leaves, a mango skin. I’m wearing a black dress, loose and flowing, under a red lei, and sand clings to my arms. “Or you want to give the dance lesson a shot?”

I follow his gesture; there’s a group concatenating around an early-twenties Hawaiian dude, clad in a Ron Jon tee, holding a ukulele. Instead of saying, “We have work to do,” I shrug. “Why not?”

“I warn you,” he warns, hopping lightly to his feet, circling the table. Guides me, chivalrous, with a hand on my back towards the crowd. “I’m going to suck. Let’s hope you’re graceful enough to make us look good.”

“Well I WAS on dance team,” I toss over my shoulder, leading the way. “But I’ve had some booze, so our odds are mediocre.”

He lines up with the other victims, laughing in the torchlight, lacking, as always, any hint of social anxiety. He’s adorable towards the hula-skirt-clad instructor, mock-competes with several dudebros, makes bland yet salacious comments at my progress. Watches me unabashedly with warm brown eyes, while he does an A-plus job learning the steps.

I loved dancing with Improved Past Logan at the Debutante ball, after his numerous mandated lessons—the honed muscularity of his body, the effortless way he guided me, were seductive. This version’s got nothing going for him but natural aptitude, plus a lifetime of surfing and fighting; he has no Alicia, here, to help him shine. The fact that he does, anyway, is a tribute to his own determination.

And I LIKE that he’s imperfect, but keeps striving. Almost Real Logan’s finding his way through
the maze of adult dysfunction, same as me—his mistakes make me feel less alone.

I throw extra sway into my performance, tossing my hair and grinning as muscles loosen. The other vacationers cheer me on, Logan leading with seal claps and whistles. When I’m done I get the prize—a garland of white flowers—and Logan spins me before bussing my cheek.

“For show,” he whispers in my ear, winking. “They think we just got married.”

I look up into his eyes, lose my train of thought...blame it on the fact that I’m tipsy. “It’s a nice night,” I say, at random. “Let’s take a walk.”

He gestures for me to lead, and I do, down a lantern-lit path with benches at intervals, frosted by moonlight. When we reach a koi pond, glinting orange-gold as fish glide past, I settle on the rock wall and gaze up at the stars.

He sits beside me, stretching out long legs, caressing the petals of some large, red flower suggestively. “I have to admit,” he says, flashing his I’m-about-to-quip grin. “You’re a much better travel companion than Dick. You’ve yet to bring home a wet-shirt contest winner, and you haven’t puked in the sink.”

“Give me time.” I trail a lazy finger through the water. “The night is young.”

He laughs. “Like you’d ever mimic Dick. If he said it was snowing, you’d put on a bikini.”

“Well, he’s aptly named.” I think of slipstream Dick with a pang, pinning Piz against the wall, yelling ‘she’s practically my sister!’ Knowing we could have been close, here, if he hadn’t done a terrible thing, makes it harder to get the old anger going. “In your deepest heart of hearts, can you blame me?”

“Not really—knowing him, he probably deserves it. I’m just not sure why he’s so HIGH on the list of people you loathe. I was much more invested in hurting you, once upon a time; and I make it periodically into your good graces.”

“He’s your FRIEND,” I say. “Possibly your ONLY real friend, which is why we’ll never discuss this. Besides, you’re just as unforthcoming. I’d lay odds you’re hiding SERIOUS dirt on Weevil, because you want him to have my back.”

“No comment,” he says, wry. “But I see your point. It’s like our unspoken Duncan-Lilly deal, way back when. Mutual pact of silence, to protect the friendships.”

“The deal I broke?” I look down at my finger, piercing the surface of the pond. “I should never have told Lilly you kissed Yolanda. Sometimes I get so mad at you I act without thinking.”

“Gee, I wonder why?” He smirks. “What could POSSIBLY have compelled you to such heights of passion?”

I grimace, and he snickers. “You always knew,” I accuse.

“That you wanted me? Sure; but to be fair, it was a popular sentiment. Besides, desire isn’t remotely the same thing as love. Or respect.”

“Part and parcel, as far as I’m concerned,” I say, defensive. “I have no interest in one without the other.”

He snorts, and I frown. “You disagree?”
Logan lounges backwards, balancing on his elbows, expression going cynical. “So LOVE’S the reason you kept me secret, while I got you off in summertime backseats? And flaunting Duncan in broad daylight had nothing to do with respect? You’ve got cognitive-dissonance issues, Veronica. Which is, frankly, a big part of our problem.”

“Duncan was a mistake,” I say, snapping a twig testily in half. “One I regret making. I was so caught up in prom queen fantasies, I ignored the warning signs.”

“Duncan was your teenage DREAM!” he retorts. “Come on, sugarpuss, let’s not re-con. If the Kane heir had been as airbrushed as he seemed, you never would have left him, personal dissatisfaction be damned. As it stands, he fled the COUNTRY before you’d get your rocks off with the less perfect second choice. And you replaced ME with the first available upwardly mobile copy.”

“Ugh, I did not replace you with PIZ! If you’re double-chocolate Rocky Road, and Duncan’s listeria-ridden vanilla, Piz is…those dry crackers I eat when I’m nauseous!”

“Wow, labored metaphor,” he quips.

“I have no interest whatsoever in that douche!” I insist. “I was probably trying to make you JEALOUS!”

“Veronica,” he says, “You literally dressed the guy up in Duncan’s CLOTHES.”

“All his stuff was STOLEN!” I say, affronted. “He had nothing to WEAR!”

“Uh-huh.” Logan folds his arms. “Keep on telling yourself that. Maybe someday you’ll believe.”

“You know, I used to think the same about you and Lilly,” I counter, because good offense. “That you only dated me because you couldn’t have her. I was a pale imitation of your va-va-voomy first love, with her California cheerleader glamour, and her mythical skills between the sheets.”

“I hesitate to say this,” he tells me, shaking his head. “Since we’re not dating or even flirting, much. But you ARE a gorgeous California cheerleader with a less-than-hidden wild streak. Or at least you WERE, before you went ever-so-slightly butch. And you play one well, on request.”

We both wince and fall silent, which means this Veronica ALSO made a sex tape. GREAT.

“I guess that role play game’s forever ruined, thanks to good old Piz,” he says, after a moment. “Shame.”

Ugh, I initially thought Piz was like gum on my shoe; but I’m officially upgrading the guy to HERPES. He’s one of the most frustrating features of a frequently painful slipstream, and every single reality contains VINNIE.

“There are no words for how much I regret touching that guy,” I mutter. “And as for Duncan… my regrets extend deeper than sex.”

“Because you didn’t go along?” Logan asks softly, minus any judgment. Like he has no doubt at all it’s what I wanted. “When he ran?”

“No!” I say, affronted. “Because his epilepsy…his episodes…Logan, I sent Duncan off with that baby so glibly, out of guilt for being too scared of Aaron to help YOU. And now I have nightmares about him HURTING her in Brazil during some seizure. I’m going to be a kidnapping suspect for the rest of my life, for abetting a guy who wouldn’t tell his mom we were dating. A guy who cheated with Kendall, and made fun of my detecting, and maybe sort of RAPED me!”
“Hey, no, don’t think that way. You did what you felt was right.” He takes my hand, earnest.
“Believe me, I’ve beat this theme into the ground—guilt in retrospect fixes nothing. Besides, I’m sure…I’m POSITIVE…Jake’s found a way to fund them. Duncan’s got employees watching the baby, and meds to control his spells.”

“Probably true,” I say. “Nevertheless, I need to fix this—my screw-up, my responsibility. I didn’t fully understand the situation, and I made a bad choice.”

“Duncan’s good at arousing protective instincts.” He strokes my knuckles with his thumb, smiling wryly. “I’m glad, though, that he’s the one you chose to help, and not me. Dear old dad would’ve crushed you; made that character-assassination-by-lawyer at his trial look like a cakewalk. And I couldn’t…live with that. I barely survived what he did to Lilly, and you’re so much more…”

“So much more what?” I ask, when he pauses.

“CRUCIAL,” he says, grimacing at the word choice. “We’re past the point where you getting hurt because of me would be a survivable amount of pain, Veronica. So just…feel free to jerk me around all you want. It’s not like I’ve ever been able to stop you. But don’t risk your LIFE in my defense.”

“Look who’s talking,” I say. “Playing human shield at little to no provocation is your FAVORITE ACTIVITY.”

“Well, Aaron didn’t manage to kill me.” He shrugs. “Neither did Weevil. I’m skeptical Sorokin will apply himself to the job like they did, so probably I’m golden.”

“They may not have ended you, but they left scars,” I say. “And I know from experience, scars don’t stretch like original skin.”

“Scars are nothing compared to loss,” he says. “Lilly, Duncan, my Mom, basically anyone I loved who was worth a damn; they all disillusioned me, then boom, they were gone. I’d take a whole new layer of belt marks, if I could make those endings happier. I’d even take a few for the chance to say goodbye.”

I shake my head. “Logan,” I say, thinking of Duncan in the asylum, toyed with by Beaver like a bug on a pin. “I’m not sure it’s possible to prevent peoples’ fates. Maybe in some cases…temporarily. But sooner or later, the ax always falls. Those meant to suffer, do.”

He laughs. “Suffering’s a cakewalk compared to lack of closure.”

“Closure’s not all it’s cracked up to be,” I warn. Shrug, because navel gazing does nobody any good. “Come on, this is supposed to be a VACATION, not psychotherapy. Let’s go back to that party and dance.”

“Fair enough, Scarlett,” he says, with a nod. “Evading issues is our specialty, anyway.”

Hours later, we stagger back to the room, even tipsier, laughing maybe too much. He’s carrying me; my heel broke, and then I stabbed my foot with a shell. I’m clinging to his neck while he struggles to find his card key, snorting with giggles as he fumbles.

“Careful!” I protest, as he jostles me. “I almost lost my shoe!”

He sticks the key between his teeth, shifts me to his other arm with exaggerated gentleness, and
gets the door open. “And here I thought I was being romantic, carrying you across the threshold,” he
chides. Sets me on the bed. “You’re my blushing bride, right? It’s traditional.”

I smile, because I love that he’s joking. That we’re NOT engaged here, and he’s not looking for
commitment. His reticence to get involved may spring from a belief he doesn’t deserve me, which is
dumb…but still. It takes the pressure off.

“Me? Blush?” I examine the heel of my broken shoe. Toss it aside, unfixable, and unbuckle the
intact one. “I think you’ve carted home the wrong ingénue.”

“Well, you’re definitely no storybook princess.” He plugs in the coffee machine, tears open a
packet with his teeth. “But then again, I’m no prince.”

He smiles at me, suggestively, as if to intimate what he IS, instead; and I remember the way he
kissed my cheek, to make our fake engagement ‘seem real’. I touch the spot, Freudian slip, and his
smirk gets smugger. Logan’s no slouch at subtext.

“You want a cup, so you can mystery-solve?” he asks, unwrapping protective plastic. “Or you
ready to crash? As I recall, you had two drinks; but I spent time watching that dude spit fire, so I’m
not a hundred percent sure.”

“I remember a big yellow one with umbrellas, and a few sips of something blue,” I say. “I weigh
ninety-seven pounds, though, so it never takes much. Maybe we could rent pay-per-view, and order
room service? I feel lazy, but not TIRED-tired.”

“You want to SLACK?” He mimes exaggerated shock. “Who are you, and what have you done
to Veronica ‘no social life’ Mars, tireless crusader for pyrrhic justice?”


I flop back on the bed—the bed we SHARED last visit, because he thought I was too interesting
to sleep alone-- and watch him tidy up. He sets cups out, locates the menu and tosses it over; the
aroma of coffee fills the room, roasty and slightly bitter. He’s shucked his Hawaiian over-shirt, and
his muscles flex and shift under the OP tee.

(I approve of weight lifting class, even though I always diss it. Logan infuriates me frequently, but
he’s so fucking pretty.)

“How’s your foot?” he asks, sitting on the end of the bed. Picks it up with both giant hands and
examines the sole.

“Fine,” I say, letting him. “I just stepped on a shell. Didn’t even break the skin.”

He runs his thumb over the bruise, lets go. “I can’t believe you still want to eat, after that massive
pig-out at the luau. LITERALLY. Are you SURE you don’t have a tapeworm?”

“I’m an internal combustion engine,” I say, with a smirk. “High performance. I need LOTS of
fuel.”

He raises his brows, a small smile playing around his mouth. Clearly, he wants to indulge in
double entendre of the kind that gets him laid. But he just says, “Make sure you order something
chocolate,” and moves over to the coffee machine.

Starts whistling You Shook Me All Night Long.
I succumb to a grin, feeling a rush of love for him and his weird-ass ancient music. Remember Hearst Logan, humming Wish You Were Here as I drifted away, and my smile goes wistful.

I wonder how long it will be before I lose this version, too. Whether I’ll ever find a reality where I can settle in and stay.

There’s a pad of paper on the nightstand, a hotel-logo pen. I write down a few menu items and toss it his way; grab the shirt he wore yesterday and some clean underwear from the gift-shop bag. Head into the bathroom to change.

When I emerge, teeth brushed, he’s stripped to his boxers, sprawled in the easy chair, searching the pay-per-view menu. He locates Live Free, Die Hard, and lifts his brows. I shrug, and he grins anticipation, settles in.

I flop onto one side of the bed, leaving room for him if he feels so inclined. Grab the snack bag off the dresser, and root through for the sack of mini-Reeses. Hold it out, across the swath of space between us.

He gets up, nonchalant, sits on the mattress to take one. Unwraps and eats while I power through my handful and John McClane quips. Reclines without asking for more and tucks his hands behind his head, managing somehow to look even lazier. “The girl in this movie reminds me of you,” he informs me. “Not physically, at all, but she’s pugnacious. PUNCHY.”

“Oh, I’M punchy?” I fluff the pillow behind me and lie down. He turns his head sideways to look at me. “I guess if anyone’s qualified to judge, it’s you.”

“Now that’s unfair.” He shifts his whole body to face me, like he has no clue what a potent weapon he’s wielding. “I mostly only punch Weevil—and, you know, OTHER criminals, IF they get in my way. Admit it, you attack a much wider variety of dangerous people on a daily basis.”

“But I rarely engage in actual fisticuffs,” I counter. “Whereas you CURRENTLY have scabbed-over knuckles, plus a ten-inch knife wound in your side.”

“Mmmm, but we’re neck-and-neck when it comes to psychological torture.” He lets me grab his hand and show him his own injuries. “And you win the ‘railroading people into prison’ category by a mile. You’re a girl after my own heart, really.”

“Like you said.” I run a gentle thumb across his war wounds. “Only if they’re criminals who get in my way.”

His hand curls around both of mine and we gaze at each other, considering. “I think that internal combustion engine of yours is fueled by rage.”

“Among other emotions,” I agree. “All roiling. My heart isn’t interested in halfway measures.”

“No KIDDING.” His eyebrows do a sardonic dance, flatten. “Glass houses, though. It was an epically dumb move, bringing you along on my Flirting with Rock Bottom World Tour—but I didn’t even HESITATE.”

“Enh.” I try my coyest look on him, and his grip tightens. “You wouldn’t be you, second-guessing. And I believe I’ve previously mentioned I’m not fond of passive types.”

“Well this is new,” he says, dry. “You’ve been pursuing passive types with Scarlett-esque vigor since the first flush of puberty.”
“There you go comparing me to Scarlett O’Hara again.” I remove my hands from his, splay them across his chest. He’s always so warm, and the hair there is silky. “Does that make you Rhett? And are the three inches of bed between us Atlanta, burning?”

He looks down at the indicated spot; back up at me through his lashes, shy and not shy at once. Eyes limpid, brow wrinkled, Jesus he’s addictive. “It DOES feel hot in here!” he says, like this is a revelation, indicating the space between our bodies…and that’s it, I fold.

“Maybe it’s just you,” I say, which earns me the dangerous smile. I curl my fingers through his chest hair, raking lightly with my nails—the slight pressure makes him shiver.

“You’re trying to steal my prize for ‘Worst Idea of 2007’ aren’t you?” He tilts forward to speak into my ear, cheek brushing mine. “I warn you; I won’t give up without a fight.”

“Quitters are no fun,” I say, and his breath huffs out in a laugh.

He reaches up, slowly, watching his hand like he’s fascinated; just like he did that day, early in the slipstream, when I warned Yolanda not to kiss him. Traces hair out of my eyes and tucks it behind my ear. Trails fingertips down my throat to my shoulder. I flash a tremulous smile, and he smiles back, like he can’t help himself—as if my smiles make it mandatory to reply in kind.

He curls his palm around my shoulder, strokes a thumb down my upper arm. Sensation thrills along the nerves, in the wake of his touch. His hand slides around, flattens on my spine, pulls me closer. He nuzzles into my neck, just below my ear.

My whole body breaks out in gooseflesh.

With a soft humming sound, he eases his hand lower, spanning the small of my back. His knee pushes between mine. I arch against the rasp of hair, almost unbearably stimulating on delicate skin, rock my sex upwards against the long muscle of his thigh, and slide luxuriously, effortlessly into orgasm.

“This feels a lot like sex,” he murmurs, into my ear, and I moan, because my whole body’s throbbing to fuck him. “Which we aren’t supposed to be having. But I jerked off in the shower this morning, imagining you blowing me, and you just fucking came. So I’m thinking the difference is semantics.”

“We still have clothes on,” I argue, I don’t know why. “We haven’t even kissed.”

“Oh, those are the boundaries?” His mouth relaxes into smugness. One hand slips down to my ass, the other joins it; he grips a cheek in each palm and grinds us together, with the effortlessly graceful hip swivel that makes him sexual napalm. “No kissing, no intercourse, no nudity, but everything else goes?” He bites my shoulder, I start panting, and he tugs me by the ass until I climb astride.

He watches while I ride him, hair impossibly tousled, eyes lust-blurred. His hand lifts lazily, curls around my throat, down to squeeze my breast. “You’re so beautiful,” he says reverently, as if reciting a prayer; surges up in one fluid motion to lick a circle around my nipple. His teeth scrape the distended tip, sharpness blunted by thin cotton—he switches sides, gripping my waist to control my writhing.

I lean back, planting my hands on the mattress, he curls his legs tailor-style to support my weight, and it feels so FAMILIAR. This is MY Logan, for all intents and purposes; no inhibitions, no shame. Everything allowed if it brings pleasure in bed.
His thumbs slide over my sleep shorts, tracing shapes around my clit through the cloth, and he says, “You’re awfully wet for someone who’s not getting fucked, Veronica.”

“It’s your imagination,” I argue, as his hand slides back up my torso. His thumb circles my knotted areola with maddening lightness. “Your huge ego is confusing the issue.”

“You’re probably right.” He flips me, licks up my thigh. Then I’m short of breath, because he’s sucking at my sex with just the right pressure. Voracious. Like he’s starving, and I’m ambrosia.

I knot my hands in his hair, come hard, and he LAUGHS. Gets up on his knees. Starts stroking his own dick, unselfconscious, while I watch. His eyes drift closed.

I surge forward, press my mouth to him, licking at the shape of his cock through the boxers; he strokes my hair way more gently than I gripped his, making soft noises of encouragement. His hand falls away. I use my teeth, very gently, which turns the noises into moans. Focus attention on the head, coaxing it to swell above the waistband. Then close my lips around it, with a triumphant smirk, and suck the way he likes best until he comes.

His lids flutter up. His mouth’s hanging open in that pout he does that makes him look vulnerable, which he both is and isn’t, in devastating ways. I press a kiss to his dick, wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, and he pulls me up into his arms.

We fall sideways, and he presses kisses to my face—jawline, eyelids, cheeks, chin. He nips the tip of my nose, and I kiss him the same way, gentle busses in all available spots. Press my forehead to his. Gaze into his eyes.

“You know what I love?” he asks, quietly, nudging a strand of my hair aside with one fingertip. I shake my head. I’ve never known, not for sure.

“Living on the edge,” he says. “And blowing off incredibly stupid rules.”

He kisses my mouth, plumbing the depths, feeding me all the intimate passion we just tried to deny. We lie there, loosely embracing and kissing like it’s Junior High, infatuated and entangled, for a very long time.

THREAD FORTY ONE INVERTS

I’m dozing, chin in hand, vague drifting dreams of kissing Logan, tangle of cool sheets. Then he snaps “Ronica!” in a crisp pay-attention voice, and I jerk awake, almost face-planting.

He laughs at me from the other side of the table, settling back so he can mock comfortably. “Wow, I’m bringing my banter A-game, in an effort to set the scene, and you pass out right at the good part? Has our relationship lost its magic? Or did insomnia rear its head?”

Nope, just pregnant, I think, tearing open the chips in front of me as my stomach growls. I take stock of my surroundings as I munch—Hearst food court—and my condition—engaged, long-ish hair, no noticeable bump. Improved Past, then…which means Logan might not realize, yet, that he’s knocked me up. I’m SO not looking forward to telling him.

We’re camped out stage-center, drinks, lunch and cellphones spread across the table; a bag from the Co-op rests against my leg, full of shiny new textbooks. I guess that makes this beginning of Freshman Year. Logan’s in a Mario Kart baseball jersey, sporting extra-messy hair, and looks entirely too adorable to have a girlfriend who hides things. “Sorry,” I say. “Stayed up late reading.”
“If that’s the story you want to stick with.” He leans in to kiss me, then bends to rummage through his pack. “So. Let’s not make a huge deal of this, but…I got you something.”

He straightens holding a tiny box, clumsily wrapped, and presents it to me with a flourish. I smile, remembering the first variation on this theme. Tug off the big red bow, stick it to his shirt, and unwrap the gift to find a house key.

“You gave me the door card to your suite once, just this way,” I say, tracing the steel shape with a finger. Look up at him, wry. “Why am I sure that THIS you’s upped the ante?”

“Mrs. R.” He plants his elbows on the table, clasps his hands and rests his lips against them, grinning behind twined fingers. “As always, your timing is impeccable. You may recall we had a discussion about that house of my mom’s on my birthday, and how it was central somehow to your slipstream travels?”

I nod, and he says, “She decided to sell hers, so I built another one. The frame’s up and the door’s on; that right there is the key.”

A laugh slips out of me, because of COURSE. “Convenient to Hearst, I presume?”

“Up by Cape Crescent,” he confirms. “So I can hit the waves every morning. Or at least I can in six weeks, when my knee’s healed, which conveniently aligns with the build-out finishing. Veronica’s keen to decorate, though, so I asked for early access. Let me know how much like Howl’s you need it to look, and I’ll make sure that happens.”

I locate my key ring, add his gift. Everything inside me feels soft and warm; he built a whole HOUSE, just so I’d have a locus here. “Thank you,” I say. “So much.”

“Don’t mention it.” His smirk amplifies, equal parts smugness and delight. “In case you haven’t noticed, I like having you around.”

“So what are we doing on campus?” I stick my purse under my chair and go back to the chips, because priorities. “Has school started?”

He shakes his head. “First day of class is tomorrow. Today we’re moving Wallace into his dorm room. He’s gonna give us a ring once he gets here with the U-Haul.”

“What happened to the bugs?” I ask. “From Hazelwood, I mean. And where are Beaver and Victor? I slipstreamed out right after we made our great escape.”

“Beaver’s still missing,” he says. “But we DID manage to review the bugs, and based on that…”

“Hola, compadres.” Dick plunks down in the chair between us, setting an extra-large, sweating Big Gulp on the table. “Just the two generous-hearted people I was hoping to see.”

“We’re having a moment here, Dick.” Logan flashes sardonic eyebrows, which has no effect. “Just because Ronica and I live together doesn’t mean romance is dead.”

“Oh whatever, you probably romanced twice before you got out of bed this morning.” Dick takes Logan’s chips away, digs in. He’s sweaty and unwashed, in an ungrateful pain-in-the-ass mood, but he doesn’t seem drunk. Which is an improvement over the last time I saw him, sort of. “Let’s talk about a REAL problem. Like how I’m fucked, because the Pi Sigs kicked me out, and I need a place to stay. And you guys just HAPPEN to have a suite with room service, and maid service--AND a spare bed, for which I don’t have to pay.”
Logan sighs. “Dude. Sometimes being friends with you is like having a large untrained house pet. One that belches, and steals beer.”

“So that’s a yes?” Dick grins, pats him on the back. Gets up and grabs his drink, leaving a smear of liquid behind. “Way to be a bro, bro. My shit’s out in the car, they threw it on the lawn after I got their charter suspended. I’ll move it up while you finish your ‘romancing’. You totally won’t even know I’m there.”

“Howd I doubt that,” Logan says, dryly, then fishes for his ringing phone. “No-Tell Motel,” he answers. “Home to every surf-crazed vagrant who ever mooned the dean and an auditorium full of feminists, apparently.”

Dick double-thumbs-up, like he’s proud of this act, and goes on his merry way before he’s roped into helping Wallace. I roll my eyes, reflecting on how little reformation’s reformed him.

“We’re Oscar Mike.” Logan snaps his phone shut, bounces to his feet. “He’s in Benes Hall, right around the corner. And FYI…if you find the Showgirls poster he kept taped in his closet, unpacking? Just….don’t mention it, OK?”

Half an hour later, I’m smoothing purple sheets over Wallace’s extra-uncomfortable dorm bed when he and Logan stagger through, carrying six teetering boxes. They’re followed by Mac, who ambles in with her computer satchel, looking ever-so-faintly relieved.

“Guess I arrived just in time,” she says, as Wallace sets his stack down with a grunt. “Unpacking is more my forte than hauling.”

“Then you’re in luck.” Logan dusts his hands. Grimaces at them, wipes them on his jeans. Turns this into a massage of his injured knee, revealing the contours of a brace beneath the jeans. “That’s the last of it. You can help V put the linens away--enjoy stroking those super-soft towels Alicia broke down and bought.”

“See, when you say it like that, it sounds unmanly.” Wallace removes a trophy from a box, sets it on the bookcase.

“The bathroom stuff’s over here,” I tell Mac, smoothing the top sheet, crisply folding the edge. “Take the whole container. And depending on your utility with a screwdriver, feel free to fasten his toothbrush holder to the wall.”

“If it’s not electronic, it’s not my skillset,” she says. “But I’ll do what I can.”

“You get your schedule today, man?” Wallace asks Logan, taping his up to the wall. “We have any classes together?”

“Let me see.” Logan pulls out his phone to compare. I’ve taught him my photographing-important-papers trick, I guess, which makes me strangely proud. “Weightlifting,” he says. “And sociology. Also, looks like you’ve got English Literature with Dick. THAT should be entertaining.”

Wallace snorts, and I say, “I’ve heard about the sociology class. There’s a guard-and-prisoner experiment for extra credit, right? Seems like that shouldn’t be legal, what with all the damaging dom/sub relationships left in its wake.”

“So we’re cannon fodder to those seeking tenure?” Logan quirks a brow as he starts shelving books. “Par for the course in Neptune. I’d say let’s console ourselves with frat parties and beer; but
thanks to Dick, we’re persona non grata on the Greek scene.”

“Yeah that was one for the record books,” Mac emerges, frowning, screwdriver in hand. “At least shunning decreases the odds of him falling off the wagon. Maybe he’ll actually go to class this year.”

“What about you, V?” Wallace asks. “You like your schedule? You and Mackenzie gonna rush for sororities, embrace your girlie side?”

“You’re kidding, right?” I spread out Wallace’s duvet, which features a big yellow Transformer. “Those girls SING, in five-part harmony. I’d rather drink lye.”

“I met my roommate this morning.” Mac grasps the bottom edge of the comforter, straightens it. “SHE’S rushing sororities. Taped posters of pop stars all over our walls. Plus I’ve already seen her naked, TWICE.”

I sigh, because Parker Lee. I was hoping I’d escape the slipstream before she showed up again.

“Sounds like YOUR room’s gonna be popular,” Wallace says, which makes Mac roll her eyes. “Assuming she’s pretty? The future sorority girl?”

“She’s pretty, but so’s your GIRLFRIEND,” Mac chides. “I dunno, I’m no judge. She’s a stereotypical bubbly blonde, frighteningly cheerful. Dealing with her before coffee might prove problematic.”

“Join the campus Animal Rights group,” I suggest. “Flirt with hot granola boys and save the whales. The environment will thank you, and it’ll keep you out of your room.”

“Yeah, my extracurricular time is packed,” Mac says, dryly. “The whales will have to fend for themselves this year.”

“And don’t think we don’t appreciate that.” Logan hands her a pillow shaped like the Death Star. “Did you SEE the sales numbers for last month? Online swag purchase is up EIGHT PERCENT since we took out those ads in High Times.”

Mac opens her mouth to respond, but is interrupted by a loud voice from the doorway. “Holy crap, it’s an invasion!” Piz shoulders into the room with a laundry basket and boom box. “Not the British type, right? I don’t see bowl haircuts, or screaming, fainting girls.”

She looks at me skeptically, while I try not to seem like I’m internally screaming FUCK; Wallace deflects with some comment.

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She looks at me skeptically, while I try not to seem like I’m internally screaming FUCK; Wallace steps into the breach. “You must be my roommate. Stosh Whatever?”

“Yeah, Piznarski.” The Menace sets his stuff down on the bed I just made, wrinkling it. “But everyone calls me Piz, because who can pronounce Piznarski? I just hope you’re not Wallace. Because I specifically mentioned on my application, I don’t want to live with someone who’s…”

He pauses, leading, with a big, dumb, white-toothed smile, and I clock Logan tensing from all the way across the room. “…so much more handsome than me!” Piz finishes. Then snorts with laughter.

Jesus, sometimes the slipstream is like a nightmare from which I can’t wake up. Are all the Other Veronicas on CRACK?

“A wise man knows when he’s beaten,” Logan says, silkily, his faux-casual lean dialing up to eleven. “Fingers crossed it’s not too late to switch.”

I move towards him to prevent, or maybe encourage, chaos; Wallace deflects with some comment.
about good genes. Mac elbows Logan and mutters, “Quit. Our friend has to live with him. Besides, you say worse things to Weevil on a daily basis.”

“Yeah, but Weevil’s an ASSHOLE,” Logan explains, helpfully. “This guy’s insulting WALLACE.”

“So Piz, meet my crew, Logan, Veronica, Mac.” Wallace pointedly interrupts the whispered tête-a-tête. “They’re helping me unpack. I hope it’s not a problem if they hang around sometimes?”

“As long as it’s not a problem for them that I chill in my room naked,” Piz says, cracking himself up again.

Logan notes me vibrating with rage, and murmurs, “Are the fingers curved into claws about the messed-up bed? Or do you actually know this guy?”

“Oh, I know him,” I say, through clenched teeth, straightening my hands with effort. “He’s the slipstream equivalent of leprosy. No matter how much I change fate, he NEVER GOES AWAY.”

“What about leprosy?” Mac asks, retrieving a dropped hanger. Notices Logan’s frown, and frowns too. “Wait, do I even want to know?”

“Later,” I say. “Now we focus on escape.”

Piz, displaying his usual level of self-absorption, has yet to realize we’re not all listening, and is continuing his monologue. “Yeah, some guy named Mervin, I can’t even remember, we met on the stairs. He said there’s a casino in his room on Fridays, which sounds AWESOME, right? We should go!”

“Mercer?” Logan asks, with an undercurrent of amusement. “Mercer Hayes?”

“Oh, you DO know him!” Piz chirps, and Logan represses laughter.

“Sure.” He sets Wallace’s pencil holder on the desk, gives it a pat. “Neptune’s a surprisingly small town.”

“Well I feel like I should network,” Piz says. “Get my name out there, since I’m trying to break into radio—and also, I want people to show up for my band. Maybe you’ve heard of us, Black Licorice?” Off blank looks, “We were really successful in Portland, and we JUST cut an album. I should be marketing it, right? Hey, any of you guys want to buy a copy?”

He rummages through the laundry bin, produces a stack of CD’s, and Mac saunters over to have a look. I mutter to Logan, “Remind me to tell you about Mercer Hayes, soon-ish. Most likely we’ll need to put him in jail.”

“For gambling?” Logan asks, skeptically. “Might as well lock up half our graduating class. Including ourselves.”

“If there turns out to be a campus rapist roofie-ing girls and shaving their heads?” I say, grimly. “It’s him—along with his prison-experiment-gimp buddy Moe, who HAPPENS to be the RA for this dorm. Never, ever drink Moe’s tea.”

“Great,” Logan drawls. “This fucking town. Maybe I should change my major to pottery.”

“So hey, I sure have a lot of boxes in my car downstairs,” Piz says, leadingly. “Since you guys are done unpacking Wallace’s stuff, how about you give me a hand?”
“Of course, man, glad to help.” Wallace stashes the last of his new notebooks in his desk. “Where’s your gear?”

“In a van ten miles away, along with the untended possessions of other idiots,” I mutter, which makes Logan double-take. “If this reality’s anything like mine.”

“Downstairs in the fire lane,” Piz says cheerfully, leading the way. “This fat, I mean heavy-set girl said she’d keep an eye on it for me while she waited on her boyfriend. She’s part of the Hearst Welcome Wagon Committee, which is kind of cool, right? Community spirit, lending a hand?”

“Seriously?” Logan demands, incredulous. Wallace smiles, then quickly suppresses it. “Were you allowed OUTSIDE during childhood?”

“Oh sure, I LIVED in the neighborhood park,” Piz says, missing the sarcasm. “Me and my dog Spotty. I grew up in Beaverton, that’s like a suburb of Portland. I had the most normal childhood ever.”

“Well that makes one of us.” Logan takes my hand and kisses it as he follows Piz out (more I suspect because he wants to enjoy the show than because he plans to help Piz move). “Logan was speaking metaphorically,” Mac explains, with a sideways glance at me. Because apparently I’M supposed to smooth over my boyfriend’s caustic comments. “There IS no Hearst Welcome Wagon Committee that I know of. Or at least they certainly weren’t around MY dorm yesterday.”

“But that wasn’t a problem for YOU,” I say, sweetly. “Because you locked your car before you started carrying things upstairs.”

Piz looks at me, horrified, for a beat, and then takes off running. Logan doesn’t even wait for him to turn the corner before succumbing to laughter. “Nice,” he murmurs. “He never should have messed up that bed.”

“Come on, y’all, I have to sleep in the ROOM with him!” Wallace says. “I know it’s asking a lot, but can you NOT set the dial for maximum sarcasm every time you interact?”

“I promise nothing,” I say. “I don’t like him enough to keep Logan from attacking.”

We reach the bottom, open the stairwell door, and there’s Piz standing on the parking circle, both hands threaded through his hair. He’s staring at his car, door hanging open, wearing the facial expression equivalent of a sad wah-wah sound. “My GUITAR,” he says, when Wallace moves up next to him, expressing sympathy; Wallace is just a better person than the rest of us. “I had a Gretsch 1967 Astro Jet Red Top in there. How am I going to PLAY?”

“V and Mac can get it back for you.” Wallace pats his shoulder. “They can find anything.”


Logan’s brows lift in gleeful anticipation of my smackdown, but Wallace beats me to the punch. “They run a detective agency. A GOOD one. Veronica’s planning to join the FBI after school.”

“Seriously?” Piz gives us a dubious glance—I notice the crush-at-first-sight he nursed in my reality seems stillborn, here. “Don’t you have police in this town who can handle it?”

“We have a sheriff,” I say, because Mac elbows me. “But if there’s an organized ring of thieves on campus, which is probably the case? Some cops are no doubt taking a cut.”
Piz sighs, like he wonders how he, of all people, ended up here. “How much do you want to track my stuff down?”

“Special Wallace’s roommate rate,” I say. “Fifteen hundred. Cash only, and we’ll need an advance for expenses up front.”

“I don’t have that kind of money!” he protests, slack-jawed. “Can I pay you in guitar lessons? Or, like, installments?”

“Not if you want us to actually detect.” Mac checks her watch. “We have a business to run, and none of us aspire to be rock stars.”

“Fine.” Piz kicks a rock, glum. “I’ll borrow money from my dad. If I don’t get that guitar back, I have zero sources of income.”

“I suggest Western Union,” I say, ignoring Logan’s snicker. “If you want me to start today. Give the first $500 to Wallace, I’ll rendezvous with him later. Now if you’ll excuse us, we need to start mixing cookie dough! I’ll be in touch.”

“I am…genuinely shocked you took this case,” Logan says, after he finishes laughing, and we’ve walked away. “And honestly, disappointed. I was looking forward to the evisceration.”

“Wallace asked us to play nice,” I say, innocent, with a faint sideways smirk. “I kid. Mac elbowed me until I offered, and besides, it’s shooting fish in a barrel. I know who took his toys. Plus, I feel it’s in Wallace’s best interest if I solve the question of WHY.”

“Well that was fast, even for you,” Mac says. “Care to share?”

“There’s a criminal justice major and Dickens fan here on campus, runs a ring of thieves made up of at-risk kids. His girlfriend, the ‘fat chick’, is advance scout. They sell a few hot-ticket items at flea markets and on Craigslist, but most of their filthy lucre gets warehoused. Really all we have to do is pick up lawn chairs and beer, head over to the garage full of contraband, and make a phone call to Sacks en route.”

Logan frowns. “The guy’s stealing stuff and stashing it in his garage? He’s not using it, or hocking it?”

“He hocks expensive items that sell quickly,” I repeat. “Meaning that guitar’s not long for this world, so we should move today.”

“It’s just, when Weevil used to boost cars, they were in and out of the chop shop within hours. Why would anyone keep PROOF of crime long-term, unless…”

“They were using it as leverage?” I smile and wink-point. “Obliviously upper-middle- class boys OUGHT to have money to burn, day one of college, but Piz is broke. I smell secrets. Which I want to get to the bottom of, before Wallace is affected.”

“It would behoove us to research the ringleader,” Mac contributes. “See if we can find a money trail linking him to someone extort-y. What’s his name?”

“Donald Fagin,” I say, with a grin. “Strangely, it’s NOT an alias.”

“Poor guy was doomed to a life of crime,” Mac decides, checks her watch again. “OK I’m late to meet my roommate; I promised I’d go with her to buy supplies. You want to catch up later, say around five-ish? Compare notes?”
“Works for me,” I say. “Thanks. I’ll text you before we do the take-down, in case you want to enjoy the endorphin rush.”

“I get my endorphins the old-fashioned way.” She smiles. “With borderline legal internet shenanigans. But you do you, V. And tell Sacks hi.”

I salute her and she wanders off, stopping to read a flyer for a local dance studio. Logan says, “You get a pained look on your face every time she mentions the roommate.”

“Parker Lee,” I say, in a less-than-thrilled voice. “I was hoping somehow fate would let me steer clear.”

“Whee.” He takes my hand, kisses it. “It’s our first day on campus, and already there’s land mines everywhere.”

Logan leads me to the Rover, through a quad packed with ‘Take Back the Night’ demonstrators, swinging our joined hands, smiling at the sun on his face. He seems happy to follow the path chosen, let the year unfold; I wish I felt so serene. His whole world is gold as long as his inner circle’s secure…but I’m always looking for dark clouds on the horizon.

Once we’re in the car, I call Weevil, since he’s my go-to informant RE the criminal element. He answers with, “Stirring pots again, V?”

“What do you know about extortion?” I settle back to watch Logan shift gears, because his arms are truly spectacular. “Specifically, a ring of thieves at Hearst College who hold stolen goods hostage. What’s the motivation?”

“Sounds to me like low-level mob.” The raucous chatter behind him quiets as he shuts a door. “Recouping losses. You want me to kick over some rocks, look for snakes?”

“Would you?” I ask. “Here’s a hint—the ringleader’s a guy named Donald Fagin. And the suspicious-acting victim is Wallace’s new roommate, Stosh Piznarski.”

“On it,” he says. “As soon as I call some lady about a new case. Anything else?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Where’s the best place in town to buy lawn chairs?”

“The metal kind?” he asks, amused. “Or the soccer-game kind? Because I’m a fan of Home Depot, myself.”

“Either/or,” I say, grinning as Logan flexes unnecessarily for my entertainment. “We just want to watch Fagin squirm in comfort. Thanks Weevs, you’re a peach.”

“You and Echolls need to investigate a life skills class at that fancy college of yours,” he informs me. “How to Function Without a Butler: the Way the Other Half Lives.”

“Huh. I’ll have my assistant schedule it.” I mouth ‘Home Depot’ as Logan stops at a light and lifts his brows. “Catch you on the flip side.”

“So what does everyone’s favorite grease monkey have to contribute on the topic of Piz?” Logan hooks a left one-handed, paying cursory attention to the road.

“He’s gonna make some calls,” I say, “but he’s thinking mob. GOSH I hope it’s one of the two
we’ve already angered!” I slide my phone shut, notice the date and pause. What’s so important about today? Not school, not Logan, it’s…

“Dad!” I snap my fingers, connecting the dots. “Today’s the day Dad disappeared, then came home with a bullet in his leg. I need to warn him, so he can avoid getting shot.”

“Good plan.” Logan extracts sunglasses from the overhead compartment, dons them. “Keith’s been through a LOT this year already.”

I dial, press the phone to my ear. Roll my eyes when I get voicemail, because of COURSE Dad’s out of range. “Hey big spender,” I say, after the beep. “Just a quick warning, for anybody ill-advisedly helping Kendall Casablancas. She and her compatriots are desperate and might shoot. Stay armed and vigilant, even if everything seems kosher.”

The phone clicks as I hang up. “So before we got rudely interrupted,” I say. “You were telling me about Beaver and Victor?”

“Victor took off for Big Sur.” Logan hands me my bag so I can put my cell away. “Said he had business there, I’ve got no idea what. Duncan’s been moved to a high-security facility; the investigation after our escapade led to a massive crackdown. And Beaver’s officially a person of interest in the Sharks Murders, with a warrant out and everything. Veronica took the evidence we collected to her friend at the FBI.”

“Nice!” I say, because sometimes Other V nails the dismount. “Warn Veronica not to get too chummy with Agent Morris. She’s smart, but she’s doing her best to get ME jailed for life.”

“Noted,” he says. “We met Gory Sorokin at a cocktail party at Jake and Lianne’s the other day, by the way. THAT was fun. He offered me a drink, but I was afraid he’d take the Madison Sinclair route and spit in it.”

“Or poison it,” I agree. “Best to steer clear.”

“I’m TRYING,” Logan says, plaintive. “But Jake’s persistent, Castle-wise. It’s getting increasingly hard to turn him down non-confrontationally, even for someone with MY golden tongue.”

He parks with a jerk in the Home Depot lot, and hops out. “Keep trying,” I advise, following. “I’ll seek leverage that makes your struggle unnecessary.”

“So what was Weev’s advice, as relates to lawn chairs?” He drapes an arm across my shoulders. “We always had painted teak Adirondacks, and no way will those fit in the back.”

“We don’t have to do this,” I say. “The showy ‘notice me catching you’ bit. We can just call the cops and go about our business. Jerry’ll let us know what they find.”

“Are you kidding?” he asks. “Watching the bastards pay is the best PART of your schemes.”

XXXXX

Four hours later, mystery wrapped up and Piz tearfully reunited with his guitar, we’re waiting for Mac and Weevil outside the dubiously named Pussycat Lounge. I’m hoping Mac was right about it definitely not being a strip bar.

Logan, numb to the prospect after the life he’s led, is texting Wallace; doing his level best to convince him dorms are lame. He’s handicapped, though, because we don’t have a spare room to
offer. Dick’s surely in residence by now, running up porn charges.

“Ah, the sacred bonds of friendship.” My boyfriend snaps his phone shut with an audible click, baring his teeth in distaste. “Wallace is staying put. Alicia told him if he moved out of the dorm, she’d start dropping by unexpectedly.”

“Do we have a deadbolt?” I ask, in case she takes the same tactic with Logan. “Never mind, we have a Dick. Our days of spontaneously doing it on the kitchen table are at an end.”

“Wow, way to incentivize me to oust him,” Logan says. “Maybe we could set his room on fire?”

“Things to ponder.” I lift a hand, palm out. “Hold that thought. We’re about to be infiltrated by clueless normals.”

I glare at Mac, who’s approaching with a pink-haltered, made-up-to-the-nines Parker, over six feet tall in heels and effervescing visibly. They stop so Parker can chatter at some guy in a yellow muscle shirt, and Mac gives an apologetic wince.

“FINALLY, you obtain the third Angel,” Logan decides, studying her.

“That’s Parker Lee,” I tell him, suddenly tired. “Hands, lips and eyes off, please.”

“Let me guess.” He folds his arms and gazes down at me, sardonic. “Other Logan slept with this one, too.”

“It’s like you’re psychic.” I wince as yellow shirt lays on the smarm, and Parker giggles. “Also, I’d better be the hot Angel in this scenario.”

“Oh, you’re Jill,” he assures me, certain. “That blonde over there is definitely a Kelly.” I narrow my eyes, and he says, “What? My fetish for short and bitchy is well-known.”

“In the doghouse, Echolls?” Weevil asks, sauntering up behind us. He’s in a motorcycle jacket and Dockers and looks tired. “Why all the disclaimers?”

“Just making my priorities clear,” Logan tells him, draping an arm around my shoulders. “DARLING club you’ve chosen for this evening’s festivities.”

“There’s a bartender here V needs to meet,” Weevil explains. “Got some information pertaining to today’s case he’s willing to share.”

“He’s not a friend of Fagin’s, I hope?” I ask. “Because we already turned that guy in. You were right, too; they had VERY nice chairs at Home Depot.”

“Fagin’s a Fitzpatrick stooge.” Weevil folds his arms, studying Mac and Parker. “Big surprise, considering the name. He’s a second cousin of the dumb one, what’s-his-name, Boyd. No word from my contacts on why he’s stashing shit instead of selling it; but he’s been running this rip-off ring on all three local colleges for years.”

“The criminal says, admiringly,” Logan observes. Then, as Mac approaches, “I didn’t realize it was Bring a Buddy to Work Day. I’d have dragged Dick along. My room service bill would thank me.”

“This is my suitemate, Parker,” Mac says, resigned. “I told her I was going out, and she got dressed up and came along. Parker, Eli and Veronica are my partners at the agency. And this is Veronica’s boyfriend, Logan.”
“Fiance, actually.” Logan extends a hand. “Charmed, I’m sure.”

Parker laughs, shakes. “Are you REALLY engaged already, first year of college? You don’t want to, I don’t know, explore your newfound freedom? Make sure this grass is greenest?”

“I’ve staked out the best patch,” Logan says firmly, arm tightening around my shoulders, because he’s an intelligent guy who likes his limbs. “And I’m not the one in this crowd with ambitions towards lawn maintenance.”

“He means me,” Weevil mock-whispers, as if in aside, leaning forward to shake as well. “On account of my Grandma used to be ‘the help’. Parker, right? Most everybody except McKenzie here calls me Weevil.”

“If I’d known you were bringing along hot boys in leather,” Parker tells Mac, “I would have worn more perfume!”

“This club don’t look like much,” he confides, flashing his pursed-lips version of a smile. “But I hear they’ve got a great rockabilly band. If you’re into that sort of thing.”

“I’m into anything that screams ‘fun and adventure’.” Parker squares her shoulders and straightens her top. “Lead on! And maybe while we’re dancing, you can tell me about your tattoos.”

Mac makes apologetic eyebrows at him, and he winks. She shakes her head, watching them go, and says, “Donald Fagin earns terrible grades, counsels unfortunate youths who never improve, and dates a girl who spent tenth grade in juvie. That’s as far as I got before the Enthusiasm Hurricane struck.”

“She’s not so bad.” I follow Mac through the door, wait while Logan pays the painfully bored doorman. It’s remarkable how my resentment shrinks when Logan acknowledges we’re dating. “Just chatty and extra-girly.”

Mac shudders, glancing around the dingy, bare-bones interior with distaste. “You only say that because pink and fake was once your specialty. Myself, I’m feeling VERY Odd Couple.”

Logan flings himself onto a peeling bar stool and spins. “Rethinking you pro stance regarding on-campus housing?”

“In spades,” she admits. “But I’ve already paid, and the thought of forfeiting all that money gives me hives. So I will now splash cold water on my face, and pep-talk myself into sticking out the semester. Order me a Coke?”

He salutes, and I perch on the stool beside him. Wave at the bartender, who keeps right on talking to some weedy, bearded dude. Service isn’t a priority here, I guess.

“You know,” Logan says, “looked at in the right light, our monogamy’s almost a community service.”

“What a relief,” I say, amused. Plant an elbow on the bar to better watch him expound.

He indicates Weevil with his chin, chatting up Parker at the edge of the dance floor. “If I monopolized all the women you claim I have, back in your reality? Poor Dick and Weevs would never get LAID.”

“And you’d get laid so often it would cease to mean much,” I agree.
He fixes me with the world’s most skeptical stare, but I do NOT want to know how often he bangs Other Veronica. I give blank face back. “I can’t picture it,” he says, relenting. “Or rather, I can see myself scoring with relative ease, but I can’t imagine WANTING to. I’ve always been a relationship guy--zero interest in one-nighters. Or girls who only like me because I’m that asshole’s son.”

“My Logan doesn’t mean to be promiscuous either. It’s just…” I try to formulate a description, and how objectively it’s true--he’s a charming, proto-alcoholic celebutante who sleeps around. But subjectively, he’s irresistible. Quicksand. “He’s YOU,” I say finally, shrugging. “He’s got MOJO. He holds attention with a smile, frequently a dickish one; he COULD make anyone do anything. But he DOESN’T, because he thinks it’s cheap, and that’s fascinating.”

“So all this work I’ve done to get my shit together wasn’t necessary?” Logan rests his elbows behind him on the bar, sounding peeved. “I could skate by on smarm and attitude, and you’d be equally smitten?”

“Hey, you KNOW how proud I am of you. You have flourished in this reality, and it’s amazing. I’m just saying, the attraction between us isn’t conditional.” I put my hand on his arm. “It’s about who we ARE. Even when you’re fucked up and unhappy, you’re still the guy I love.”

He smiles at me, slow-growing, making that obscene level of eye contact I’m helpless to resist. Says, “I wonder how clean the bathrooms are, here.”

“Don’t even think about it, V.” Weevil sits next to me, gestures at the bartender with a jerk of his head. “I brought you to this joint for business. Jump fancy-pants on your own time.”

“Where’s Parker?” I watch the bartender nod and wind up his chat. He’s tall and skeletal, with brown-black hair and a scraggly goatee; his eyes are a weird, transparent tea shade.

“Handed her off to Mac.” He shrugs, blasé. “Girl who brought her can entertain her. Parker’s pretty, nice, too. But I’m not out to be someone’s walk on the wild side this particular evening.”

“What’s happening, homes?” the bartender approaches before I can reply--does some complicated handshake with Weevil and bumps shoulders. “These the friends you told me about?”

“Yeah, this here’s Veronica Mars.” Weevil gestures. “She wants to ask some questions about that guy Donald Fagin.”

“Veronica Mars, who put half the Fitzpatricks in jail?” The bartender smiles, faintly. “Hey, any enemy of theirs is a friend of mine. Those Micks come in here sometimes, though, guapa, you want to be careful. Conal likes the girl who sings with the band. My boss SAYS he lets ‘em hang because they tip heavy; myself, I think they’re moving product through the back room. I like getting paid every week though, so I don’t ask.”

“And what’s Fagin’s function in the gang?” I ask. “Collecting debts owed, maybe?”

He shrugs. “Fagin’s kind of an equal opportunity character, you know what I mean? He steals for profit, and for blackmail, and ‘cause someone in the organization said ‘hey, steal that thing and stash it’. He ain’t the brains, for damn sure; it’s anyone’s guess why he hasn’t been caught.”

“He has,” I say. “I had him picked up today after he ripped off my client.”

The guy laughs. “No wonder they tried to burn your house down. You badASS, girl!”

“I do my modest best,” I say. “Any idea if Fitzpatricks have revamped the organization enough to
Scraggly black hair flies as he shakes his head. “They got partners for all the big gigs now. Not enough manpower left on the outside. There’s a guy comes in sometimes with Conal to watch the band and pick up girls, that’s the one you want to keep an eye on. He’s got all the cash lately. No matter how much shit sticks to everyone else, he stays clean and shiny.”

“An admirable skill,” Logan interjects. “He here tonight?”

“Nah, they turn up Wednesdays.” The bartender goes after a smudge with a rag. “Come back then, you’ll know him by his shiny suits. I don’t recommend approaching, though. You rich blonde types stick out. And nobody who’s friends with the Micks is Veronica Mars’ biggest fan.”

“Thanks.” I show Weevil a fifty under the bar. He nods, so I stick it in the tip jar. “You mind giving us a Coke and Sunkist in bottles, plus whatever these gentlemen want? We’ll be out of your hair in five.”

“On the house,” the bartender says. “Get rid of fancy suit and his friends, and you drink free as long as I work here.”

I salute him with the soda he hands me, watch as he wanders off.

“So I guess we drink up and let Mac not enjoy dancing? Then seek out more amenable entertainment?” Logan uncaps my Skist and hands it over, opens his Corona. Takes a sip, like he’d be happy to do just that. “Or rather, I drink up, while you stay primly on the wagon?”

“I’m dehydrated,” I protest, without heat. Because if I tell him why I’m abstaining it’ll kick up a ruckus. I wave the Coke at Mac to get her attention--she smiles relief and starts across the room.

“Weevil, you said something about a new job?”

“Yes, I checked the messages while you were hunting for petty thieves,” he says. “We got one from some rich white lady whose precious is up shit creek. I figured she couldn’t be threatened by tattoos out of hiring us over the phone, so I called her back.”


“Door number one,” he corrects. “Kid got busted for possession. He offered to turn evidence that the Hearst Liberal Arts library is a distribution hub; Van Lowe shooed him off, needless to say. Mom’s frantic he might have a permanent mark on his record--she wants proof he can use to make a federal deal.”

I sigh. At least this answers the question ‘Why did I take a library job, even though I’m knocked up and rich?’ “So let me guess. We find employment on campus and scope things out…me as a mild-mannered help-desk clerk, you as an after-hours janitor?”

Weevil lifts a brow. “Great minds work alike. If I get a maintenance gig, I’ll have keys to every building. You think it’s doable?”

“I can manage it,” I say. “But we’re compensated by the client for time spent on-duty. It’ll prevent us from working other, potentially more lucrative, cases.”

“You sure you have the bandwidth for this?” Logan asks, in a leading way, like I’m supposed to say no. “What with all your classes, and building a house? Among other concerns?”
“Bandwidth for what?” Mac asks, arriving flushed. She picks up her Coke and drains half. “New case?”

“A potentially very lucrative one,” I explain. “Look, Mac’s more booked than I am. And Weevil’s forte is disguises and hazard duty, not blending in with rich kids. This sounds safer than a lot of jobs we accept—I don’t get why it’s a big deal.”

“Veronica wants to work at the Hearst library,” Logan tells Mac. “Where she’ll make scheduled appearances alone, at night, in an easy-access public space. Beaver Casablancas will cream himself when he hears. But look how I’m acting reasonable and just drinking rapidly, instead of wigging out.”

“Hey, you can hang at a table and study,” I tell him. “Assuming you DO plan to study, in the upcoming year?”

“I do NOW.” He sets his empty on the bar and gestures for another. “We’re done in this shithole, right? Somebody go round up Kelly while I chug. There’s a safer club for her to flirt in, a couple blocks down the road.”

“Logan.” I squeeze his arm, to recapture his attention. “Don’t sweat this. I’ll LET you protect me.”

“Veronica.” He leans close to my ear, voice uncompromising. “Quit making risky decisions by fiat. Other you was FURIOUS after the asylum debacle, what with all the crime-committing, and crazy-person freeing, and surf-career-ruining—not to mention, you apparently went DIRECTLY against her wishes. Endanger her without consent again, and it won’t be pretty.”

I sit back, surprised. Is Logan, devoted Improved Past Logan, taking a White Knight stand for Other Veronica? To protect her from ME, because she considers me a THREAT?

I want to square up and say, ‘How do you plan to stop me?’ I want to tell him, ‘I make my own choices, and if you don’t like it, fuck off.’ But Weevil’s sitting right here, watching Mac thread her way towards Parker, and it hits me….

This isn’t my life.

It belongs to another Veronica who can’t control my actions, but has to live with them after the fact. A Veronica who found no evidence of wrongdoing in Duncan’s care, and didn’t want to set Victor free. When I insisted on the rescue, I went past making her uncomfortable, and into ‘doing things she hates, using her body’ territory.

It’s maybe one degree different from Duncan’s choices at Shelly’s party. I’m skating dangerously close to becoming the villain. And Logan’s trapped in the middle of our conflict, trying to protect us both.

Fuck, I can’t deal with this right now. Not while everyone’s staring at me. Not when someone might guess. I need to move, act. I need to get AWAY.

“Fine.” I set my bottle down with a clank. “Clear the job with all parties, let me know the verdict. I’m going outside. This smoke in here is making it hard to BREATHE.”

“Ronica…” Logan calls behind me, and Weevil says, “Relax, I got this.” I don’t care if they follow me, though. As long as they leave me alone, because I can’t, I can’t….

I burst through the door, into the smoggy, humid night, rush around the corner to the alley and
slump against the wall. Hug myself, breathing fast, fighting back sobs—keep it together, don’t you fucking cry…

It takes several minutes for the gasps to slow, let go of the choke hold on my diaphragm. I’m OK, I decide. I won’t fall apart. Funny, after all I’ve been through, that the last straw would be this.

I straighten up, breathe deep, walk back into view. Weevil’s waiting by the door, arms folded, leaning against the wall. “I don’t know what Richie said back there,” he tells me, studying the building across the street. “But I’ve been on the receiving end of his little bon mots. I’m guessing it wasn’t pretty.”

“I screwed up,” I say. “This one’s all me.”

“Be that as it may,” he turns to look at me, and the lack of judgment in his dark eyes is soothing. “You’re my girl, V; I ain’t leaving you unguarded in this neighborhood to hyperventilate on your lonesome. That didn’t work out so good, last time…and one kidnapping is enough to last you.”

I laugh, weakly, lean against the wall beside him. “It’s good we can joke about these things.”

“You don’t want to take the library case?” he asks, because Weevil is shrewd.

“Let me think about it,” I say. “When I’m in a more normal frame of mind, I’ll let you know.”

He nods, and I watch club-goers wander down the street between businesses, dressed in their hookup-hunting clothes. “Do you ever feel a thousand years old?” I ask him. “Like normal twenty-something activities lost appeal so long ago, they’re distant memories?”

“I was never much of a partier,” he says. “Had real-life pressing concerns—needed my wits about me, you know?”

“I used to be so FRIVOLOUS,” I admit, somewhat wistfully. “And so naïve, without realizing it. I thought I was shrewd, cop dad, up to all the tricks. I thought my smart mouth meant I was sophisticated, but I was SO WRONG.”

“Act jaded long enough, you’ll become that way.” He shrugs. “Your boyfriend’s a perfect example, or he would be if it wasn’t for you. Me, I had all the innocence squeezed out of me when I turned six, and realized my mom was gone for good.”

“I know who your father is,” I tell him, because at least I can give him information. “But there’s no money forthcoming from that quarter, and he’s long gone, besides. Maybe you should think about whether you actually want the name?”

He huffs exasperation. “Do I look like someone who needs to be protected? Lay it on me. Couldn’t be worse than I’ve imagined.”

“Richard Casablancas.” I roll my head along the wall to meet his eyes. “Senior. Dick and Beaver are your brothers. So you tell me….worse, or better?”

He stares at me for a beat, then starts to laugh. I’m not sure I’ve ever SEEN Weevil laugh non-threateningly, let alone this hard, so it takes me a minute to pick my jaw up off the floor. “FUCK me,” he says after a good thirty seconds, wiping his eyes. “I should’ve lit a candle first or something. Do I have to worry about people thinking I took his money?”

“I shake my head. “You and I both know Mac stole it,” I say. “I don’t care, and I won’t tell; but I’m sure she wouldn’t have left evidence framing a friend. I thought you two might end up dating,
“I was willing,” he says, with a shrug. “She likes me, I like her back. But I think she’s still hung up on….man, does this mean I can’t call Dick a shithead anymore? Because that’s one of my great joys.”

“Don’t hold back on my account,” I say, which makes him smile again. “He’s camped out in my hotel room with his possessions in a trash bag, probably watching porn.”

“Some fucking world.” Weevil shakes his head. “You feeling better, V? I can see them through the little window, walking towards the door. And Echolls has that losing-it look in his eye.”

I square up. “My mask’s back on, regardless. Nobody will be able to tell.”

He bumps me with his elbow as Logan emerges, searching me out, concerned; then relaxes back into brooding watchfulness, when he sees me next to Weevil. Parker and Mac follow, Parker chattering vivaciously. Mac gamely tries to stay pleasant, but yawns behind her hand.

“Get enough fresh air?” Logan asks. I nod, crossing my arms over my chest, and push away from the wall. He doesn’t touch—he knows better—but falls into step beside me as we follow Parker and Mac down the sidewalk.

Weevil swings in on my left flank, says, “We going to that other fancy bar? And if so, what are the odds they’ll let me in?”

“Medium to low,” Logan opines. “Unless maybe you want to wrap a jaunty scarf around your neck, don yellow rock-star shades? They might mistake you for someone famous.”

“Pass,” Weevil says with a sneer. Which is when I notice Parker’s been cornered by a prospective Pussycat client.

I elbow Logan and he narrows his eyes, sizing the guy up. “Shamrock tattoo, forearm. Not good. Let’s hope they haven’t all been trained to recognize us on sight.”

He moves toward Parker, lazy and confident. Weevil circles around behind the squat, redheaded Fitzpatrick and his flat-faced, dirty-blond toady. I follow, wondering if I should dig out my taser; reject the idea, because I’m (presumably) knocked up. If I accidentally electrocuted myself, it would be bad.

“Why d’you got to leave just when the band’s starting?” red Fitzpatrick whines. He indicates the thrumming baseline, shaking through the Pussycat’s closed door. “You look like a REAL good dancer.”

“We need to meet a friend.” Mac, ever the pragmatist, makes relieved eyebrows at Logan as he drapes an arm around Parker’s shoulders. Declaring himself, for the second time this evening, Protector of Distressed Damsels.

Parker jolts with surprise at being touched, sends Logan a blinding, grateful smile. He says, “Hey there, peaches. Making new friends?”

“These are…fans of the band,” Parker informs him. “This one’s asking for a dance.”

“No can do.” Logan shakes his head, decisive. “We’re danced out. You guys go ahead, though; I hear that club is popular amongst a certain…element.”
He jerks his head, to indicate Mac and I should follow, and starts off down the pavement, turning his back dismissively. Then the redhead shouts, “Hey!” and grabs me by the arm.

“Well look-ee what I found.” Stooge Number One squints at me, essays a poor-dental-hygiene grin. “I wouldn’t’a thought YOU’D have the guts to show up here.” He turns to his sidekick, ignoring my efforts to twist away. “Check this out, it’s Veronica Mars and her balls of steel. Take her phone, Tommy. She narcs on everyone who sits still long enough.”

Tommy tries for my bag, lunge-grab; his grip on the strap yanks me sideways as he suddenly goes airborne. Logan’s flipped him over his shoulder, and turned to kick Shamrock in the stomach, before I can fully process what’s happening.

Weevil steps on Tommy while he’s down, Logan shoves me behind them, and Shamrock does the unexpected; grabs Parker, and holds a knife to her throat.

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” Shamrock says. “Tommy, up. I was gonna encourage Veronica there, real nice-like, not to cause any more trouble for me and mine. But if your boyfriends want to fight me, maybe I’ll tell the blonde about it instead. She can pass the message, once we’re done… talking.”

Parker makes a growling noise and elbows him, but he’s tougher than he looks and has a punishing grip. “Don’t try it,” he warns, as Weevil creeps in from the side. Turns his glare on a furious, fists-clenched Logan. Then winces, as something strikes him in the back.

Madison Sinclair stands behind him, in a pink mini-dress and heels, a rock clutched in one fist and a cell in the other; that punishing softball arm I remember from grade school is cocked threateningly. “Hey, guess who’s on the phone, asshole? The cops, and you’re on speaker. Also, before you get any more aggressive, you should know, my dad’s the Mayor. So much as BREATHE at me wrong, and he’ll lock you up.”

Shamrock glances over his shoulder, uncertain, and that’s all the opening Logan needs. He’s got the knife hand bent backwards, with an audible crack, and Shamrock immobilized on the ground, in under two seconds. Weevil sucker-punches Tommy, and he topples like a log. Parker goes running to Mac, who embraces her.

“What are you DOING here?” I ask Madison, as Logan flashes his I-dare-you grin at Shamrock, and throws the knife in the gutter.

“Club Tech.” She points down the street behind me. “Duh. I came back to feed the meter, and here you are, desperate for help AGAIN. If I get a parking ticket, I’m mailing it to your room.”

“I’ll pay.” I say, and she nods, like of course I fucking will. Then a cop car rolls up, and she heads over to say hi.

Logan relinquishes his captive to a patrolman, and I cross to the wall where Mac and Parker stand. Mac’s given Parker her flannel over-shirt, so she can staunch the cut on her neck. Parker looks shaken, but substantially unharmed.

“I thought we were just going CLUBBING,” she says, and yeah, this is the girl I remember from early Freshman Year—pissed, because I screwed her over. “What are you and your friends INTO, that criminals threaten you on street corners?”

“Little bit of this, little bit of that,” I quip, and Mac frowns. “Come on, it’s NEPTUNE. We swim in corrupt waters. Our detective agency is how we keep from sinking.”
Weevil approaches, as the other cop herds Tommy away. “I don’t think they’re gonna arrest us,” he says. “Madison saw it all, told ‘em we acted in self-defense.”

He points at Logan, who’s sitting on the squad car’s hood, rubbing his knee and grimacing while he endures a lecture. Probably on excessive force, which coming from the Neptune cop shop is rich. Mac says, “Parker wants to go home.”

“I can take you,” Weevil offers. “If you don’t mind riding my bike. I got an extra helmet, you can tuck your hair up inside.”

She smiles gratitude--beams, really. “Do you promise to burn rubber?”

“As long as there’s no cops around.” He winks. “Don’t wanna get caught misbehaving, with a girl like you.”

The slipstream threatens, tugging me sideways so hard I stumble.

I turn towards Logan, who meets my eyes, and try to convey what I can’t with words—that I’m sorry. That I never wanted him to wear a knee brace, or make his girlfriend feel used, just because he chose to help me. That I love him, and need him on my team, and didn’t choose to disappear, mid-fight.

Then my heartbeat accelerates, my nerves jangle, and I’m jerked unceremoniously away.

Chapter End Notes

We're coming up on the end of this fic--it's 50 chapters long. So I'd like to open up the floor to you, the readers, in the comments section. What unfinished plotlines do you most want to see resolved? What storylines remain unclear?

I've outlined extensively, and I re-read and take notes periodically, to make sure I don't leave anything dangling. But you can help a writer out, by letting me know what parts of the fic you think are still begging for resolution. :-)
Happiest of birthdays to Beezlebobble, exceptionally fabulous fandom friend!

THREAD FORTY TWO

I’m in a darkened conference room with no frills, staring at a TV screen--my heart’s pounding. The mustard-painted concrete walls scream ‘law enforcement’, and I’m perched on a rock-hard folding chair, surrounded by Kanes. The TV’s static, I’m pregnant as hell, and I’m holding Logan’s hand so tightly my knuckles are white.

A balding man in a suit to my right puts a finger against his ear, holding in place a lightweight headphone. Murmurs into the mouthpiece, “Four minutes. Eyes in the sky are in place. Bob, can you turn on the streaming video?”

“Just got the feed stabilized,” a younger suited guy says, behind us. He flips switches on some big whirring gadget, and the screen blares into zig-zags. Resolves into one big image, and six scenes-within-a-scene. The small ones show SWAT guys in a van—they must be from helmet cams—and the large, the back of a dilapidated duplex.

“OK, so what you’re seeing here is the house Miss Mars located at 473 Estrella—it’s part of the tenement purchased by Cassidy Casablancas, in his failed bid against incorporation. We’ve had eyes on the area for seventy-one hours. As of oh-four-hundred this morning we can confirm that Casablancas and Mr. Kane, are, in fact, staying in this one.”

I glance over at Logan, eyes wide; he squeezes my hand reassuringly, though he looks stressed as hell. Lilly, sitting on Logan’s other side, pulls his thumb out of his mouth—he’s biting the nail—and clutches his palm between her own.

Beside me, Celeste says, “We’ve seen the photographs. What I want to know, Mr. Elliot, is how all those men with guns are planning to keep my son safe.”

“Mrs. Kane,” the guy in charge murmurs, with just a trace of weariness. “Your son and his cohort are escaped prisoners from a high-security asylum. Of course every effort will be made to capture them alive; but they’re both convicted murderers, and our priority here is preventing harm to…”

“To DUNCAN,” she says, with bone-chilling precision. “Or I can assure you, you’ll be facing an inquiry that will end your career.”


This is all happening because I broke Victor out of the nuthouse, and retrieved the bugs early.

I must have changed Ideal Reality HARDCORE, by kick-starting an investigation into Hazelwood—one that turned up enough evidence to get Beaver captured and convicted. But fate is fate, so he ended up in the same facility as Duncan; and somehow, they managed to escape.
“Ma’am, the Sharks Killings and the Echolls murder were the two highest profile cases Balboa County’s ever prosecuted. The media’s playing this manhunt story in constant rotation, and the public is panicked. We’re allowing you to observe from our secure facility as a courtesy, but I can’t…”

“One minute,” Bob says, from the back of the room. The images on the SWAT cameras line up, all aimed towards the van’s back door.

I spare a glance for Jake, slumped in his chair. He’s got mom digging her nails into his knee on one side, Celeste rigid with rage on the other. His expression’s that of a man whose billion-dollar product release is not making news, and whose son is about to die. I’ve never seen him so badly groomed.

Whatever shitty things he’s been doing, that he’s willing to murder to hide? He’ll have to double down, after today.

“OK, they’re beginning the approach,” Elliot says, from his place against the wall… unnecessarily, I think, since we can see for ourselves.

The team storms the house from two directions, one group fanning out to cover the back and sides, the other heading straight for the front door. A lone camera projects from a high vantage point; I figure that’s the sniper.

“Were the other homes in the neighborhood cleared?” I ask, as I watch the men close in. It’s hard to tell, via grainy video, but it looks like they’re moving through light rain.

“The ones on the same block,” Bob confirms. “This zip code is mostly vacant since incorporation, though; it’s primarily used by drug addicts and vagrants, squatting. OK, here we go.”

I can tell, even without audio, that they’re doing the ‘Open up, law enforcement!’ thing; shortly after which, the front door splinters when kicked.

The place inside is ratty—peeling wallpaper, puddles on the floor, exposed wiring. I have a moment to reflect that Beaver’s a slum lord, before Bob says, “Look!”

He presses buttons, one of the cameras maximizes, and there’s a guy in SWAT black with an MP-5 pointed at Duncan and Beaver. Beaver’s standing, hands up, holding a remote control. Duncan sits cross-legged on a sleeping bag, rocking. The guy with the gun is yelling, but Duncan doesn’t move; and I have a clear view of Beaver smirking as SWAT guy’s attention is distracted.

Beaver presses a button with his thumb. The door slams shut, shoving Mr. Sub-Machine Gun backwards. Then fire washes across the screen, a wall of it, and the camera goes black.

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Celeste is apoplectic, hissing at everyone with her jaw clenched like a striking snake, as SWAT regroups and searches the rubble. My mom is crying and putting her hands all over Jake, talking in a steady, comforting stream; he just sits there, unresponsive, and stares off into space. Plotting.

“How’d they manage to break out of a high-security facility?” I muse, under my breath.

Logan’s got his arm around Lilly, stroking her hair as she stares dry-eyed at her mother. He hears, though and tilts his head my direction, pitching his voice low. “Beav killed a nurse, took his keys,” he says. “He’s been biding his time, apparently, bribing people to bring him electronics. He zapped the cameras to cover his escape. Nobody knew it was happening until they were gone.”
“Did he dress like a pirate, during the enterprise?” I ask, bitter, and Logan’s eyes narrow.

“Not to my knowledge,” he says, considering. Shuts his mouth, but keeps scanning my face.

I wonder if this is Ideal Reality, still—whether it’s worth dragging out the red-satin code, just in case. I reject the idea, though; what does it matter if Logan says the words? He’s already answering my questions, and my mission statement’s the same, regardless. Figure out what’s different, save the day. Repeat as needed, when shuffled off elsewhere.

“Mrs. Kane,” Bob calls, from where he’s been frantically computing while talking on the phone. Mom and Celeste’s heads both snap up. “Preliminary reports confirm three bodies in the wreckage, all law enforcement. SWAT just shifted debris in the living room and found a trap door. We think Casablancas and Kane escaped.”

Celeste stalks over to view the video on his laptop. Mom wipes her tears and dons a ‘brave’ smile. Jake watches Bob explain, but his face stays impassive.

“It was a remote detonation of plastic explosive.” Elliot hangs up his own phone, which immediately starts ringing. “The channel changer was the trigger. We’ve got a team about to enter the tunnel in pursuit.”

“Where’s Clarence?” I murmur, prompting Lilly to look at me strangely.

“At the scene,” Logan murmurs back. “He’ll do damage control on the spot, should the need arise.”

“There’s no controlling this damage,” Lilly opines, with faint undertones of relish. “It’s a clusterfuck from which the Kane name will never recover.”

“You’ll have to re-brand from ‘fabulous’ to ‘upstanding’, and save it yourself,” I tell her, which actually makes her smile. “Piece of cake.”

“Yeah, thanks.” Elliot snaps his phone shut again. “Sorry folks, there’s no one in the tunnel. It opens into the parking lot of a check-cashing place a block over. We’re guessing Casablancas had a car stashed.”

“The tunnel wasn’t on the plans,” Jake says, rousing from his stupor. “I thought you researched this neighborhood before acting?”

“Yes sir,” Bob says, still frantically typing. “This tunnel was crudely constructed, no supports or beams. Likely the house was used for illegal activities by its previous owners—smuggling, maybe. These people don’t draw up plans, or get approval from the neighborhood association.”

“We should go,” Logan tells me, with an assessing look. “You’ve been in constant motion and under stress since four this morning, Ronica, and you haven’t had enough to eat. Lils, will you call if anything changes? We can come right back.”

She nods, still as calm as her father. “They’re not going to find squat, though. Beaver’s good at flying under the radar.”

“Maybe the Neptune PD’s radar,” Logan says, drily, “but the Feds already caught him once. Whatever his game, he’s got limited time to play before the buzzer sounds.”

“His game is chess,” I tell them, trying and failing to stand. “Which means we need to think twenty moves ahead, too, if we want to come out on top.”
“This brain works better when you’re full of Chinese food.” Logan helps me heave my bulk out of the chair, curves a palm around my skull. “Come on, Violet Beauregard, let’s get you home and fed.”

I’m numb as we cruise Howl’s-ward in the Rover, gazing, unseeing, out the window; unable to form coherent theories, or really, do much but dwell.

Maybe Beaver’s slipstreaming, and that’s why he’s always one step ahead. Maybe I caused this whole mess, trying to protect exploited mental patients. Maybe Logan shuns me in Ideal Reality because I’m the villain, the one who mistreats the girl he’s marrying. Maybe it does no good to get attached to someone else’s life.

Logan turns a corner off Alameda, a swanky exclusive lane in the Hearst-adjacent suburbs, and pulls into the driveway of yet another Howl’s. This one’s balanced on a cliff, with a rear stairway visible that leads down to the beach. The front yard is planted with beds of snapdragons.

I’ll have to make note of the decorator choices, here, so I can give my opinion later.

“We’re home,” Logan calls as he swings the door open. Dick appears in the living room archway, economy bag of Cheetos in hand. “They escaped,” Logan informs him, before he can speak. “You should have come to the viewing after all.”

“Wasn’t gonna happen.” Dick shoves a handful of carbs in his mouth, gives me the bag. “I don’t care what the Beav’s done, he’s still my brother. I have no desire to watch him get shot in the face. Come on, your food showed up a couple minutes ago, Rons. We already ate, but I’ll bet the fetus is starving.”

We file into the living room, which is basically the same as all the other Howl’s; the couch is green velvet and Victorian, the kitchen’s larger, and the view contains additional cliffs and sky. Victor’s sprawled in an overstuffed red easy chair, watching an ancient MASH rerun with barely concealed impatience. He sits up when we enter, and says, “What’s the word?”

“They blew up the building, then crawled through an escape tunnel,” I say tiredly, collapsing onto the couch. “Three SWAT guys died, or maybe four? I don’t remember. It was bad.”

Logan slumps down next to me, examines the contents of a carton. Tosses it on the table, opens another. “Just what you’ve been craving, sugarplum,” he says, handing it over with chopsticks. “Sesame chicken, extra broccoli, no MSG, extra sauce.”

“Extra broccoli?” I make a face, because seriously; Other Veronica and her health kicks drive me NUTS. But as I was so forcefully reminded, a few hours ago, I’m an asshole for placing my needs above hers. So even though I’m not hungry, I grit my teeth and take a bite.

Logan grabs up a box of Szechuan beef and starts making his methodical way through it, staring at MASH without seeing. He seems fried. Dick’s over by the window, gazing out, and Victor’s got his arms crossed, contemplating the ceiling in apparent deep thought. I nudge Logan with my toes. “Hanging in there?”

He tries a smile, but it falls away quickly. “Worried about Duncan. And, you know…this is hard on Dick, and the Kanes. Something wrong with your food? I thought we were past the pukey-picky phase.”

I manage another bite, but enh. Not even extra sauce can disguise BROCCOLI. “I’ll finish it
later. I’m not in the mood.” I settle back into velvety cushions, put my feet up on the coffee table. Curve my hand around my belly, because Peanut’s doing that weird, unsettling slow squirm again. It feels like fish, schooling. “I’m kind of numb, to be honest. Just want to stare bleakly off into space. Ponder the futility of existence.”

Victor snorts, and I say, “Keep those comments to yourself, Grandpa. It’s been a tough week.”

“Woe is you.” He tosses the remote on the coffee table, pins me with his still-sharp gaze. “Come on, Veronica, you’re talking a bunch of bullshit and you know it. Vengeful pint-sized heroines such as yourself don’t give up. You’re not that much of a coward.”

“How would you know?” I demand, tiredly. “You met me what, a year ago?”

“I’m a good judge of character,” he retorts. “And if you don’t want me to lose all respect, get off your ass, quit whining, and figure out what that jerkoff’s planning. Be VERONICA again.”

“SCREW you,” I say, ignoring Logan’s ‘Hey!’ and put a hand on my boyfriend’s chest to prevent interference. “I do nothing BUT try to out-think that asshole, every minute I’m awake. And when I’m DONE considering every possibility, I try some MORE, even though I’m so pregnant I WADDLE. So you need to go do Tai Chi or something and back the hell off. Also, just FYI, I don’t give a SHIT what you, or anybody else, thinks.”

“See?” Victor smirks. Settles back smugly into his chair. “All fired up. You just needed a little opposition to get your motor revved. Feel better?”

Logan laughs, chortling with the force of it. Grabs and kisses my hand.

“Maybe a smidge,” I say, and smile.

“Well I still feel like my brother’s daring people to kill him, so he can murder them instead,” Dick says, throwing himself onto the couch beside me, making us both bounce. “And I’m fucking starving. If you’re not gonna eat this, I will. I’ve got my own giant gut to grow here.”

“Bon appetit,” I say sarcastically as he goes after my food with his fingers. He winks at me, undeterred. I wonder if Dick lives in our spare bedroom in this reality, too. And if so, whether it would be awful to make him leave at this juncture, instead of helping him work through his pain.

Surely Other Veronica can’t hate me for pest removal, right? Even if Dick IS more like a….beetle…here than a cockroach.

I settle into Logan’s side, and he drapes an accommodating arm around me, shifting so he can eat one-handed. Watch Hawkeye soliloquize about the Horrors of War, and spare a glance at Victor, who’s coping with aplomb. Because this was HIS war, right? Korea? This is where he got shot down, and spent several years as a POW?

I’m claustrophobic, since Aaron locked me in that fridge. I can’t drink Coke or rum anymore, and it freaks me out when lovers lie on top. LOGAN can’t bring himself to show his back to people; and he’s got some weird anger/avoidance thing about empty swimming pools.

It occurs to me to wonder what silent terrors Victor suffers, as a result of his tribulations. Whether they’re tougher to handle when he’s tired, or alone, or upset. Does it feel easier to be around people who’ve been through trauma themselves? Because they understand what it is to live with random un-fixable pain?

He turns, notices my sleepy gaze on him, lifts his brows. Then Dick tosses his empty carton on
the table, belches and stands, breaking the connection.

“Gotta drain the firehose,” he announces, like this is widely-sought information. “Everybody be sure to brood and look emo when I come back. This house-wide whiny bitch fest makes total sense, since you all have family members about to bite it, and I don’t.”

“How many years are we planning to soothe that guy while he falls apart?” I murmur, sinking further into the couch as he departs. “I don’t want to seem unsympathetic, but you’re no longer the biggest diva I know, Logan.”

“Go easy,” Logan murmurs, as Peanut resumes writhing, creating brief, sharp and painful pressure. “His brother’s determined to burn out rather than fade away, and bravado’s Dick’s only defense.”

“I’m starting to think he needs tough love, not cossetting. He seems to have zero understanding of boundaries.” I frown as the pressure intensifies into pain. “Man, this pregnancy gets more uncomfortable by the day. Peanut definitely inherited your restlessness.”

Logan puts his hand on my belly just as it knots. I cringe, and he frowns. “Are you…usually when she wiggles, it doesn’t HURT.”

Victor leans forwards, studying me with an impenetrable expression. “Those are contractions,” he says, as the clench in my abdomen finally releases. I fall back, gasping. “When are you due?”

“She’s not quite thirty-nine weeks.” Logan’s face goes grim. “This is too early. Could it be Braxton-Hicks? Should we call the OB?”

Dick comes striding back into the living room, says, “Man, where did you GET that food, Victor? I just took a piss, and it BURNED!”

“Maybe you need a quick trip to the STD clinic?” Logan quips, palm still on my stomach like he can prevent more pain. Then, observing Dick more closely, “Wait, what are those weird red dots around your eyes? Are you sunburned?”

Dick goes to check himself out in the mirror, murmurs, “Dude, it looks like a rash.” Shakes his hand, studies it. “My fingers feel weird, too. Cold and tingly.”

Victor shoves aside the takeout detritus and starts fumbling through the bags. He comes up with the receipt, stares at it, and says, “Kid, call nine-one-one.”

Logan grabs the receipt out of his hand, reads, blanches. Drops it on the coffee table and jerks back as if burned; then fumbles for his phone, clearly freaking OUT. He dials with his thumb, one hand creeping into his hair and clinging.

I reach forward and snag the paper, wincing as my belly clenches again—the world’s worst period cramp, times ten. My eyes shut, and I can’t do anything but breathe through my teeth while I wait for this to pass. Dimly, in the background, I hear Logan talking.

“It’s something they ate,” he says, tone sliding up an octave and back down. “Chinese food, we had it delivered. No, not vomiting, but look, she’s in labor and it’s too early, we need a fucking AMBULANCE…”

My eyes open, focus on the slip gripped in my sweaty hand. Words are written along the side, like the note a waitress leaves a customer in thanks.
Hope you enjoyed the show this morning,” it says, in semi-legible red scrawl. ‘Here’s something else you’ll love—a gift from me to you, Veronica. Thanks for all your hard work, destroying my life.’

I look up at Victor, who seems as terrified as I feel. He sits beside me, takes my hand.

The pain comes again, and my vision bleeds white.

Our ambulance ride is a blur—the EMT’s shove Dick in another one, and Victor goes along. I endure an endless cycle of cramps and thrashing, Logan beside me, gripping my fingers and chanting. “Breathe in … deep and slow. Good, now let it out. Breathe.”

Then I’m on a gurney and we’re rushing through the hospital. Victor and Logan are both above me, similar profiles, similar grit. “What’s the OB’s name?” Victor asks as Logan strokes my hair back. “I’ll hunt her down.”

“Dr. Charles,” Logan tells him, gaze locked with mine. “Neptune Women’s Center. Take my phone, her emergency number’s in it.”

The pain comes again. When I recover Victor’s gone, and we’re in a room. There’s a nurse attaching sensors to my belly, frowning worry she’s too professional to speak.

I search wildly for Logan. He’s still here, way over in the corner, talking to a deputy I don’t recognize in hushed tones. I smile when his eyes meet mine, to show I’m OK; his lips curve in response though he looks frantic, and about to cry.

This is the way he acted at the Sunset Regent, the night we figured out his mom was really dead. His expression scares me.

I take a deep breath, feel another contraction coming… they’re close together, which even I know means business. Then there’s a flurry of movement at the door and my OB bustles in, all energy and competence with Victor trailing after.

“Miss Mars,” she says, approaching to study the monitor, face calm. “You’ve been gaining weight. Good job following instructions, I admit I’m pleasantly surprised.”

I laugh, because cool customer, and she adds, “We’ve done blood tests on both you and your friend Mr. Casablancas. We think the food delivered to your home was laced with RU-486, more commonly known as the Morning After Pill. Do you know anything about how that drug works?”

I shake my head, reaching a hand out for Logan as he moves up beside me. “It’s basically a large dose of birth control,” she says. “A single pill induces contractions in women, and does not much of anything to men. In the case of an early-stage pregnancy, it reliably causes miscarriage. In the case of an almost full-term pregnancy, such as yours, it can kick-start labor.”

Logan growls, and she says, “I COULD give you a drug that suppresses contractions—Terbutaline—but it will only work for a few hours, or days at most. And it’s not a guarantee; once labor begins, it triggers a whole cascade of physiological events, and those are hard to reverse.

“In my opinion, we should go ahead and deliver. You’ve only got a week to term, you and the baby are healthy—and I’m here, right now, to make sure everything goes well.”

Logan looks at me for approval, and I say, “I jinxed myself, when I wished not to be here for the
main event. Famous last words.”

“I’ll be sitting right next to you,” he assures me, never breaking eye contact. “I won’t leave.”

I laugh, because fucking slipstream. I hate this—it HURTS—but Peanut’s a force of nature like her parents, and I’m guessing she won’t be denied. “Fine,” I say. “Let’s get it over with. I have asylum escapees to catch, and the clock’s ticking down.”

The doctor smiles and rolls up her sleeves, sending Victor back a few steps with a look as he hovers. “Good attitude,” she praises. “But you should focus right now on breathing. This is a marathon, not a sprint, and we’ve just started running.”

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I WISH she was kidding. It takes six HOURS to get the baby out, while I curse a blue streak, alternating between limp exhaustion and rigid pain. The doctor stays calm and preternaturally focused, even though there are nurses scurrying, and machines beeping, and a general air of chaos. Logan looks terrified, but his voice is a soothing constant, sarcastic and affectionate while he lets me crush his hand.

The baby won’t come, won’t come, while the OB presses and twists, exerting a fair amount of energy herself. Then, abruptly things change; three pushes, slippery, sudden release, and Logan’s saying, “Oh my GOD, what IS that?” while Peanut screams.

I try to sit up, to see, but my doctor says, with some amusement, “It’s the placenta, Mr. Echolls. All mammals have them. The important product of this effort is a beautiful baby girl, and she’s about to have her first bath. Let me quickly finish these stitches, and then you can hold her.”

STITCHES? I think, flopping backwards, with what would be a wince if I wasn’t numb from the waist down. Peanut squalls with true Echollsian flair, affronted by the indignities of cleanliness; Logan presses his face into my shoulder and starts silently crying.

I stroke his hair, wondering why I’m playing the role of comforter when I did all then work. Then, abruptly, a bundled-up infant is set on my chest.

Shaking away a sweaty hank of hair, I gaze down at her, arm curving, protective, around. Her face is tiny, puckered, and bright red, and she strongly resembles a Sleezstak.

It doesn’t matter. I saved her, and beauty’s skin deep. She frowns and twists her mouth sideways like she’s considering more yelling; I fall hopelessly, irrevocably in love.

“She looks like you,” Logan says. I turn to see he’s lifted his head, and is gazing at our mildly maroon daughter as if she’s the second wonder. He traces the line of her jaw with one long finger. Peanut opens dark eyes and glares, with a direct ferocity that makes him laugh. “Small, pissed off, and not afraid to let everyone know.”

“Yeah, because I’M the one with anger management problems,” I say, turning my face into his neck. He kisses my cheek.

“You want to feed her?” Logan asks, as the nurse comes forwards with a bottle. “Or should I?”


I can’t sink all the way under, though. I watch him cradle her, tiny and squirming, in one big arm; hum off-key under his breath while he holds the bottle. I study his face, vulnerable and open…and
my love feels boundless as the sea.

Time drifts and slips, elastic, as I doze. I’m not out, exactly, but I’m hardly alert; my body’s tuned to its own secret clock, and nothing but daydreaming matters. I’m holding Peanut and murmuring, Logan curled on the bed all around me—I’m sprawled across the mattress alone, staring at a stain on the ceiling.

When I wake fully it’s dark in the room, and Logan’s crashed on the couch that spans the opposite wall. Victor’s in the easy chair feeding Peanut, whispering nonsense about all his money she’ll inherit, and there’s a Nurse checking my vitals by the bed.

“Glad to see everyone doing so well,” she says, smiling at Victor and the baby. She turns the smile on me. “I thought for sure you were headed for a C-section; but that doctor did an AMAZING job getting the baby re-positioned.”

I nod, sleepily, because what the fuck, but also why does it matter? The ordeal’s over now, and we’re all fine. “You need anything?” she asks, straightening the blankets. “Food? A drink? Help going to the bathroom?”

“Ice water?” I ask, and she nods, reaching for a pitcher on a nearby table. “Maybe some pancakes?”

She hands me a glass and menu, says, “Choose whatever you want. I’m afraid your grandfather and husband will have to go to the café, though. Room service is only for our new moms.”

I point out the French Toast platter and she leaves to place the order. From the chair, Victor says, “You’re awake.”

“Semi,” I say. “Still kind of dazed, honestly. As it happens, childbirth is hard work.”

He laughs and brings the baby over, settling her along my flank. “Worth it,” he pronounces, stroking a finger down her nose. Grins. “You did good, kid. She’s a sweet little thing, as long as you keep her fed.”

I gaze at Peanut, smiling involuntarily as she works one eye open to threat-assess. Then snuggles in close and snoozes off, content. I’m fairly certain I’ll be an epic disaster as a mother, but yeah. This moment feels good.

Victor notices movement in the doorway, frowns. I follow his gaze to Dad, talking smilingly with the nurse. “You’ve got company,” Victor says. “I’ll leave you alone to chat, go check on Dick. They’re keeping him overnight because he had an allergic reaction.”

“To female hormones?” I ask, which makes his mouth curve. “How…karmic.”

“Take care of yourself, Veronica.” He winks at me, pats my cheek. “Don’t forget that action item, while you’re watching over everyone else.”

I thumbs-up, and he walks past Dad with a nod; Dad frowns, then spins to watch him leave.

“Who was THAT?” He settles into the chair at bedside, gazing down at Peanut in much the same way Logan did. “Even MY dynamo of a daughter’s too busy today to interview clients.”

“You have no idea.” I make a face. “But that’s just Logan’s grandfather. He was hanging out at
our house when disaster struck."

"Sweetheart," Dad says, with concern; his eyes are drawn back to the baby, like he can’t help himself. “Logan doesn’t HAVE a grandfather anymore. All his relatives are dead, barring his mom and one unfortunate uncle.”

“It’s complicated,” I explain, with a hand wave. “Aaron had Victor Lester incarcerated for interfering with his marriage. Honestly, don’t sweat it, Victor’s a great guy. You want to hold your granddaughter?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” He takes Peanut and bounces her, which makes the baby grumble and wake. She stares at him, fearless and bright-eyed, and he responds with a comically large grin. “Hi, gorgeous,” he says, staring like he’s memorizing her face. “Who’s the most amazing infant since your mother? You, that’s who.”

I smile as he carefully re-tucks the blanket. Then he says, “Veronica, I watched Victor Lester’s funeral on the news. Warren Beatty was one of his pallbearers.”

“They must have faked it, somehow,” I say, stubbornly, and he gives me the patient look I hate; like he’s waiting for me to accept that I’m wrong. ‘Dad, Victor’s AMAZING. Logan loves him. And he SAVED me today—he found the receipt Beaver left in the Chinese-food bag. Because of him, we made it to the hospital in time.”

Dad starts to respond, then grins as Mac and Weevil enter noisily, chattering about audio surveillance. “Hey, look who else couldn’t wait. Mac, Eli, come meet my granddaughter.”

“Is this a good time?” Mac stops three feet away and hovers, like babies should be approached with caution. Weevil, denizen of a large family, has no such qualms. He lifts a brow and, when I nod, carefully takes Peanut from Dad.

“I can’t believe you’re awake and Echolls isn’t.” He leans against the wall, child competently cradled. Glances over at Logan, who the noise hasn’t roused. “He get worn out worrying, miss the main event?”

“Nah, he JUST crashed,” I say. “And I was in a stupor until five minutes ago.”

“You hanging in there?” he asks, as Dad walks over to Mac, engages her in muted conversation. She nods, glancing doubtfully at me, and I wonder what’s up. “Looking pretty wiped, V.”

“It’s been an eventful afternoon,” I say, dry.

“Just wait,” he says, almost-smiling as Peanut screws up her face, then relaxes. “Your job is food machine for the next six months. And once she starts crawling, you’re screwed. Parenting ain’t all strollers and smiles like the movies.”

I wince, because come to think of it, my boobs DO hurt. “Thanks for the warning,” I say. Then, to Dad and Mac, who’ve pulled out a laptop and are scrolling websites, “What are you up to over there?”

Mac casts another dubious look my way, and Dad says, “Veronica, you need to see this.”

I beckon, because I am NOT getting up—the meds are wearing off. He brings the laptop over, sets it in my lap.

Mac’s pulled up a page from a Stars of Hollywood website, featuring a scanned black and white
glossy of Victor in his prime. He’s wearing a Navy uniform, dapper and smirking, and the resemblance to Logan is uncanny. His hair’s finer and fairer, his chin’s got a faint cleft, but I’d recognize that unholy twinkle anywhere. “Wow, Grandpa was HOT,” I say.

“Look at the stats, Bond,” Mac says quietly, shoving the laptop incrementally closer.

I frown, scan the brief bio. Age at time of death, 54, it says. Weight 162 lbs, height 5’9”, hair light brown, eyes green. Read it again and look up at Dad, nonplussed.

Remember Victor in the chair murmuring about all his money, and Lynn saying at the Deb Ball that she grew up poor. My teeth clench.

“He’s not Victor Lester,” I realize, with that sinking feeling in my gut I haven’t experienced since MadisonGate—that sense of unbalanced fury, when it’s revealed I’ve been duped. I spare a glance for Logan, still sleeping, and cringe because I’ll have to explain. “But…he’s shown no interest at all in publicity or money. I don’t understand WHY.”

“Think back.” Dad’s voice is soothing, but he’s clearly in cop mode now. “Is it possible the impostor’s delusional? Or has a motive other than financial gain? Could he be the one who slipped you the drug?”

Oh no, I think, remembering Dick asking, “Where’d you GET this food, Victor?” The possibility can’t be dismissed.

Fuck, this is bad. I may have broken a dangerous stranger out of jail.

“Check on Dick,” I snap at Weevil, my face no doubt telling Dad all he needs to know. “Victor went to visit him, right before you got here. He must have known you’d guess, Dad. He sort of said GOODBYE!”

Mac offers, “I’ll go,” but Weevil shakes his head, carefully handing Peanut back.

“I need to scout this out first,” he says, heading for the door. “Victor’s old but he’s a big guy. And he surfs every day, so he’s strong. Mr. Mars, you’ll stay here with V, right? Wake up Echolls?”

Dad nods. “I’m calling the police first, though. The detective investigating the drugging will want to know. And I can probably convince him to station uniforms outside the kids’ doors.”

Peanut squawks, displeased by the commotion, and Logan rouses at the sound, Pavlovian. Dad pats his shoulder as he stumbles towards the bed, then walks into the hall to make his call unheard.

“Hey, beautifuls.” Logan smiles, bleary-eyed. Tickles Peanut, who’s trying to thrash out of her swaddling, under the chin; she goes still and yawns. “Everybody find something to eat?”

“French toast,” I tell him, stalling on the Victor reveal, because I know how Logan gets, IN RE betrayal. “She had a bottle a few minutes ago, and hasn’t lodged a protest since.”

“Weekend toast,” I tell him, stalling on the Victor reveal, because I know how Logan gets, IN RE betrayal. “She had a bottle a few minutes ago, and hasn’t lodged a protest since.”

“She will. She’s got the Mars always-hungry gene, don’t you, Peanut?” he grins at her, drawing her total focus. “Has that nurse showed up yet, to teach you how to breastfeed? Do I need to throw an entitled celebutante tantrum, so my kid gets some dinner?”

“Nobody’s been in here but Mac, Weevil and Dad,” I say. “And we really need to start calling our daughter by her NAME, now that she’s an externally viable human.”

“Leilani Jane,” he croons, which makes her coo, because she’s female. “You want me to scare up
Leilani. Jesus, Other Veronica. Despite your massive attitude, vis a vis me, you really are a sucker.

“Victor’s nowhere to be found,” Mac tells me, striding back into the room. “He pulled a complete vanishing act, must have headed straight out the door…” she stalls as she notes I’m not alone, grows hesitant. “Oh, hey, Logan’s up.”


“Yeah, about that,” I murmur, reluctantly, locking eyes with Mac, who makes a ‘sorry’ face. “He’s not actually….your grandfather. You were right to be suspicious, when I suggested springing him. Dad sussed out the ruse, and he’s afraid the guy’s intentions aren’t…benign.”

“Hold on.” Logan sits up straight. Puts his hands out flat in negation and backs away from the bed. “Are you saying VICTOR drugged you?”

I shrug, because I feel furious and betrayed; and still, in my deepest heart, refuse to believe it. But Dad thinks it’s true, so I don’t KNOW.

The world’s a shitty, unfair place, and sometimes people lie. I learned that lesson the hard way, and I’d be dumb to forget it now.

Logan’s hands run into his hair, tug hard, and he begins to pace. “Oh, this is fucking fantastic! We invited him into our HOME! I slept while he held my CHILD!”

Dad walks back in, snapping his phone shut, and says, “I take it you told Logan the bad news?”

“We need to call Security Solutions!” Logan pats his pockets in search of his cell. “We need to get a guard in the room. He sat right NEXT to you, UNSUPERVISED!”

“Veronica and the baby are OK.” Dad rests a hand on his shoulder, coaxing Logan to meet his eyes. “I’ve talked to the sheriff, he’s sending a couple deputies down.”

“Oh great!” Logan flings up his hands. “The Keystone Cops are rushing to the scene in their clown car. How comforting!”

Recognizing his argument’s futile, Dad pats Logan’s back, then lets him pace and mutter while waiting for his call to connect. Turns to Mac, who’s sitting beside me, allowing Peanut to hold one finger.

“So, Mac.” Dad leans against the wall, frowning as Logan brushes past him, phone to ear. “I know you’re booked right now, but I wonder if you could free up a few hours to do some code analysis for me, sometime soon? I’ll pay your going rate.”

She glances at me with lifted brows. “Well, seeing as Veronica just unexpectedly had a baby, I assume I’m lead on all current cases. But I’m sure I can fit you in within the next few days, since you fall under friends and family.”

“What code is this?” I demand, Spidey Senses tingling.

“Nothing important, honey.” Dad tries the soothing voice I know better than to buy. “Don’t worry about it. I just came into possession of a hard drive with some interesting stuff on it, and I’m
too old and non-tech-savvy to make heads or tails.”

“A HARD DRIVE?” I repeat, dumbly, and then start to laugh, because fucking slipstream. “One you acquired from Kendall Casablancas perhaps? With the promise that it contained proof of the True Crime Story of the century?”

Dad squints at me, suspicions on high alert. “How did you know that, Veronica?”

Logan stops pacing too, with a muttered, “Hang on,” correctly perceiving something else is up.

“A little bird told me,” I say, folding my arms. Because if Dad can be elusive, so can I. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

He sighs, folding his arms back. “Yes, sweetheart, your acute nose for trouble has sniffed out a doozy. Kendall came to me a few months ago, saying her life was in danger and she needed to disappear. I tried to help her do just that, but things got a little…hairy. So I’m attempting to cut a deal with witness protection, in return for proof of federal crime. She sent me a hard drive yesterday morning, via an…emissary, claiming it contains the evidence I need. But all that’s on it is some blackmail data about a collegiate secret society. Plus this code I can’t decipher.”

“Do you have the drive with you now?” I ask, meeting Logan’s eyes. He murmurs, “I’ll call you back,” into the phone, and hangs abruptly up.

“As a matter of fact, yes. I was hoping I could hand it off to Mac; have her look into the matter when she found time.”

“Mac has time right now,” I say, causing her brows to inch still higher. “You can check it out right here in my hospital room. Because I’ve got a sneaking suspicion this drive contains critically important, critically dangerous information, which certain people would kill to keep private. If the blackmail material isn’t legally actionable…and it sounds like, from what you just said, it isn’t? Then the code must be the reason the bad guys want this thing back.”

Dad removes the drive from his pocket, gazing at it as if it’s radioactive. Hands it hesitantly to Mac. She turns it over in her hands, asks, “Is it OK to keep using my laptop in here? Like, will it interfere with medical monitors?”

“Who cares?” I say, impatient. “Peanut and I aren’t hooked up to anything, and we’re healthy. I’ve been chasing this drive for way too long to let the opportunity pass.”

Mac crosses the room to get a cord from her bag, sets up on the coffee table by Logan’s nap couch. Motions Dad over and plugs the drive in, then navigates efficiently and calmly through files.

“This is data mining software,” she says, after a minute or so of reading, a faint v appearing between her eyes. “Not as good as the stuff I just finished writing, but very professional. Looks like it piggybacks on a browser—it’s structurally similar to the malware in that ‘laptop repairman’ case. When you open the tool to surf the web, this stuff tracks where you go; then stores the data in the creator’s banks. The perp in our case used information gathered for theft—but it would help with something benign, like targeted advertising, or something as malicious as untraceable spying.”

“And it’s attached to a browser, you said?” I clench my jaw as the puzzle pieces fall into place. “Could the new initiative Jake Kane was about to debut, when the Duncan fiasco happened, be a browser, perhaps? One designed to revive the flagging Kane fortunes?”

Everybody in the room grows various shades of appalled. Mac’s phone starts to ring.
Logan, who’s closest, grabs it, checks the caller ID and thumbs on speaker. “What’s up, Weevs? You find fake Victor lurking?”

“Get your ass down her NOW, Echolls,” Weevil growls, above max-volume yelling and clanging. “Dick just grabbed Duncan Kane, but he’s going fucking CRAZY.”

Logan’s out of the room like a shot, tossing the phone on the bed. I grab it up, say, “Weevil what’s happening?” but he’s already hung up.

I try to stand—and Jesus Christ, the aftermath of having a baby HURTS. “Get me a wheelchair,” I hiss at Mac, who rushes out of the room.

“Veronica, it’s too dangerous,” Dad says, as Mac barrels back in with one she’s grabbed from the hall. “You’re holding a baby, and Duncan’s a MURDERER.”

I hand Peanut over. “Now YOU’RE holding a baby,” I say, managing to make it into the seat. Call past my shoulder as Mac shoves off, “I’M solving the case I’ve been paid to investigate, and protecting my fiancé besides.”

“Only Veronica Mars,” Mac says, as we hurtle down the hall at non-wheelchair-approved speeds, “would get up from childbirth and hand off her newborn to chase a psychotic killer.”

“Just your average weekday,” I quip. But I remember Duncan’s SUV, after he took a tire iron to it, and admit that really, I’m worried for Logan’s safety.

We take the elevator down, enduring ‘A Taste of Honey’ while our hearts hammer, and burst out into second floor hallway pandemonium.

Duncan and Logan are grappling, while nurses scurry out of range and patients scream, knocking over trays and IV stands, banging into walls. Duncan has his hands around Logan’s throat, and his eyes are bulging out, terrifying. Logan’s trying Krav Maga tricks that would immobilize someone not in adrenal overload; but Duncan’s the guy in an After School Special, high on PCP. As we barrel towards the fight, Weevil jumps on Duncan’s back; takes all three of them into a wall, him bearing the brunt. Smashes Duncan over the head with a tray, making him stagger, and enabling Logan to break free.

Logan plants a hand on the wall, the other clutching his throat, and manages, “Ronica, STAY BACK,” his savaged voice pleading. Dick makes it to a sitting position, unconcerned about his anatomy on display. “I woke up when that biker friend of yours started shouting. Fucking Duncan
was standing over me, all cracked out and tweaking, it was scary as shit. Navarro threw a cup of coffee in his face, tried to tackle him. But he shoved the greaser off and ran.”

The GREASER, I think? Sounds like Weevil hasn’t said anything to Dick about their uncomfortably entwined family tree. And honestly, who can blame him?

“What was Duncan doing in your room?” I ask. “Peeping? Because no offense, but nobody here wants to buy what you’re selling, Dick.”

“Let me check,” Mac says, heading into the suite, while Dick grimaces and covers up. I cradle Logan, who’s got his face pressed to my knees, still upset by the fight with his nutso best friend. Dick heaves himself up and follows, foregoing the dirty comment he normally would have made.

Mac re-emerges in a minute, holding a small glass bottle. “Insulin,” she says, displaying it for inspection. “This was on the nightstand. I think Duncan was trying to inject it into Dick’s IV. A moderate amount would have put him in a coma…probably forever.”

Just like in Prison Reality, I think. An unsolved mystery I’d pretty much forgotten. Only Weevil was the victim, there.

Dick looks down at his hand, bleeding like he yanked the needle out to rumble…back up at us. “Fuck,” he says. “What the hell’s his problem?”

The question everyone’s asking today, I think, as Weevil re-emerges from the stairwell, shaking his head. And I’ve got zero answers. There are only two connections between Weevil, Dick and Duncan.

One is Beaver, who’s brothers with the first two, and kidnapper of the other. He might be pissed about childhood trauma, or feel betrayed, or be after that stupid missing money.

And the other connection is me. Maybe Beaver just wants to kill anyone I like.

“Did Duncan escape?” Logan asks, hand still pressed against his throat.

“Yeah,” Weevil says grimly, folding his arms. “He climbed in a car with your so-called grandfather, and the two of them drove away.”

THREAD FORTY TWO INVERTS

Logan grips my knee hard, the world twists inside out, and abruptly my postpartum pain is gone. I’m sitting, still, but it’s on the counter of the kitchenette at the Grand; I’m desultorily stirring vegetables in a stainless-steel pan. Dick lounges against a pillar opposite, downing a beer. Past the island, Logan’s bent over the small, round table, perusing a messy mass of papers. He’s doing his best to ignore Dick’s chatter, but the tips of his ears are red.

“So did she seem like, flirty-flirty, or just, you know, friendly-flirty? Like the way she gets when I call her Ghostworld, and she’s all, ‘Dick, my pallor means I’m less likely than you to die of skin cancer’.”

I shrug, because I have zero clue why he’s jealous, and he says, “Rons, you’re a GIRL. You’re supposed to notice this shit! It’s not like I can show up when you’re working and WATCH them together, that cholo’s acting maximally weird. What’s his deal, anyway? He suddenly wants to be FRIENDS? Because I’m not PALS with assholes who just got out of Chino, and used to beat up my face.”
“You know what, Dick?” I say--Logan’s fist is clenched around the pencil, and I’m afraid there’ll be a stabbing. “I’m glad you’re not constantly wasted, like you were before Carrie and her drug habit got shipped off to Julliard. And while I’m not HAPPY you’re our hanger-on, it doesn’t irritate as much as it once would have.

“But…” I toss down the spatula and turn off the burner, because AS IF I’m going to eat SNOW PEAS, “and I say this with love…grow the fuck UP. People change. Mac did; she’s not interested, anymore, in guys who sleep around, even if she once carried a torch. And Weevil changed, too. He’s evolved beyond ‘boy whose only option in life is gang leader’--which I, for one, support. You should give getting along with him a shot. Oh, and hot tip, he’s done using you as a punching bag. If he can play nice with Logan, he can make friends with ANYONE.”

“Who says Weevs and I play nice?” Logan asks, not turning around. He’s tapping the pencil now, though, head cocked alertly, so I guess at least I’m entertaining.

“I’ve witnessed him in our home, drinking coffee you made.” I open the freezer, dig out a tub of ice cream, and go after it with a spoon. “You’re capable of working together for the common good, which, in my eyes, is progress.”

“You know where I’d like to make progress?” Logan turns to face me, smirking as he takes in my dinner. “Analyzing bank statements. But certain people won’t quit bitching about their failures at love, and I can’t CONCENTRATE.”

“Jeez, you two are hostile tonight.” Dick grabs the pan off the stove and fishes a fork out of the drawer. “How about I take this stir-fry off your hands, and go watch TV in my room, so you can work out your frustrations the X-rated way? Like NORMAL college students.”

I gaze at Logan across the island, as Dick disappears with a door slam, shovel in another bite of Rocky Road. The disagreement we had yesterday yawns between us; not only do I doubt he wants to get busy, we might actually still be FIGHTING. And that stresses me out. Because he’s the only Logan left who seems to recognize me, slipstream-wise. Which means he’s the only helping hand available.

“We have to find a way to kick Junior out of the nest,” I quip, testing the waters. “I’ll gladly volunteer my boot.”

“Stronger footwear’s tried and failed.” He settles back, arms crossed. “Dick’s a barnacle.”

“What’s wrong with the financial statements?” I gesture with my chin at the papers.

“Oh not much,” he says, dry. “Just tens of thousands disappearing from my trust fund. Seems my money manager’s been naughty.”

“Oooh, I know the answer to this one,” I say, because at least in this I can be helpful. “It’s funneled to your illegitimate half-brother Charlie Stone, by some skeezy guy named Avi Kaufman. Charlie seemed decent, though, the one time I met him; he’s probably unaware his income’s stolen. I can tell you where he works, if you want to straighten things out.”

“This is the guy impersonated by a journalist?” Logan asks, and I nod. “Wow, suddenly-appearing long-lost relatives are thick on the ground. Maybe that’s where the money went in your reality, Mrs. R. But here, it’s tripping the light fantastic through five holding companies, before ending up at Hazelwood--second day of each month on the dot.”

“You don’t seem surprised to see me.” I lick the back of the spoon, contemplative. “How’d you
know I was here, before I mentioned Charlie?"

“You’re eating dessert for dinner, which WAY exceeds your daily fat intake; and you verbally
dressed down Dick with zero circumspection,” he says. “I can’t definitively ID unless you punch
someone in the face, but those are reliable tells.”

“I NEED this calorie bomb,” I inform him. “On a fundamental level. TRUST me, over the last
twelve hours I’ve earned it.” I dig out another bite, then point at him with the spoon. “And by the
way, Victor’s NOT your grandfather. He’s a liar and a fake, and he maybe tried to kill me. So if you
have any idea how to track him down, we should, and then CRUSH him like a BUG for making me
a SUCKER. Oh, and also? Jake Kane’s developed data mining software to rip off his customers.
And Beaver’s using Duncan in the future to MURDER people.”

“Jesus.” He sets his pencil down. “What have you been DOING since last time I saw you?”

I laugh, somewhat hysterically, because if he only knew. “Let’s just say it was an eventful day.
The main takeaway, though, is that Kendall Casablancas has a hard drive we need, in order to
definitively prove Jake’s misdeeds. We’ve got to brainstorm ways to lay hands on it, pronto.”

“OK let’s go over the less incendiary details,” he says. “What is data mining software?”

“Well, I’m no Mac, so my explanation will be vague. But basically it collects browser history and
stores it for the creator’s use. It can help with probably-legal things, like designing better click ads, or
crimes, like theft, fraud or spying.”

“Great.” He cracks his neck, shuts his eyes to better focus. “OK, step one SHOULD BE dial
Lilly, and see if she knows any dirt; but she’s answered our calls zero times since she moved to New
York, so that might not prove fruitful.”

“Is she up to something?” I ask, moving closer, since he doesn’t seem markedly hostile.

“More like someONE,” he says, with sarcasm. “Hopefully Jackie--but with Lils, who knows?”

“We could spy on Kendall again,” I suggest, taking a seat at the table. I put my feet on his lap, he
doesn’t object, and a hard ball of angst unknots inside me. “Call my Dad, find out what he’s heard?”

“Doable,” he agrees. Curls his hand around my toes.

“We could…cuddle?” I offer. “Like NORMAL college students?”

He fights a smile. “When have we EVER approached normal, Veronica?”

I set the ice cream on the table, wedge in the spoon. “I’m not really sure what you want from me
right now.”

“YOU’VE got to leave in half an hour for your new job,” he tells me. Pulls one of my legs
around his waist, then the other, dragging me onto his lap in the process. Surges up and lifts me, with
a show-offy spin, then carries me to the couch. Settles us there, entwined. “And in my opinion, you
should rest first. Veronica rarely does that, anymore, you NEVER did—and I’m starting to worry
about that gleam in your eye. We hero-complex types can get addicted to adrenaline.”

“Slowing down means death.” I tuck my head beneath his chin. “Often literally. Besides, you
know me—not much good at moderation.”

“I’m aware you think you’re invulnerable, Mrs. R,” he says. Both his voice and the way he’s
stroking my back are drugging. “But you’re really not so physically tough.”

“Hey, I just spent six hours in labor,” I inform him, sleepy. “If you think you can top THAT with your manly muscle-flexing, be my guest.”

“LABOR?” His body goes rigid, and he looks down at me in horror. “Like BABY labor? Because if you’re giving BIRTH nine months from now, that must mean you’re…oh, FUCK no!”

He pushes me off the lap—guess THAT moment’s over—and leaps up to pace, tugging at his hair in a way that’s become disturbingly typical. “This was supposed to happen LATER in the timeline! You said halfway through Freshman Year!”

“Yeah, that was before we broke the condom,” I say, gently, not sure how to respond. Because I’ve warned him, repeatedly. I guess he just…chose not to believe. “I think maybe, if I hadn’t showed up in the shower, the sex would have been more…gentle. And the accident would’ve been delayed until Christmastime. When I first started slipstreaming I was three months along, and all of a sudden, after your birthday, BAM. Hippopotamus time.”

“So you KNEW,” he says, in the deceptively soft voice that spells maximum trouble. “On your last visit, you were aware of the pregnancy, but chose not to tell me.”

“We were busy,” I say lamely. “Donald Fagin and whatnot. I meant to bring it up, but ran out of time.”

“Well this is just FABULOUS.” He punches the back of the couch so hard it cracks. Shakes his hand absently, pain barely registering. “My Veronica’s been going to bed early and eating vegetables, she must have taken a test. Apparently, I can’t trust either ONE of you.”

“Logan,” I say, because come on. “I told you this would happen in high school. Cowboy up.”

“Veronica,” he mimics, “I’ve got Jake on my ass to join the Castle, and you’ve just informed me he’s an international criminal. I have an escaped fugitive grandfather who I’m supporting twice over, and HE’S apparently a phony. My surfing career’s on hold because you convinced me to break into an asylum, where Beaver smashed my knee; which means my business is bleeding money, and my sponsors have threatened to bail. AND I’ve got two identically-headstrong girlfriends trading off the same body, who seem to be silently at war. I don’t have the bandwidth for dysfunctional impending fatherhood!”

“You forgot Sorokin,” I say, which makes him sneer. “I wasn’t any happier about this baby than you are, when I figured out she was fated. I’m TWENTY, I have career dreams, and my psyche’s a fucking mess. Plus in one possible future, I screwed up so badly I caused a MISCARRIAGE. I don’t know jack shit about children, but let me tell you, Logan. I just held our kid an hour ago, and I will END anyone who hurts her. And you’re going to feel the same.”

“What about what VERONICA wants?” he demands, and there it is again. The specter of HER. Standing right between us, like she always is. “What if she decides to get rid of it?”

“Then she will feel my WRATH,” I say. “My impotent wrath, though, right? Because I’m not ALLOWED to make critical choices. It’s her body, like you said, and I’m just the unwelcome houseguest.”

“Nice to hear you finally acknowledge it,” he quips, and OK, that’s IT. ASSHOLE.

“Yeah, I’m hearing your message loud and clear,” I say. “I don’t matter, I’m automatically wrong, and I can only get my way through manipulation and subterfuge. I need to declare WAR. But what
YOU don’t understand is, that’s FINE with me. Because I’m not wrong—Veronica will regret it bitterly later, if she gets rid of Peanut now. And I’ve won battles with you LOTS of times, in my reality. I’m willing to go lower than you are, and I have WAY fewer regrets.”

“Are you THREATENING me?” he demands, voice sliding up an octave in outrage. “Have you just conveniently forgotten the way I was raised, because it’s too icky to think about? You know better than ANYONE what I’m capable of under my Clark Kent exterior, Veronica. You’ve heard at least some of the fucked-up Aaron stories. You want to wager a kid’s happiness on the hope that I’m man enough to rise above my abuse? Just based on faith? What is WRONG with you?”

“If I hadn’t seen the future, maybe I would be afraid,” I say. “But I have, so I know our problem’s more likely to be ME. In one reality I’M the fuck-up, which I wouldn’t previously have believed possible. And in my OWN reality, you’re the guy trying, while I stiff-arm every effort. But in the place where I have my act together, we’ve actually made it work; we’re functional and well-adjusted, happy to have a kid. So all this crap about you being unable…it’s a cop-out, Logan. You’re not your father, and you know it.”

“You’ve seen what SOME versions of me did.” He points an accusing finger, for emphasis. “You have no clue what THIS one might. I am freaked the fuck OUT right now, Mrs. R. We took steps to prevent pregnancy, because we agreed none of us wanted it. You don’t get to throw around ultimatums, when you’re not the one who lives here.”

“And that’s the problem, isn’t it?” I say, with a flash of insight. “You’re not angry I’M knocked up. You’re angry SHE is, because SHE doesn’t believe in you.”

He scoffs, and I add, “Yeah it’s all fun and games until the shotgun wedding to the wrong girl.”

We stare at each other for a minute, and I’m sure I’m right. When I’m not around, his faith in HIMSELF starts to fade. If Other Veronica can’t bring herself to trust him more than I trusted MY Logan, beginning of Freshman Year….they may come to the same bad end.

But how can she trust him, when she knows…is deep-down SURE…he prefers someone else?

“Uh-uh.” Logan ends the fraught moment with a negating hand wave. “You know what, I’m DONE with this conversation. Run along to the LIBRARY job you went renegade to accept, since you care more about slipstream bullshit than Veronica’s safety, or my feelings. Maybe you’ll bounce before it’s time to come home, and I’ll get to discuss this problem with my ACTUAL girlfriend.”

“Great,” I say. “Maybe I WILL. And maybe I’LL wake up next in Hawaii, with the version of you that just wants to screw all day. And isn’t such a TRUTH-DENYING DICK.”

I grab my bag off the side table; he makes a dismissive, shooing hand gesture, and I respond by flipping him off. Storm out to the garage and climb in the Rover, because it’s the only car key I have. FUCK him if he’s left without a ride. I back out with a squeal.

I’ve driven two blocks, at excessive speed, before I realize I don’t know which library employs me.

I’d rather pull out my fingernails than call Logan, though; so I roll the dice, and head for the liberal arts building where MY work-study department placed me. Park over the line in hopes his precious car will get dinged. Fish for earbuds as I storm inside, because screw anyone who expects interaction.

At least I don’t have to empty trash cans like Weevil, I reflect, smacking the double doors open.
Or fix broken windows and clogged toilets, or scrub egg off the Dean’s car. This job entailed a minimum of massive annoyances like….

Piz.

Shit, shit, shit, he’s sitting behind the desk with his feet up, playing Tetris instead of shelving the overflowing cart. And he’s clearly just noticed me, which means I can’t escape. No WONDER Logan hates the library job, though Other V must have OK’d it. The real mystery is…why DID she?

Because seriously, no client commission is worth this. I don’t care if Bobby 09’er’s rap sheet keeps him out of medical school. I’m not getting NEAR this creep’s excess teeth, and his sex tape, SHUDDER. And that HAIRCUT, Jesus, I can’t even.

“Hey, Veronica,” The Menace says flatly as I approach. Goes back to playing Tetris. Which is when I realize that, though I’ve yet to utter caustic word one, he shows no signs of a massive crush. At ALL.

Maybe my non-single status nipped his Manic Pixie Dream Girl fetish in the bud? Although my boyfriend slowed him down none, back home?

“Piz,” I say, through clenched teeth, because that’s as civil as I get this evening. I toss my bag on the counter and shove through the gate. Pull up the other chair and slump.

“You’re sixteen minutes late,” he says, not looking at me, and GREAT. On top of being a human case of jock itch, he’s THAT co-worker.

“What do you care?” I shoot back. “You’re not even pretending to do your job.” I dig through my bag, locate M&M’s and tear in, because this is a situation that calls for chocolate. “Why’d you take this work-study, anyway? I thought you wanted a gig at the campus radio station?”

“I did.” He shoves the mouse aside and leans back in defeat. He even sucks at TETRIS, apparently. “But I can’t convince the station manager to give me a chance. And I have no money, thanks to your extortionate detecting bill. So here I am, at the one place on campus that will pay me.”

“They didn’t offer you a spot at the campus paper?” I ask, innocently. Because if any two people deserve each other, it’s Piz and Nish.

“I don’t have the necessary skills. I’m a lover, not a writer.” He looks at me sideways, to see if his joke landed, and I suppress an internal groan. Pull out my phone and text Weevil—THIS LIBRARY JOB HAD BETTER PAY OFF BIG.

A few seconds later, a text comes back, THE CANDY DISPENSER HITTING ON YOU AGAIN?

I text back EWWWWW, and can practically HEAR him laughing, from whatever dingy basement he’s sweeping. DOESN’T SEEMS LIKE HE’S INTERESTED, I add, after a minute. MAYBE MY RESTING BITCH FACE IS WORKING?

OR MAYBE HE GOT TIRED OF OPIE GLARING AT HIM YOUR WHOLE SHIFT, WHILE TWITCHING THE CORNER OF HIS MOUTH THAT WAY HE DOES.

My shoulders shake with laughter. Piz asks, beside me, “Messaging your BOYFRIEND?”

“Just a pal,” I say, typing WHILE I’M HERE, WHAT SHOULD I LOOK FOR TO CRACK THE CASE? “He’s a janitor. Which I guess makes me Bender from Breakfast Club, only with better
“I’m surprised Logan’s not here, studying.” Piz tries to look at my phone without seeming nosy. I turn it face down on my lap. “Usually, he is.”

“He’s doing a home spa day.” I peek at the screen as it vibrates. HOW BOUT CHECK THE MAGAZINE SHELVES ON THE THIRD FLOOR? DARK UP THERE, GOOD HIDING SPOT. “He’s impossible without his weekly cucumber facial.”

“Oh, ha.” Piz picks up a pen, twirls it. Drops it, then pretends like he didn’t instead of trying to retrieve. “He still mad about you working here?”

I lift a brow, because like I’m confiding in THIS guy. “Does it matter?”

“Just making conversation.” He crosses his arms somewhat defensively. “Passing the time. Hey, I forgot to tell you what happened with my band. We have a gig this week at Sister Susan’s on the strip! I’m totally stoked, too, because we’re opening for the Corporate Raiders. They’re like, local legends, in case you didn’t know. We’re talking about maybe doing a tribute song…nothing cheesy, very respectful…”

“You know what?” I hop up with alacrity. “I’d better get shelving. You can man the desk right? While you practice your Tetris skills?”

He aims a surly thumbs-up at me, turning his back, and I push the overloaded cart towards the elevator. There’s nothing on it that BELONGS on the top floor—but it provides cover, in case someone stumbles across me. A couple seeking privacy, maybe, since nobody else ever goes there.

I enjoyed the ambience myself, back when my boyfriend was Logan-Feeling-Reformed, and not Logan-Shithead-of-Biblical-Proportions. He went down on me for half an hour on the table in the back corner, instead of flinging around edicts like an entitled jerk.

Shoving the cart to the end of the darkest aisle, I grab a handful of books and wander. Probably I’m wasting my time; most drug deals are live exchanges, involving wads of sweaty tens ripped off from mom’s wallet. But I’m not paid for my opinion— and since Jake’s quit footing my bills, here, it’s work or be Logan’s kept woman. So I check behind boxes and under shelves, in the drawers of desks shut since Nixon.

I’m weirded out by Piz’s behavior…the fact that he’s abandoned his crush distracts me. I mean, on one level, I’m glad; Other V has a weird susceptibility to bad puns and passive-aggressiveness that defies logic. But on the other, it breaks the cross-reality pattern. Piz pursues me EVERYWHERE, and Logan’s existence doesn’t deter him.

Logan clearly senses a threat, too—he’s been skulking around while I work, glowering. But all I read from Piz is pouty self-absorption. So what happened to dull his interest?

Then it hits me, and I drop my handful of books. LOGAN happened.

Piz crossed some line, known only to Kings of the Oh-Niners, and met with fist-shaped pseudo-justice in some Hearst back alley. An event Logan didn’t bother to mention, because it would have shrunk his high horse.

High-and-mighty slipstream Logan might not be all that reformed.

I huff laughter, because perversely it makes me feel better to catch him hiding things; bend down to gather the books. Notice a box of magazines askew on the bottom shelf, and poke it with a finger.
It doesn’t budge.

I shove again, same result, so I remove it, and look what we’ve got here! Attached to the back, with a distinctive black-and-gold clip, is a bag of clearly narcotic white powder.

Pulling out my phone, I text Weevil. FOUND IT. CLIPPED TO MAGAZINE FILE FOLDER. TAKE, OR PHOTOGRAPH AND LEAVE?

PHOTOGRAPH, LEAVE AND MONITOR, comes the answer, quickly. DAMN, V, IT’S LIKE YOU’RE A BLOODHOUND.

AW, SHUCKS. I type, take a couple quick snaps with my cell cam. LEFT MY BAG DOWNSTAIRS, NO BUGS. I’LL PLANT VIDEO BEFORE I LEAVE.

CLIMB ON A STOOL AND ATTACH IT HIGH, he writes. NOT LIKE LAST TIME, WHEN YOU CUT OFF THE BAD GUY’S HEAD.

EVERYBODY’S A CRITIC, I say, and hear footsteps. Shove the box back, grab my books, and run for the cart.

When Piz appears, skulking at the end of the row like he’s afraid to approach, I’m serenely sorting texts by level and section. “Hey.” I glance up and smile, like I don’t have a care in the world. “Problem?”

“Your boyfriend’s here,” he says, sullen. “I told him I wasn’t sure where you went, because you seemed pretty mad.”

“Here where?” I ask. He shrugs, still watching sulkily from a distance.

“Downstairs, at his usual table. He said you always turn up, if he keeps the faith and waits.”

I press my lips together, because that’s a coded slipstream message. He wants to see me before I go-- he’s sorry. And I’m mad, still, furiously mad…but not enough to disappear from his life for months without making up.

“Guess I’d better head downstairs, then.” I push the cart towards him, let go. “Wouldn’t want to leave my snuggly-wumpkins kicking his heels.”

I brush past, walking fast because I’m amped with adrenaline. My phone buzzes in my pocket, another message from Weevil, probably, but I ignore it.

Logan’s at the big round table near the clerk’s desk; he’s sprawled in a chair that’s balanced on two legs, staring morosely at the ceiling. A textbook lies open in front of him, but he watches me approach, not even pretending to read.

I stop in front of the table, arms crossed, and he says, “We need to talk.”

“DO we?” I ask, resentment bubbling up. Because I’m not interested, if he’s going to take a TONE.

“In private,” he adds, with a glance behind me. I turn to note that Piz has followed me down, and is lurking a few feet away.

I’m starting to feel sorry for Wallace. He has to sleep in a room ALONE with this guy.

“Come on.” I beckon with my head, lead him to one of the reservation-only conference rooms.
Lock us in. I pull down the shades, in case Piz is REALLY curious, and lift my brows.

Logan leans against the wall, thumbs in pockets, that casual pose with which he initiates confrontation… like he won’t do his enemy the courtesy of seeming tense. “You DID warn me about the baby,” he says, intent, then looks down at his shoes. “I just wouldn’t accept it. I thought I could change fate.”

“Fate’s tricky,” I say, because THAT I understand. “And patient. If it wants something to happen, something does, no matter what tricks you try.”

“I wish it had happened LATER.” He blows out a self-disgusted laugh. “Like ten years from now, when MAYBE I’ll have my shit marginally together. Because Veronica, right now I’m a fucking mess.”

“The timing is…not ideal,” I agree. “I freaked out too, when I first learned about her. Because she happens EVERYWHERE, to whichever girl you’ve been…with. But Logan…I WANT Peanut, now. And so does YOUR Veronica, in the future. And when you have a chance to calm down and consider, so will you. I promise.”

“Her.” Logan scuffs one shoe against the other. Spears me with a look. “You know for sure the baby’s a girl?”


“And the us who had a baby…we’re still hot on the heels of Beaver?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “Also Duncan. They’re enjoying a joint crime spree, while SWAT teams converge from all directions. Like I said. The timing isn’t ideal.”

“It never is,” he says. “Look, Veronica, I have to tell you something you’re not going to like. I don’t want to--I hoped we would never come to this—but I doubt whoever’s in charge of FATE much cares how I feel.”

I nod, thinking UH-OH, and he says, “I know you love the baby, and I know you love me. I know you’re willing to step up and make a family; and I would do that, for you, because I love you, too. Even though I’m terrified right now…and really, really fighting the urge to get trashed.”

“But?” I gesture for him to keep talking, since clearly he’s not done.

“But,” he continues. “I won’t let you make Veronica’s choices for her, anymore.”

“Because she’s the one who matters,” I say. Surprised by how much it hurts.

“No,” he corrects. “I feel the same way about you as I always did; I will for the rest of my life. It’s just…I love her, too. Which makes me feel like I’m cheating on both of you, all the time—and not just sexually. I’m constantly having to choose sides.”

He toys with the blind cord, a rare show of nerves. “It’s especially hard because YOU’RE the one whose approach to life makes sense. We NEED to take action, to stop these predators. I CHAFE on the sidelines, I’m a fists-first guy. But you and Veronica have different goals, and you constantly ride roughshod over hers. And she’s not here when you are, to protect herself. So, as her fiancée, I HAVE to step in. Even if it makes you hate me. Even though you’re the love of my life.”

I let loose a noise of protest, and he lifts a silencing hand. “WE knocked her up, Veronica. You and me, because we’re combustible in bed…we were aggro and reckless, playing with fire, and SHE
got burned. What we did has consequences; it can’t be undone. And the fact that she must
REALIZE she’s pregnant—she’s completely changed her lifestyle—but hasn’t told me? Means she’s
not sure she can trust me to do what’s right. That can’t stand.”

He sighs. “I won’t let you take her directions she doesn’t want to go, anymore. I’m sorry. But it’s
my responsibility, here, to love my Veronica better.”

I nod, hugging myself tight; because if anyone understands work before pleasure, I’m the girl.
“But if she’s changed her lifestyle, that means she’s keeping Peanut,” I say.

“Oh she’s hedging her bets,” he counters, gently. “I won’t know until I talk to her. And I can’t do
that right now, because I’m talking to you.”

I turn away, towards the shuttered window. This feels a lot like getting dumped, and there’s
nowhere safe I can go, to escape.

“So where does my decision leave us?” he asks, after a minute. I glance over my shoulder to see
he’s slid down the wall, and is sitting on the floor. And he’s staring at me with that Lost Logan look I
can barely handle on my best days. “You hate me now, right? I’m the enemy?”

“I feel TRAPPED,” I say, closing my eyes. “And as I believe I’ve told you before, I’m not good
with loss of control.”

“Trapping you is the LAST thing I want to do.” His voice is low, passionate. “And it’s
impossible, anyway. You can’t ever really control a force of nature.”

I lift my lids, study him across the distance between us, because I’ve heard these words. In Hearst
Reality, right before he dumped me. In Prison Reality, when we reunited. Logan must have
ALWAYS seen me as something powerful and untamable, even before the timelines split. Even
back when I was pink and docile, minding my manners while others watched. “You and I, we’re
star-crossed,” I say. “I never really understood how much.”

“Yeah.” His face twists into a smirk, like he can’t help it. “Two big balls of incandescent plasma.
With enough gravity to suck in and vaporize anything that draws near.”

I snort, and he says, “Help me find a way through. Don’t disappear, and leave me alone.”

“Ah, the patented Logan Echolls courtship technique.” I sit, facing him. “Simultaneously threaten
and cozen, then dare me to up the stakes. Turn on a dime and flash the puppy eyes, the minute I’ve
had enough.”

He laughs, and I extend a hand, palm up, across the space between us. “It’s good some things
never change.”

Logan puts his hand, feather-light, on mine, shivering because this is how much he craves touch.
It’s almost a disease, for which I’m the cure. In his mind, love and fear and conflict are the same. “I
need you so much, Veronica.”

“I know.” I stroke his wrist.

“Of course you do.” He laughs. “I’m sorry it has to be this way, Mrs. R. I never wanted anything
but love to lie between us.”

“It’s the right decision,” I say, because I can offer my blessing, at least. “And you wouldn’t be
Logan if you shrank from making it. That’s your motto, right? There’s always a choice, even if it’s
He presses a kiss to my knuckles, doesn’t answer. Maybe because there’s no reassurance he can give. I tilt my head back, stare at the ceiling, and let the slipstream spin me away.
I float in silence, dozing—so sweet, this peace, I’ve had too little rest for such a long time. I’m warm, cocooned in a jacket, cheek on Logan’s shoulder, still and safe. With a sigh, I nestle closer, mouth against the skin of his throat.

“Veronica,” he says softly, and my lashes flutter but my lids are slow to open. “We’re here.”

I sit up. I’m in Logan’s black Rover, idling with the heater running in the cool of early morning, parked on the street in front of Mac’s parents’ house.

“Wow,” I say, pulling away with regret. Because this reality, so much like my own, is ironically where things are going best. “Home already? Short vacation.”

“Hey, you’re the one who demanded we hop on the red-eye and fix things.” He brushes back hair that’s fallen into my eyes. “I’m just here to protect you…against my best judgment.”

“And that’s the ONLY reason you came?” I ask. Because the last time I saw this Logan, we were in bed. “To protect me?”

“Oh, you actually want to DISCUSS what happened?” He lifts his brows in mock-surprise, but doesn’t seem angry. This is normal Veronica-exasperation, mixed, maybe, with jet lag. “Or just have the ‘we got too serious too fast’ talk? I admit, I was encouraged when you rousted me out of bed after that phone call from Clarence, and demanded I come along. Your normal MO is to ditch me without leaving a note.”

“See?” I cuddle his giant jacket around me. “In my book, long-distance plane trips count as peak romance.”

“We were tipsy,” he concedes gently, undeterred. “And fake-engaged, and cuddled together in a very small bed, having deep, intimate conversations. If you regretted it, the next morning—or DIDN’T, but think it’s too soon for a repeat—I wouldn’t blame you.”

“Do YOU regret it?” I ask. “Or think it’s too soon?”

“Not yet,” he says, serious. “I guess my attitude depends on you.”

“Well, if we’re trying to relationship better, this time,” I say, “we should probably take things slow, and consider our feelings in depth. But speaking for myself, I’m not the least bit sorry.”

He nods, considering. “Same. And I agree—protecting your dad is more important than getting my drink on in exotic locales. But what’s VITAL, if you want us to work, Veronica…you’ve got to keep me in the loop. If you do anything crazy, at least let me tag along.”

“Safety first goes both ways,” I say, softly. “If you stumble across anything Sorokin-related, the first thing you do is pick up the phone.”

He opens his mouth to reply and there’s a loud thump on the window. I turn to see Mac peering in, hand curled to shield her eyes from the sun. She lifts her brows, observing our tete-a-tete, and beckons.
I roll the window down, and she says, “Sorry to interrupt your tender moment, guys; but I’m leaving on a family jaunt to Big Bend in four hours. If you want my help—and it sounded, based on that frantic phone call from the airport, like you DO—we need to start now.”

“I’m practically already inside,” I tell her. “Just give me one more minute to say goodbye.”

Mac snorts, heads back in. Logan smiles down at me.

“I’d fork over the Red Bull right off the bat.” He roots around on the floor, produces a six pack with a flourish. “She works best highly caffeinated. And call me when you get a line on the hard drive. I REALLY want to know where it went.”

I kiss his mouth, gentle buss which takes him aback, but his grin broadens in the aftermath. Climb out of his car, bringing his jacket along. He hands me a shiny new duffel, full of my purchases from Hawaii, I guess; then waits ’til I’m inside before driving away.

Mac ushers me into her high-school bedroom, with a shouted, “Not now, Ryan!” as her brother barrels towards us wielding a tennis racket. She locks the door, rolls her eyes as he thuds against it, and gestures me towards a chair.

I sit, feeling weird because it’s NOT weird to hang here—because this is my PAL Mac, and I’ve grown used to more distance. “How do you want to do this?” I ask, hoping to elicit discussion of what ‘this’ is.

“Well I kept a copy of the drive, like you asked.” She crosses to an old phonograph on the cabinet, fishes a black bag out of the space beneath. “But I’m not sure what exactly you think we’re going to find on here. Other than those pervy Castle interview files, that is.”

Pervy CASTLE files? That’s right, Dad DID say something about secret society dirt. Note to self—read and/or watch before next slip; because God knows I need all the ammo I can find. “We’re looking for code. Data-mining code, to be specific, which attaches to a browser. I don’t think it’s IN the files. But if my sources are correct, it’s hiding somewhere on that drive.”

“Curiouser and curiouser.” She plugs the device into a jack on her laptop—clocks her knuckles, with a familiar almost-expression of relish. “Any clue as to the origin?”

“Yes,” I say. “But I want you to look at it with fresh eyes. I’ll postpone the expository monologue until you’ve had a chance to go fish.”

“Oooh, I get to be the detective.” Mac grins, already deep into subdirectories and menus, clicking and browsing with scary speed and focus. “Cindy Mackenzie, tech noir specialist. It has a nice ring. Wait a minute, what’s this? Bingo.”

She double clicks on something and enlarges it, frowning with concentration. It looks like nonsense words and numbers to me, but then again, I have zero nerd cred. “What are you UP to, Jake Kane?” she mutters, scrolling. “And why does this program have three separate notes written in Cyrillic?”

“So it IS of Russian origin,” I say. “Like, if law enforcement, computer crimes division, studied it, they’d agree--this code hails from Russia?”

“It was written, or at least modified, by someone who speaks a Cyrillic-keyboard-using language,” she says. “And attaches to a browser, as you said, then collects surfing data. This is INGENIOUS.” She shakes her head, eyes bright. “Once again, Veronica, I’m amazed at your perspicacity. I never would have thought to look for this, but it’s a BIG deal. If Jake rolls out his
version of Google with spyware attached, and gets caught? It’ll be the tech scandal of the DECADE.”

“So using it on customers would be illegal?” I ask. “Like it might ruin him financially, or cost him millions in fines?”

“I don’t know about ILLEGAL,” Mac sits back, pondering. “There aren’t a lot of rules policing the internet at present, it’s kind of like the Wild West. Or rather, there ARE laws that apply to individual hackers, but not so many for corporations; I’d have to research to be sure. I’ll tell you this, though...if it IS legal, I might take a stab at writing my own.”

“Keep me posted,” I say. “This information will protect us best if we know EXACTLY where to apply pressure. Make me a copy of the drive, too, if you don’t mind. Someone important needs to see the data.”

“I can’t promise I’ll finish researching today.” She locates a disk and inserts it into her machine. “Because like I told you, Big Bend. But I’ll make it a priority when I get back. I have more time on my hands, since Max and I became less-official.”

“Oooh,” I say, because Max? Like, computer nerd with the hooker girlfriend Max? “Tell me more about Max and less-serious!”

“Well, you know.” She clicks a couple GUI’s, and files start copying. “Turns out him flunking out of college to sell term papers full-time wasn’t the relationship death knell I thought—I like the sex too much. But I’m going places with my life. And I’m not prepared to float around in a prurient bubble, twenty-four-seven, with someone who isn’t.”

I nod, thinking wow, on the surface, she sounds like me, back when my goal was normal. Hot unsuitable guys are for kissing in secret; they don’t get to play consort. But while I never actually WANTED a friends-with-benefits relationship, it sounds like Mac DOES.

The realization is...comforting. Maybe love doesn’t have the world-destroying power over her it does me. Maybe, like Victor said, she filters her feelings through her mind. Which could be why she’s so changeable about dating, in the slipstream--freewheeling sex is her comfort zone. And though I can’t imagine being that light-hearted about exchanging body fluids...Lilly is. Dick is. Even Logan is, to some extent. It’s not beyond the realm of possibility Mac might be, too.

Frankly, I’m just glad to be sitting here with what feels like Real Mac—a person who shows friendship with deeds. She low-key shows up, helping under the radar, available for critical takedowns no matter how packed her schedule. And she does this in other realities, too...she's consistently, eternally reliable.

Mac’s a good person, everywhere I’ve met her, even if she DID sleep with my boyfriend in Prison Reality. I’m not angry anymore, I realize. I’m only glad she’s still in my life.

“So what about you?” she asks, startling me out of my fugue state. Hands me a freshly copied disk. “Are YOU in a bubble with Logan again? I admit I was surprised to get a call from Hawaii, five days after Parker dumped him, and two days after you broke up with Piz. But in a way, I’m also NOT surprised. Like, at all.”

“I don’t know if I’d say bubble,” I tell her, fighting off a blush. “More…the lines of communication have re-opened.”

“Are you back together?” she asks, bluntly. “Just so I don’t put my foot in my mouth, when next
he and I meet?”

“I’m not sure.” I busy myself securing the drive in my bag. Because I DON’T know what Other Veronica wants, or what LOGAN wants, for that matter. “I think we’re trying to see if we CAN be. If we’re able, at this point, to work through stuff that derailed us.”

“Fair enough.” Mac closes down her menu. “But for the record? I KNEW you wouldn’t last more than a semester without roller coasters. Face it, Veronica, the teacup ride was never your style.”

I grimace, because truer words, and she laughs. “So what next?” she asks. “I’ve got a six-pack of Red Bull here, and a few free hours.”

“Well if we’re looking for a weak link, or at least a marginally human link, to negotiate with at Kane Industries…” I sigh, sitting back, and press my fingers to my temples. “You have no idea how weird I feel, saying this, but it’d have to be Celeste. She’s more rational than Jake, and she’s got buttons I can press. So the next item on the agenda is, she and I need to have a chat. Any way you can hack her schedule, find out her plans for today?”

“Oooh, I bet I know the answer already.” She pulls up a browser. “There’s a Junior League luncheon at the Neptune Grand at one, honoring the charitable stylings of Ellen Sinclair.”

She types, ignoring my searching look, and says, “Yep, just as I suspected, Celeste is president of the local chapter. Bet you could confirm her attendance with a phone call, if you think up a good reason for asking.”

I wink, exaggerated. “Observe a pro at work.”

She types ‘Neptune Grand’ into Google, but I wave her away--I know the number by heart. When the ever-perky Tina answers, I drawl, doing my best bored-cynical-California-assistant, “Catering, please. Yesterday, if possible.”

Tina’s both efficient and helpful, so in six seconds I’m on the line with a harried event planner. “This is Astrid Collins for Celeste Kane? We have a MAJOR storm brewing. PLEASE tell me her entrée for the charity luncheon does NOT contain cranberries OR gluten.”

“We have a list of food allergies and preferences for the attendees,” the caterer assures me, in the polished yet somehow fawning tones of the professional suck-up. “I believe Ms. Kane’s only request was carb-free, but let me check.” There’s silence for a moment, broken only by rustling paper, then, “Right, disaster averted. She DID specify carb-free, so there’s no fruit or croutons of any kind on the salad. Shall I make a note of gluten allergy, for future reference?”

“Between you and me, the ‘allergy’ is to exercise,” I say. “But you’ve saved me an hour’s worth of groveling and icy reprimands, so thank you.”

I close the phone, grin at Mac, and thumbs-up with both hands. She laughs. “All right, I concede. I may be the hacker extraordinaire in this dynamic duo, but you’re the one with professional-grade lying skills.”

Blowing a kiss, I move to stash my phone, only to reverse in mid-motion as it rings again. “Weevil,” I tell her, after checking it. “I’ll take this outside, so you can get started on your task list. Thanks for fitting me in.”

“Anytime, Bond.” She waves behind her, distracted already by some article on Internet laws, and I let myself out. Dodge a tennis ball struck down the foyer by Ryan as I go, and watch their terrier fetch it.
“What’s the word, Weevil?” I ask, as I step out into the sunshine. “Please don’t say bail. I’m unemployed at present, and I just got back from vacation.”

“Not bail YET, but I wouldn’t be surprised if things headed that direction. Where’ve you BEEN, V? I’ve left four messages this morning! Some science professor told the Deputy Brigade he saw me carrying an ID maker out of the physics lab. I’ve got cops breathing down my neck, here--they’re currently searching my apartment.”

“Will they find anything?” I lift my brows, noticing a suspiciously-familiar Saturn parked nearby. When I try my key fob on it, the lock beeps open; I must have asked Dad to drop it off. “ID cards buy you all sorts of stuff on campus; and as long as they work in the scanners, they’d be hard to trace. Sounds like easy money.”

“If I was guilty, would I call YOU?” he asks, exasperated. “You’d turn me in yourself.”

“You’ve begged for help when guilty before,” I remind him, climbing in and starting the car. “But bygones. Look, Vinnie Van Lowe is all about the quid pro quo. Give him cash, or something else he wants, and he’ll make any pending charges magically disappear.”

“Why do you think I’m always getting framed?” he demands. “I don’t got nothing these people in power want. Except the skin tone and lack of status that make me a convenient patsy.”

“You have the license plate numbers from Thumper’s paddle, still,” I remind him. “Right?”

“Sure,” he says. “For insurance.”

“Well, I’d say imminent arrest qualifies as an emergency.” I turn right on Hamilton, head for the Sunset Cliffs; I need to change into jeans. This likely won’t be a Hawaiian-dress and boyfriend’s-jacket kind of day. “Those plates belong to some very influential people who bought drugs from the Fitzpatrick crime syndicate. How about you dig up your copy, and meet me at Java the Hut in ten? Maybe we can save your bacon, and Logan’s, and mine, all in one fell swoop.”

“I could care less about Echolls or his bacon,” Weevil says, which, let’s face it, is patently untrue. “But I’ll be there with bells on if you can make THIS problem vanish.”

“Bring your tool box,” I tell him, pulling into the lot. “And wear a black suit. You’ll need to disable a car in a surveilled lot, if all goes according to plan.”

“This is what I love about you, V,” he says. “Crimes only count, in Veronica-land, when they’re not done for your benefit.”

“See, you keep talking, but all I hear is WAAAAH WANH WAAAAAH,” I say. “Meet you in ten, at the place with the caffeine.”

The apartment is empty, with the still, slightly dusty look of several days’ disuse. Backup’s not here, but I can hear him barking from the apartment next door; I guess Mrs. Aviles is watching him again. I toss my bag on the couch with a sigh, and slump down after.

My phone rings, hanging lax in my hand, so reluctantly, I answer. “Hey, Daddio!”

“Veronica are you back already? I’m stuck in traffic on the highway, and Mrs. Aviles just called me. Wanted to know why she’s watching our dog when you’re in the apartment.”

“I literally just got home,” I say. “And I’m booked all day, cleaning up this Fitzpatrick mess. Listen, I could use your help. Will you meet me at Logan’s suite in three hours? I promise I’ll make it
worth your while.”

“Veronica Anne Mars. I thought I told you not to meddle.”

“Dad, I got you, among others, into this mess. The least I can do is get everyone out. It’s not like brilliant deductive minds such as mine are a dime a dozen.”

“I’ll meet you,” he says, resigned. “Because at least you’ve included me in your plan this time, even if it promises to turn what remains of my hair grey.”

“Love you, Dad,” I say. “With or without hair. Oh, and by the way…does Bob at Classy Transport still owe you a favor? The kind that might earn you the loan of a limo, perhaps?”

“I’ll ask,” he says. “But I hope you realize, when all this is done, we’re re-opening discussion about that hamster ball.”

“Ooh, I hope it has blackout windows and a TV. And an ergonomic chair. Drive safe, Dad. And dress like a businessman, you’ll need to look respectable.”

I hang up, toss the jacket on the sofa. Dial Logan with one thumb as I head to my bedroom in search of jeans. “Hey good-looking,” I say when he answers, his voice lazy and slow. “You busy this afternoon?”

“That was fast,” he says. “Nope, I’m watching a poker tournament and eating a burger. Did you and Mac hit a dead end?”

“Negative.” I wiggle out of my dress. “We’re done, I’m home, and I’m currently changing clothes.”

“And you’re allowed to use the phone? Color me amazed.”

“Only because Dad isn’t here.” I sit to unbuckle my sandals. “Listen, I just invited some partners in crime to meet at your suite in three hours. They’ve got evidence we can leverage, to get all these murder-y types out of our business. And as of five minutes ago, so do I.”

“The mysterious hard drive?” he guesses. “Considering you didn’t know where it went twenty-four hours ago, you sure found it quick.”

“I had help,” I say. “But just as a precautionary measure, we should stash this somewhere safe. Like a Swiss bank vault, for example, which a little bird tells me you own.”

“I’ll have my money manager check,” he drawls, as the TV in the background goes silent. “And which partners in crime are we talking about? Because if Weevs is coming over, I’ll send the concierge out for Colt Forty-Fives.”

“Behave,” I chide, donning my jeans, then ducking under the bed for boots. “Oh, and in a related, although seemingly not so, aside, how much cash could you stand to lose in a poker game, without causing yourself hardship?”

“THAT’S a loaded question.” He sounds amused. “Why do you ask?”

“Brainstorming ways to pull Weevil out of his poverty spiral which A) he’ll accept, and B) won’t get him arrested, like the method he’s currently considering. I think he needs to be his own boss—he doesn’t work well as a subordinate. Tattoo shop, perhaps?”
“How much money are we talking about, here?” he asks.

“The equivalent of a small business loan?” I say. Grab a long-sleeved tee off my dresser, sniff it, and yank it over my head. “In the form of you playing poker just badly enough to seem plausible?”

“Let me check my bank balance,” he tells me, long-suffering. “If Weev’s evidence keeps me from getting fileted again, I’m sure we can work something out.”

I make kissing noises into the phone, hang up, and call Mac back. “Guess what?” I ask, twisting my hair up into a knot as I head for the door. “I’m about to acquire a bunch of license plate numbers, whose owners I need to run through Prying Eyez. Can I turn around and come back, and monopolize those next few hours you offered?”

“If you bring coffee,” she says. “Hacking the DMV requires caffeine. And there was an incident just now with Ryan’s dog and my Red Bull.”

“On my way, quad in hand,” I say. “Fresh from Java the Hut with my compliments. You’re the best.”

Three hours later, the men in my life are lined up on Logan’s couch, like that see-no-evil, hear-no-evil comic from the Seventies. Weevil’s slouched low, studied-casual, one boot heel balanced on the toe of the other. Dad’s got his arms crossed, watching me with weary, patient cop eyes. Logan’s planted one shoe on the cushion, elbow braced on knee, and he’s furiously twiddling a pencil.

“So I guess you’re wondering why I’ve called you here today.” I pose dramatically in front of the patio doors. “I have ALWAYS wanted to say that!”

“Because Wallace is in Uganda, and Mac’s camping?” Logan asks, sardonic.

“HILARIOUS, but no,” I correct. “Because I’ve figured out a way to solve all our problems in one fell swoop. I’ll need cooperation from the three of you, though.”

“If you’re helping, I’m cooperating,” Weevil says. “I ain’t a dumbass with something to prove, like certain people on the other end of the couch.”

“At least I HAVE a couch, Paco,” Logan retorts, shifting his foot to the floor and tossing the pencil away. “Or rather, a couch I didn’t score for half-price on Goodwill Dollar Day.”

“Boys.” Dad doesn’t bother to raise his voice. “Veronica’s speaking. Do we need a refresher on social skills, such as sitting still and taking turns?”

I smirk at him as they both subside. “So the way I see it, we each have an intractable problem. Weevil’s got to clear up this wrongful accusation about false-ID-making, and stay gainfully employed while on probation. Logan needs the Sorokins to muzzle their heir--because let’s get real. Pulling a knife on you in a stairwell might get HIM convicted, but it won’t end the threat.”

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“I pace to one side, while all eyes follow me, turn abruptly back. “Dad wants the Fitzpatricks off his case, but they’re demanding money he hasn’t got. And I’d like to disabuse the FBI of the notion that I was involved in Duncan Kane’s disappearance. Being a perennial suspect is really hindering my career dreams.”

“Is THAT why you gave up your internship?” Dad asks, light dawning. “You were worried about answering questions?”
Logan lifts his brows, urging me silently to come clean; but Dad’s a quick study, and we have ground to cover. “Allow me to present Exhibits A and B.” I produce the CD Mac gave me, and a folder full of research on Thumper’s plate numbers. “This information can clear all these messes up, with the assistance of my contact at the FBI…a real go-getter named Agent Morris. But Weevil, you’ll have to submit to questioning, and stay on the straight and narrow afterwards. Dad, you’ll have to tell the FBI what really happened to Kendall. And Logan, this plan involves turning in Jake Kane, albeit for crimes he’s actually committed.”

Logan jumps to his feet, earning a quelling look from Dad, and Weevil says, “I’ve BEEN on the straight and narrow all year, V.”

I roll my eyes. “Don’t bother, Mac hacked the police report. I doubt you’re responsible for the fake cards circulating—you’re not dumb enough to use famous peoples’ names. But I DO think you sussed out the methodology, and I DO think you have the machine. So if you want my help, that card-maker gets conveniently found…and YOU quit the illicit wallet-lining.”

“I can’t turn in Jake!” Logan blurs, grim. He’s by the window, arms crossed, restrained from confrontation only by Dad’s presence. “I won’t be party to that. What about Duncan, and the baby? What about what I OWE the guy, for any stability I HAD as a kid?”

“If Jake Kane actually cared, you’d have moved into his house by age fourteen, and started seeing a therapist,” I say, heated. “He’s the one guy we know who could have beaten Aaron in court. As it stands, he needs to go down; but I’ve got a plan to protect Duncan and the baby. Which is why my first order of business is a chat with Celeste.”

“Celeste Kane who obstructed her own daughter’s murder investigation?” Dad asks, doubtful. “I wouldn’t count on her maternal instinct surfacing. Also, the odds of her helping the Mars clan are…poor.”

“Duncan’s mentally ill, Dad. He can’t be responsible for HIMSELF, let alone a kid,” I say. “Celeste’s a bitch, but I believe she’d get him help, if the alternative was jail. She kept him from dating me, when she thought I was his sister, which is more than mom or Jake did. She insisted he take meds, brought him home when he fled to Cuba. She even tried to force Lilly to fly straight, albeit in the most counter-productive possible way.”

“Kane thought you were his SISTER?” Weevil asks, jaw dropping. “Wait, does that mean…your mother?”

“You’re forgetting the Mannings.” Dad swiftly changes the subject. “Even if Celeste throws her weight behind Duncan, she’s a single grandmother; they’re a married, wealthy couple. What makes you think she’d win?”

“Stewart Manning likes to POISON people,” I say, with relish. “In order to ‘test their faith’; and that includes both his own kids, and Neptune’s drug-abusers. Mac and I investigated Weevil’s list of Fitzpatrick customers, and found seven toxicity-related illnesses and deaths. I feel confident Agent Morris can get a search warrant for his secret lab, which I’d be happy to point out on a map. After she’s done with him, he’ll be lucky to get custody of his cell’s bottom bunk.”

“Are you KIDDING me?” Logan demands, shocked out of disgruntlement. His hands creep up into his hair. “And you figured all this out TODAY? You really ARE Wonder Woman.”

“I still don’t understand how Jake ties in,” Dad says, fighting a proud smile he probably doesn’t think is appropriate. “And even assuming he’s guilty of crimes—other than the ones for which he’s been prosecuted—why would Celeste stand against him? As acrimonious as their marriage was, they
managed to cooperate when it mattered.”

“Because Jake’s about to run their multi-billion dollar company into the ground.” I point at Dad for emphasis, like he’s my smartest student, not bothering to hide the smug. “Remember that hard drive you…borrowed from Kendall? It contained illegal spyware created by Russians. Jake’s about to roll out a new internet browser with said spyware attached. I’ve also stumbled across Dear Diary confessions from members of a secret society called the Castle, of which Jake and Russian Mafia heir Gory Sorokin are members. They make FASCINATING viewing. And I just so happen to have them on disk, right here.”

Dad frowns. “You absolutely didn’t steal this data from Jake, right, Veronica?”

“I would NEVER!” I make my eyes as big and innocent as possible. “Here’s where you come in, though, Dad—if you’ll testify that Kendall was murdered, it’ll implicate the Fitzpatricks, who wanted her money, or Jake, who wanted the drive back. And since you also have proof that Vinnie Van Lowe is in LEAGUE with the Fitzpatricks? We've got a perfect storm of actionable evidence against EVERYONE we don’t like.”

There’s silence as they all absorb this—three intelligent, strategic guys, making connections. Then Dad says, “I should be the one to speak with Celeste. She and I may not be pals, but she respects my professionalism. I’m afraid she’d be dismissive of you kids.”

“Not this time, Dad,” I counter, gently. “You don’t know all the details of these crimes like I do; and Celeste is very much aware that I’m more willing to go for the throat. All I need still is Logan’s permission to strike, and his help getting through her door.”

“You’re assuming I HAVE intact Kane connections.” Logan lounges against the glass, face impassive. “After my dad was unmasked as their daughter’s murderer…I’m thinking not so much.”

“You’d figure something out.” I cross to the window, take his hands. “I have faith in your devious ingenuity. But as it happens, you don’t need to…because I’ve got a plan.”

“Is this the reason I brought my tools?” Weevil asks.

“And I rented a limo?” Dad adds.

I tap the tip of my nose. “Celeste Kane is scheduled to attend a Junior League meeting today,” I say. “In the ballroom, at the Grand. I’d like to run a harmless, teensy con on her—so the innocents are protected, when this big old house of cards tumbles down. Echolls, can I count you in?”

He studies our twined fingers for a minute, then meets my gaze. “Yeah,” he says, softly. “You’ve convinced me. This time, Veronica, I'll put my faith in YOU.”

XXXXX

“I don’t see why I have to play the drunk and disorderly character,” Logan mutters into my earbud, several hours later. From where I’m sitting in the Grand’s lobby, I can just make him out; he’s sprawled across a banquette in the bar, being a pretend-wasted dick to the serving staff. “I feel like that’s typecasting, which we all know is wrong.”

“Just lean into it, sugar pants.” I cross my legs with a swish of skirts, check my watch. “Nobody will think twice if Logan Echolls disagreeably ties one on in the cocktail lounge—which isn’t the case for the rest of us. Weevil, you got that engine disabled? Time’s running low.”

“Why does Mrs. Kane drive the biggest Lexus SUV they make, anyway?” Weevil asks, instead
of answering. “No kids, no grandkids, and you can bet your ass she and her fancy friends don’t carpool.”

“It’s white, too, isn’t it?” I speculate. “And upholstered in cream suede. So she can tell if the vanishingly rare passenger even SWEATS in there.”

“Gold,” Weevil corrects. “But close enough. OK I’m done. Mr. Mars, you can quit monopolizing the guard in the booth. Me and any army that wants to join me will hide behind this thing until the coast is clear.”

“Ah, jealousy,” Logan muses. “Such an unworthy emotion. Although I believe this conversation proves my contention that size DOES matter.”

“How about we save the innuendo until fathers AREN’T listening?” Dad asks, over the sound of an engine dying. “All right I’m headed into the lobby. What’s the time?”

“Three minutes ‘til end of meeting.” I pull out a compact to deter a hovering, flirtatious businessman. Rub a smear of crimson lipstick off my incisor, ruffle the bangs of my long black wig. “You should make tracks up to the lobby, or Logan will have to shift gears and distract Astrid’s replacement.”

“If you get in that limo, I get in with you,” Logan says, flatly. “End of discussion. You can’t predict what Celeste will do when she’s backed into a corner. I guarantee it won’t be a half-measure.”

“Words a father loves to hear.” Dad’s huffing slightly with exertion. “I’ll stand between your kid and danger. OK, I’m in the elevator headed up. Spotted her yet?”

“They’re starting to trickle out of the ballroom, all tipsy and calorie-deprived,” Logan says. “No Celeste thus far, but enough pearls and Chanel to fill a Vogue boardroom.”

“Ah yes. The uniform that, when it walks into my office, makes me sure we’re having steaks for dinner,” Dad says. “I’m in position. Eli, you made it out to the limo?”

“Circling the block.” Weevil sounds harassed. “The doorman was giving me the stink eye. I think he’s too threatened to make good, but I don’t want to risk it.”

“Aaaaand here she comes,” Logan announces. “All in white, like the car. No chariot pulled by polar bears, which is disappointing, but at least her assistant looks harried.”

“Pay your tab as soon as she passes,” I tell him. “And look lively, we’re depending on your timing.”

“Pssshh, I had timing down by age five.” He throws down a wad of bills and stands, with an elaborate, unconcerned stretch. “I stole three scenes from Clooney in his prime, wearing galoshes and a crewneck sweater.”

“Excuse me, miss, I think you dropped these?” Dad goes into nebbishy character as The Guy Who Derails the Assistant. Pulls the skinny, tense redhead trailing Celeste aside, and into conference about free-stay vouchers. The Ice Queen sweeps past me to the valet stand, not pausing, which is great—she hasn’t recognized either of us. I tuck my compact away and stand, pretending to talk on my phone.

Logan staggers past me and winks—leans extravagantly against the wall outside, lights a cigarette with a happy sigh. I follow at a saunter; make it through the revolving doors just as the valet returns.
with Celeste’s ticket.

“I’m sorry Mrs. Kane,” the kid says, large Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallows. Logan essays a feline grin and gives me the up-and-down eye…then tosses his cigarette aside, and walks off down the street. “For some reason, your car won’t start. If you’d like, we can contact our mobile mechanic, and call you a cab.”

“What do you mean, won’t START?” she demands, frosty as ever, smoothing her white boucle sleeve like she’d rather be strangling him. “My Lexus is in perfect working order, I had maintenance last week. If the attendant who parked it damaged something, I’m warning you now, I’ll sue.”

The limo Dad borrowed turns the corner, eases up to the curb—Weevil nods at me as he puts it in park. “Excuse me, I couldn’t help overhearing,” I say, in my poshest boarding-school voice, adding a note of husky because Celeste knows me. “I’ve hired a driver to take me to my lunch date. Would you like a ride?”

She gives me the barest glance—but the super-expensive wrap dress Logan insisted on does its job, and she stays polite. “I couldn’t possibly inconvenience you,” she says. “I’ll order my own car.”

“It’s no trouble,” I assure her. “We’re meeting at a French place a few blocks away; just a smidge too far to walk in heels. Ricardo can drop you wherever you like, after.”

A slight pucker appears between her Botoxed brows as she considers…I’m afraid for a second she’s unmasked me. But then she nods. The valet shoots me a look of intense gratitude, opens the rear door, and she folds herself elegantly in.

I climb after. Weevil pulls smoothly away from the curb, and she says, “You’ll like Chez Nous. It’s very well-appointed, and the wine cellar is excellent.”

“I’ll just have to exercise caution with all the cheese and butter.” I flash a closed-lip smile because I’m sure she’d recognize my frantic-to-please teeth. “I’m Brigid,” I add, extending a hand. “Brigid O’Shaughnessy.”

She eyes my palm like it’s contagious, claps it briefly, turns her gaze to the window. Frowns faintly again, as the car slows and pulls over. “But this isn’t…” she manages, before the rear door swings open. Logan hops in, all sneers and attitude as he sinks onto the seat beside her.

Weevil immediately accelerates, engaging the child locks, and Logan says, “Mrs. Kane. I’d pretend it’s a pleasure, but we both know better.”

She glares at him, then goes for her purse, and whatever self-defense tool she’s packing. He yanks it away, because that’s why he’s here—muscle—and sits on it for good measure. “Unh-unh-unh,” he chides, faux-regretful. “We talk, you listen, that’s the way this tete-a-tete unfolds.”

“Logan, ease down. We only want to chat,” I say, since I’m Good Cop. She turns her glare on me. Her eyes narrow, then widen, as she sees through my disguise.

“Veronica Mars,” she says disgustedly, back going rigid. “Of course this ridiculous scheme is your idea. Fine, spit it out, whatever you want to say, since I’m apparently a captive audience. It’s obvious you’re after SOMETHING.”

“Duncan’s daughter is in danger,” I tell her, getting right to the point. “And she needs your help.”

That catches Celeste’s attention. Her pale hands press together in her lap, prayer-style; she manages not to say the first few things on her mind. “What makes you think so?”
“You’re very well aware what makes me think so,” I say. “It’s the whole reason you didn’t want him raising a child, let alone disappearing overseas. Duncan’s psychotic. He needs specialized care, and he’s not a fit person to have custody.”

“I could wish you’d developed these scruples BEFORE you helped him flee the country,” she snaps. “It’s considerably more difficult to remind him of his limits once he’s spent months exceeding them.”

Logan lifts his brows. “So you AGREE he shouldn’t be hiding in some no-extradition-treaty village with that kid?”

“Of COURSE!” she says, acid. “Which is why I tried to stop him from running. The Mannings were perfectly capable of dealing with their grandchild, and I had Duncan well in hand. At this point, however, he can never come home. He’ll end up in JAIL.”

“The Mannings are abusive,” I tell her. “To an extreme degree. Which Duncan knew…that’s why he took a stand.”

“The GOOD news is,” Logan drawls, relishing the moment. “We have enough evidence to put Stewart Manning away for life. IF you’ll step up to the plate, and commit to raising baby Lilly.”

“Baby…” she draws a deep breath, looks out the window. “You want ME….if our Lilly were here, she wouldn’t stand for this.”

“Probably not,” I agree, watching her carefully. She’s not responding to our hard sell the way I expected. “Lilly carried a grudge, because of what happened with your brother.”

Celeste jerks back as if slapped. “Steps were TAKEN,” she says, her lips so rigid they barely move. “The legal system of Neptune rarely results in justice. As you’re both well aware.”

“And was it worth the price, not making waves?” I ask. “Considering your son’s never going to end up in the White House?”

She gazes at me steadily, and I’m reminded of the blank, pale glare of a shark. “My brother is dead.”

Holy shit, I think, and glance at Logan, whose mouth has dropped open. He shuts it with a snap. “WELL,” he says. “If we were looking for ruthless, I guess we came to the right place.”

“So that’s a yes?” I ask, to clarify. “You’ll keep the baby, and get Duncan the help he needs?”

“I won’t sign anything,” she says. “I’m not an idiot. But it sounds like our goals…align.”

I resist the urge to get catty, and nod. “Good. If I were you, I’d move on the plan to collect him right away. Certain…resourceful members of your entourage might not be around much longer to help. Oh, and if you still have holdings in Kane enterprises, since your divorce? I’d suggest you discreetly divest. Today.”

“I certainly don’t intend to discuss my financial affairs with YOU,” she says, frigid.

“Good thing no discussion is necessary,” Logan murmurs, as the car pulls over. “I’d encourage you to keep an eye on the news these next few days, though. Because you may THINK we’ve given you a head start…but that’s not necessarily true.”

He reaches across Celeste, flings the door open, and gestures for her to get out. “Curbside
service," he says, indicating her condo. “Step onto the sidewalk, please. I’ll toss your purse through the window as we drive away.”

“I know you’re only doing this because Lilly was your friend,” she says. “But I…th…”

“You’re welcome,” he tells her, marginally softening. “Go.”

She shakes her head, gets out of the car. He rolls down the window and hands her bag over, as Weevil speeds up and makes tracks. I gaze at her through the rear windshield, standing on the cement, clutching her purse in both hands, and almost feel pity. But refrain, because she’s made of steel, and she’ll be fine.

“Get that all on tape?” Logan asks, slumping back in his seat, crossing his feet on the bench beside me.

I pull my phone out of my pocket, check it. “Yep,” I say. “Every word. She kinda confessed to murder, even, which was a bonus I was not expecting. That’s some major leverage, should she go back on her promise.”

He gazes at me, warmly and intimately, while I send a quick text to Dad; ALL WENT AS PLANNED. FEEL FREE TO MAKE THE CALL. Probably he’ll freak like he always does when texts appear, but really. Dad needs to join the twenty-first century.

“Hey, Veronica.” Logan nudges my hip with his shoe. “I’m impressed, even more than usual. Thank you for taking care of Donut before you went scorched earth.”

“Stop,” I say, smiling. “You’ll make me blush.”

He grins, puts his feet on the floor so he can lean toward me, but I don’t feel his lips on mine because the slipstream takes hold—suddenly I’m pushing Loki down while he tries to lick, fumbling for my ringing cell. I resist, because I can’t leave the FBI visit to Other V; the next reality wavers but persists, faint.

I can still feel the bench in the limo—Logan’s crouched beside me, chafing my hand. “You OK?” he asks. “Dizzy? Did you get any sleep on the plane?”

I pull him close, ear by my mouth, gritting my teeth to fight the slipstream tug. “Make sure this all goes down just the way we planned. Visit Agent Morris at the FBI…lay out our evidence like breadcrumbs. Get rid of the bad guys in one fell swoop. Promise me.”

He nods, upside-down-v appearing between his brows. Behind him, Weevil, scowls into the rearview mirror. “You need to lie down, V?”

I smile, faintly. “I’ll be back to normal in a minute.” Surge up to kiss Logan’s surprised mouth, then let the slipstream suck me under.

THREAD FORTY THREE INVERTS

I’m lying on a Neptune Grand couch, reading….Vogue? Yeah, super-thick fall fashion issue, denuded box of chocolates on my chest. Loki’s sprawled over most of my legs, mismatched eyes half-lidded; his gaze darts between the box and my mouth, gauging the potential for theft. He’s like a large, warm blanket, and I tuck my toes beneath—turn the page. I’m basically grounded in Improved Past, so I might as well enjoy the down time.

I’m halfway through a photo spread on the resurgence of tweed when the front door swings open.
Logan creeps through, jerking when he spots me like I’m supposed to be elsewhere. He’s all in black, plain jacket and tee, jeans and boots; there’s a dark smear on his freshly-scrubbed cheekbone. I raise my brows, because come on.

“Something’s missing from this picture,” I say thoughtfully, laying the magazine on my stomach and surveying him with amusement. “Hmmm, what could it be? Oh yeah. A SKI mask. And possibly a .38 special.”

He puts hands on hips, gazes at me in silence. Pulls a ski mask out of his coat pocket and tosses it on the table. “You caught me,” he says, heading for the kitchen. I hear the pop and sizzle of a bottle opening, and he emerges, beer in hand.

“So how was your day, honey?” I ask, as he settles into the armchair catty-corner—interesting, he’s keeping his distance—and reaches for the remote. “Productive evening, committing crimes?”

“Finally caught Mercer up to mischief,” he says, after draining half in one gulp. “I’ve been keeping tabs on that asshole for a month, so a successful resolution was satisfying.”

“Did you handcuff him to a police cruiser, with the help of your merry men?” I drop the magazine on the floor and select another candy. “Or get yourself arrested, so you could beat him up in a cell?”

He studies me over the top of his drink for a moment, sets it down. “Mrs. R. I didn’t recognize you over there, lying all relaxed and still.”

“Oh, the comic genius,” I say. “I’m struck dumb. Are we about to enjoy a visit from Neptune’s Not-At-All-Finest?”

“Nah.” He finishes the beer, sets the bottle beside his mask. “I didn’t even need a disguise. The girl’s two friends caught him prepping his victim, there’s no way this can come back to bite me. I just played luckily-present hero; got in three really satisfying face punches and cuffed him to the desk. I went out the window and down the wall while they were calling the cops. Didn’t realize Danny’s exfil lesson would come in handy so fast.”

“You sure do hang out with Danny a lot,” I say, and he snorts.

“Who else am I supposed to befriend? My now-missing fake grandfather? Wallace spends all his time studying, lately, for that degree he insists is more important than basketball. And Dick just parties, or moons around the suite eating frozen snickers, watching his gut expand. Guilt over his brother being a psycho killer has turned the guy into Sartre.”

“You could try going to class,” I offer, and his expression turns cold.

“I go to class,” he says. “I get straight A’s. Maybe you’re confusing me with some other version who doesn’t have his shit together.” He leans back in the chair, bracing an ankle on his knee, and bounces his foot aggressively. “Here’s a hint—I’m the grown-up. With a kid on the way, which I didn’t want, but I’m trying to deal. And I’ve got a WAY better attitude, in my opinion, than YOU… with all your stomping around, wreaking havoc. Not dealing with shit that bothers you, then pretending you’re FINE, like lying will make that true.”

“This argument is so two visits ago,” I snap, losing my temper. “You laid out the rules clearly last time, Logan. And all I did THEN was investigate something Other V OK’d. I haven’t even left the house since I turned up here—I’ve just been lying on the couch, reading a magazine! You have no reason to be MAD!”

“Don’t I? Well, what about this library job, for starters? You have zero need of the paycheck, it’s...
dangerous, and you’re pregnant, which seem like good reasons for supposedly-mature Veronica to quit. But you decided no way, even after our last conversation, and now my Veronica thinks it’s because you KNOW something. So she won’t quit, either, and neither of you will tell me WHY. That pisses me off, for sure.”

“Wait, let me get this straight,” I say, with exaggerated emphasis. “Are you in a snit now because I DIDN’T interfere in Veronica’s choices?”

“This Piz asshole’s been lurking around crushing on you for months, and you’ve never discouraged it!” he says, incensed. “You’re talking to HIM about stuff you keep secret from ME! He’s causing trouble, Veronica, and Wallace is getting dragged into the middle, because he’s Piz’s roommate and my friend.”

“I’M encouraging him? I LOATHE the guy! Other Veronica’s the one with the crush, which let me tell you, I find INCOMPREHENSIBLE. And I have zero clue what she’s hiding about that job, either. I don’t KNOW anything about the stupid case I’d want to keep secret. If you plan to blame me for something, pick a mistake I actually MADE.”

“Are you telling me my Veronica has a THING for this guy?” he demands, understandably shocked.

“In this reality?” I shrug, pick up the magazine again just to piss him off. “I have no idea. I doubt it, because he seemed surly last visit, and you’re engaged. But I’m not here to play relationship counselor for you and the other woman. If you’re worried she’s making sex tapes with Piz up in the stacks, ask her yourself.”

“Well that’s oddly specific,” he says, straightening. “Is she making sex tapes with him in OTHER realities? Or does your imagination just go that direction when you think about Piz?”

“Are you actually listening to the words coming out of my mouth?” I demand. “Let me speak slower—I THINK HE’S REPULSIVE!”

“Yeah, you attacked me screaming ‘I hate you!’ once, too, back when I was dating someone else,” he says. “Forgive me if I don’t take your word as gospel.”

“Oh, I get it. This is just a tantrum because you’re jealous,” I say. “That’s rich, when girls constantly throw themselves at you, and you don’t even TRY to bat them off.”

“You’re just freaked out because your Logan SLEPT with all of them. If you get to hang around the library every day, hate-flirting with Piz, even after I asked you to stop? I get to smile at other women without you jumping down my throat.”

“I don’t give a SHIT about the library job!” I yell, because it’s true. “I don’t give a shit about Piz, either, beyond fervently wishing he’d disappear. Neither of those things even REGISTERS on my radar, so I could care LESS what choices you and Veronica make. Which is good, since you two decided I don’t GET a vote, even when I DO care.” I shove a chocolate in my mouth, chew furiously. “It’s great to know I’m still pregnant, though. One less injustice to make me simmer with impotent rage.”

“So what DO you care about?” he wants to know. “Since we’re listing priorities?”

a little bit Dick. You, of course. And that’s it. That’s the sum total of stuff that matters.”

I subside with a huff. “Also please note, I figured out last time I was here that you menaced and/or beat up Piz at my place of employment. And I said nothing, then, because I APPROVED. If you’d just drop-kick him to Antarctica, and quit being an asshole, I’d put this magazine down right now and do you on the couch. So how about you back off? You’re upsetting the dog.”

“Why’d you advocate so hard to take this job, then, if you don’t care? Why’d you argue so passionately that Piz didn’t matter?” he demands, sitting forwards like a Jack-in-the-box ready to spring.

I raise my brows. “Is that the first beer you’ve had? Because I DIDN’T. Weevil told me about the gig while we waited in the Pussycat Lounge, I said sure. You informed me I wasn’t allowed to make Veronica’s choices, and I said ‘Okey-doke!’ Next time I turned up here, I was already employed, so I figured you and Veronica hashed it out. The end.”

“You didn’t insist on taking the job,” he says flatly. I shake my head, and he hops up, running his hands into his extremely sweaty hair. “Shit. I need to think.”

He strides off into the kitchen, and I toss the magazine aside. It feels like Logan knows a whole lot more about what’s going on than I do, which exacerbates my control issues something fierce. Throughout the slipstream, I’ve consistently had a leg up—I’M the one with foreknowledge, the one who’s older and wiser. But everybody else has proved sneaky, lately. I’m losing my position of dominance, as well as my ability to predict the future. And I don’t like it.

I know Logan’s coping with a lot right now—the Russians, the Castle, the aftermath of the Boat, not to mention a baby—so I’m not surprised insecurity’s making an appearance. But I never gave him an inch before, and I won’t be starting now.

Logan returns, calmer, sits down across from me. He’s donned his inscrutable face, but seems less mad. “Tell me about Piz and the sex tape.”

“Why?” I ask. “You already played caveman with his face. Plus the tape only happens in realities where you and I break up in October; which surely won’t be the case, here. I REALLY don’t think you need to worry.”

“So you are confirming she makes one,” he says.

“No!” I tell him, exasperated. "Gory Sorokin makes one, without her knowledge. Presumably to goad you into violating the cease fire Jake engineered, after you were stupid enough to join the Castle. Since Gory know, as does everyone, how irrational you get when jealous.”

Logan glances away. Quips, “Nothing like a nice, cathartic beat-down to lessen the pain of betrayal.”

“Waaaaait a minute.” I sit up, sensing evasion. The dog, dislodged, turns in circles, then resettles in the couch corner, huffy. “Did you just misdirect TOWARDS your fist-fighting shenanigans? And away from…Jake, Gory…the CASTLE? Logan, PLEASE tell me you didn’t accept Jake’s invitation.”

“I had no CHOICE,” he says, and here come the grandiose gestures. “Jake started making veiled threats about letting Gory have his way. Once Veronica decided to keep the baby, a decision you clearly support, she became a hundred times more vulnerable. All Danny’s solutions to Gory involved law enforcement and guns, which have proved ineffective, and there was nobody else
around to brainstorm ideas. It was NECESSARY, Veronica.”


“That my dad hit me,” he says, with a sigh. “Some youthful indiscretions. There’s plenty of dirt to mine without involving you—they didn’t have to look hard to find it. Don’t worry, they never asked about any of the items on your list.”

“And you’re OK with that information going public, if you run afoul of them?” I feel stirrings of sympathy, which I repress.

“No,” he says. “But like I told you. I had no choice. Or rather, I had two very bad choices, and I picked the lesser one. I will get down in the mud if I have to, Veronica, and protect what’s mine.”

“I just hope it’s ONLY mud,” I say, disparaging, because yes I AM disappointed. His scowl returns.

“Great, thanks for judging,” he says. “I can always count on you to perform that vital function.” He gets up, removes his jacket, tosses it on the chair. “I’m taking a shower. Dick’s bringing some people over soon, we’re going out. You can hide in the bedroom ‘til we leave, if you don’t feel like socializing.”

He strides off, into our side of the suite. I can hear, clearly, the click as he locks the bathroom door.

I flop back on the couch, frustrated, because what the hell is UP between him and Other Veronica? He’s acting like a DICK, and an irrational one to boot; he spent the whole conversation accusing me of things I didn’t even….

“Hold the phone,” I say, and maybe I say it angrily, because Loki presses himself to my side. He tucks his head under my chin, and I ruffle his fur.

What if Logan thought I wanted the library job because someone convinced him I DID? Someone who’s impersonated me before, causing long-term harm?

Someone willing to go as underhanded as I would to accomplish her goals because…she IS me?

 Fucking Other Veronica stole my IDENTITY, to shift the blame for making nice with Piz. Logan even OUTLINED HER ARGUMENT, last time I was here, and I failed to catch on.

I’ve got her dead to rights now, though. And what I need to know, this very moment, is WHY?

I shove the dog gently aside and go on a laptop search. Find one tucked into my (her) messenger bag, with a password I can’t decode. I have to hunt down Logan’s computer, which is sitting half-open on his nightstand, because his passwords take five minutes to crack, and he never learns.

I pull up an AOL page, mentally rehearsing evisceration tactics, and type in the kittenfancy login. Get an error message. Type it again.

After seven tries, I’m forced to admit I’ve been outplayed.

Other Veronica’s gone rogue. The kittenfancy address is history.

Whatever she’s up to in that library, with that band-having weenie…she doesn’t want me OR
Logan to know.

Noise from the foyer forces me to scramble. I return the computer to the nightstand, and wander out before Logan and his suspicious nature emerge. Twelve-ish people have invaded my suite, led by Dick; they’re bundled up in jackets and scarves, pink-faced and garrulous with booze.

“Yo yo, Ronnie!” Dick shuts the door behind the herd, shoves back his stocking cap. “Check you out! You finally quit eating candy and bathed!”

“Had to up my game, with a discriminating roommate like you,” I say, as Loki brushes past and crawls under my bed. “Tomorrow maybe I’ll Febreeze, then light some candles.”

“I wouldn’t.” Logan emerges from behind me, brushing past without touching, because yeah, he’s still in a mood. “We’re on thin ice with management thanks to the LAST time Dick lit something on fire.”

“Burning down the house?” Carrie tucks back a wisp of hair and stumbles sideways against Casey, who laughs and sets her straight. “I guess arson WAS always this crowd’s style.”

“I only got involved in a preventative capacity,” Logan informs her, grabbing his jacket off the chair and shrugging into it. “Or rather, I attempted to prevent. That whole pool debacle still haunts me.”

“Poor beleaguered hero.” I frown as Bodie and Shelly sprawl onto the couch and produce a pack of Cloves. “Hey, no smoking in the suite! And what are you doing here, anyway?” I ask Carrie. “Aren’t you supposed to be in New York?”

“Not anymore.” She shrugs, and Casey laughs again. “As of yesterday, I’m officially kicked out of Julliard. It’ll make a good joke on my liner notes someday, when I’m ten times as famous as all those pretentious assholes.”

“Carrie partied too hearty,” Enbom tells me in an aside, then cackles when she shoves him into the wall. “Started hanging with Lilly, and you know how THAT goes.”

“Actually we’ve forgotten,” Logan tells him, taking the bottle Bodie’s unearthed, chugging some. “Lils doesn’t call, she doesn’t write, since the day she went away. Too many experimental lesbians, cokehounds and overly-confident men at Vassar, perhaps?”

“What about Jackie?” I lean against the table, since my couches are full of giggling 09’ers. “She’s not providing such stability as Jackie can?”

“Jackie’s a fading star in Lilly’s firmament,” Carrie tells me, smirking—her gaze slides away from mine, though, and fixes on her shoe. “She has a kid. So she’s not interested in painting the town red, co-ed style.”

“Go get your coat, Veronica,” Casey urges, nudging my arm. “We’re playing drunk ski ball at the student union, then hitting the midnight movies.”

“Veronica can’t come.” Logan zips his jacket with an aggressive hiss. “She has to WORK.”

“LAME!” Casey pronounces, while Bodie and Shelly nudge each other on the couch, muttering OOH! “Quit that stupid job and come be on my team. You’re the only one who can actually make the high-point shots.”

“Sorry.” I head over to the door, upon which someone’s knocking. “Duty calls.”
I open it to Mac, pink-cheeked and buttoned up. She smiles at me and breezes in, tucking her scarf below her chin. “Sorry I’m late,” she says. “I couldn’t skip computer lab, I’ve got a project due tomorrow.” She gives me a quick up-and-down. “Why are you still in pajamas?”

“You’ll have to party without me tonight,” I say. Because I’d rather get to the bottom of Other V’s shenanigans than watch ’09’ers implode. “Library shift.”

She flashes a don’t-abandon-me look that tests my resolve, then gets swept into a hug by an ambushing Dick. “THERE she is!” He swings her around, while her feet scrabble for purchase. “That girl who makes me all the mohn-NAY! I get dibs on Mackie tonight, you assholes. She counts scores better than the rest of you.”

Carrie scowls and appropriates Bodie’s flask; I begin to think Loki had the right idea, hiding. Because doesn’t Carrie have anything better to do than get dysfunctional with Dick? And succumb to Cobb’s manipulations, and lean on my boyfriend? Where’s her SPINE, lately?

Also, where’s her best friend? Susan turned up all the TIME in early Ideal Reality, but she’s been MIA for a WHILE, here.

“Hey Case,” I ask. He’s still standing next to me, playing rock-paper-scissors with Kate Rakes, laughing every time he loses. “What ever happened to Susan Knight? She’s not here tonight--and it occurs to me she’s NEVER around, lately.”

“Dunno,” he shrugs, with his typical level of don’t-give-a-shit. “She and Carrie had a fight about something and quit hanging out, like MONTHS ago. I have no clue what. But I mean, Carrie’s kind of a loose cannon. I saw her come to blows with Ashley once over PAPERCLIPS.”

I glance at Ashley, who’s coyly thrusting her boobs towards Logan. Generally, he ignores her schtick; tonight, he’s not FLIRTING, exactly, but he’s letting her bask in his charm. Which is the kind of freshman-year, one-foot-out-the-door shenanigans he pulled in MY reality, making my brain insane.

I mean, I now know he was half-expecting me to dump him, back then, and was maybe lining up plan B. But UNDERSTANDING shitty behavior is not the same as CONDONING it.

The rich-asshole dervish begins to swirl towards the door, leaving behind detritus yours truly will have to clean. “Have fun,” I tell Mac as Dick herds her past. She rolls her eyes.

Logan leaves without looking at me, or saying goodbye.

I latch the deadbolt behind them all, then stand in the foyer, arms folded, gazing at the floor. Fighting back tears. Because I HATE this discord between us, the way I have to pretend not to care. I don’t WANT to go back to wearing masks. And I can’t believe IMPROVED PAST LOGAN is acting so cold.

Loki creeps out of the bedroom, looks cautiously around, and reclaims his spot on the couch. Sniffs at a Skittles packet Bodie left behind.

I take it away, crumpling paper in my palm, and head off to shower.

“So what do you think about bowling?” Piz asks, while we both sprawl behind the library desk, waiting for something, ANYTHING, to happen. “Just in general? Is it a cool activity to do with a group, like in a post-ironic way? Or is it genuinely dorky? Because I can’t tell.”
I groan internally. He’s been like this since I got here…determinedly flirting, despite my forbidding demeanor. I really don’t want to talk to him—or be present, beyond what’s necessary to solve the case. But Other V went to great lengths to keep this job, and lie to Logan about why. So I need to maintain, until I figure out what she’s up to. I’m positive it’s somehow critical.

“Well, right this minute,” I say, “My fiancée and his friends are playing ski ball in a DRUNKEN way, so I guess I’d go with the former. They pretty much DEFINED cool, growing up.”

“Is that why you date him?” Piz tears open a packet of Reese’s Pieces, and props his feet on the desk. “Because he’s cool?”

I lift my brows, because seriously? Only someone truly oblivious would look at Logan and think yeah, STATUS is the reason ladies swarm. “I date him because I love him—we’re two of a kind. Even though he acts like a DICK, sometimes, and makes me honestly question my judgment.”

“Are you sure it’s not just…habit, though, Veronica?” He continues to munch candy without offering me any, which is so completely PIZ. “You seem like totally DIFFERENT kinds, to me. You’re nice—like how many people would go out of their way to move me up Trish’s waiting list at the station, just so I wouldn’t have to work this gig I hate? And he’s…”

I look at Piz, all shaggy and aggressively normal, rambling about what is and isn’t cool in his self-absorbed, non-threatening way; and realize why Other V succumbs, in realities where she’s mad at Logan. This guy sees her as the kind, normal, cute girl she wants to be (if she’s anything like I was, pre-slipstream). He’s a path off the death-and-destruction thrill ride that’s pretty much become her lot.

If I didn’t suspect cash flow problems, if I didn’t know about the sex tape—if I believed Logan and I were spiraling—would I NOTICE his annoying subtext? Or would I view Piz as a bland-but-palatable solution to my never-ending angst? I mean, there’d never be any fireworks…the memory of that video haunts me. But, well…I can admit he bears a vague resemblance to pre-lunatic Duncan.

Piz turns, actually CLOCKING my shift in focus, stares, and I realize; this is it. This is the moment when he tried to kiss Other V in Ideal Reality, and she ran. He thought me bitching about a fight with Logan gave him a shot. I can actually TELL he’s contemplating a move…he’s focused on my mouth.

If I hadn’t seen him in sketchy, douchey action—would I have said no?

“Appearances can be deceiving,” I mutter with a twist of my lips, facing forwards. Shutting his fantasy down cold. “Logan’s much more ethical than you think, and I’m…not really nice at all.”

“Right.” He clears his throat. Tosses his candy, half-eaten, into the trash and stands. Reverts to sulky, natch, the moment his interest isn’t reciprocated. “Whatever you say. Look, I’m gonna shelve these books. Talk to you in a while.”

He rummages in his bag, comes out with his phone and a packet of peanuts. Shoves them in his pocket as he walks away. Grabs the cart with an angry gesture and powers it, too fast, towards the elevator. Where he presses the….top floor button?

I cross my arms and pretend not to watch, while he climbs on and pulls the cart after. But he and those books don’t have any more business amongst the periodicals than I did, last time I showed up here. So what the hell is he DOING?

As soon as he’s out of sight, I case the area for warm bodies—but the library’s vacant, except for one frazzled student in the far carrel. I take the opportunity to rifle his backpack.
It’s full of standard detritus—issues of Spin Magazine, packets of junk food, already-battered notebook for History of Journalism. I lift my brows; if he’s a journalism major, why’d he refuse the job at the paper? He’s got a box of pencils, all sharpened, and a tiny Ziploc bag of…black and gold binder clips?

I extract one, lift it up to the light, and yep. It’s the kind used to clip the…coke? heroin? to that fateful periodical box. The lack of further retaliation, after we busted Fagin, suddenly makes more sense. Piz is paying off his gambling debt to the Fitzpatricks in LABOR.

I’m guessing those weren’t peanuts in that snack sack.

Pocketing the clip, because evidence, I smack the ‘CLOSED’ sign down so hard the lone studier notices; text Weevil with a triumphant CAUGHT HIM RED-HANDED. Remove my camera from my OWN bag, and go in search of malfeasance.

My anger at uncovering more Piznarski-flavored wrongdoing sustains me…until I make it to the top floor, and discover he’s turned off the hallway lights. This is problematic, since using the flash will give my game away. There’s a faint glow coming from five rows down, though; so I feel my way along, using the shelves as guides.

And there sits Piz, tailor-style in the aisle, glumly chewing peanuts while he clips drugs to a box of magazines.

I thumb off the flash, because MAYBE there’s enough ambient light to get a usable shot, and click the shutter twice. It’s barely a sound, softer than the crinkling of paper—but it’s so silent back here, his head shoots up anyway.

He fumbles in his pocket and removes a switchblade, snapping it open as he shoves the magazines in place. Stands silently, skirting the peanut wrapper, as he tries to triangulate sound. I press my spine hard against the bookcase endcap, and pray he goes the other direction.

“Is anybody there?” Piz calls, voice approaching. “This floor’s off limits unless you’re checking out periodicals. I don’t want to be THAT GUY, but find somewhere else to make out.”

I ease myself around the corner, holding the camera behind my back—though nothing I can do, if caught, will make it look like I wasn’t spying. I’m breathing hard, suppressing the sound. It occurs to me how improbable this is…I’m fight-or-flighting because of PIZ.

Then the room floods with light, and Weevil calls across the rows, “Sorry I scared you, man. I came up to empty the trash, and couldn’t find a switch.”

Cringing back against the case, I watch Piz walk by, pocketing the knife as he goes. He’s flashing that big, gormless grin, probably as relieved as I am. “Oh, hey, no problem,” he says. “We all have to do our jobs. It’s just dark and scary up here, you know? Like a horror movie. Whoo, I jumped a foot!”

He grabs the cart, abandoned by the door, and turns it with a nervous jerk. Tells Weevil, talking too fast, “I’ll just take the rest of these down to the third floor and shelve. Switch the lights back off when you go, okay?”

Piz pushes through the double doors towards the elevator, while Weevil watches with dark, tired eyes. Wipes away the sweat he probably worked up, running here at top speed. “That guy seriously needs to work on his poker face, if he doesn’t want to end up shot.”

I emerge from my hiding place, let out a long slow breath as I traverse the hall. “He had a
"Knife," I say, incredulous. "He had a knife and I’m pregnant, and I took pictures of him planting drugs! I didn’t realize this was a situation where I had to be scared. Thanks for deflecting attention."

“Show me the drop,” he says, with a frown. “If it’s not the same spot as last time, we need to move our camera. Gotta have video of the pick-up before we close the case.”

“Row E. There’s a peanut wrapper on the floor,” I say. “I’m going downstairs to get my bag. Then I’m heading across the street to the student union, while he’s still shelving—where I will sit in view of many witnesses until you join me.”

“Plant a tracker in his backpack before you go,” Weevil advises. “We need to know where he hangs out when he’s not being watched. And buy me a Coke. I’ll meet you over there once I’m done.”

I nod, and make tracks at a rapid clip. Hear, muttered, behind me, as I hurry away, “Pregnant. Jesus Christ. Only Veronica.”

I’m halfway through my burger/fries/milkshake, feeling marginally less angry-scared, when Weevil turns up at the table—drops into the opposite chair with a sigh. I shove a meal combo at him, and he digs in like he’s starving. “Heroin,” he says, dumping a gallon of ketchup on his plate. “These deals are targeted to rich kids, too—bag that big’ll set you back a couple grand. I’m surprised only one guy’s OD’d; plus that amount of product means our boy’s looking at a felony. He really is a dumb shit, if he agreed to this to clear debt.”

“I found a hole in his backpack lining and hid the bug there,” I say, aggressively drinking shake. “And then emailed my official resignation. Piz is armed, crime-committing and slap-happy…which makes me view being alone with him in a new light.”

“No problem,” Weevil says. “We just need photos of his supplier to put the case to bed, and that tracker should lead us right to him. I’ll take over the tail— I’m not scared of one little knife in the hands of some asswipe.”

“I wish I knew where the Fitzpatricks were GETTING drugs.” I shove in a mouthful of fries. “Between the FBI, Stewart Manning and us, every supplier in the area’s jailed or bankrupt.”

“Take it from a guy who knows.” Weevil crosses his ankle over his knee and drinks. “Nobody’s ever gonna put ALL suppliers out of commission. Profit margin’s too high.”

I shrug, because I’m sure he’s right, but I’m fresh out of ideas. Other Veronica clearly harbors suspicions that made her pursue this case covertly, which means the answer to our question must be bad. Especially since, for whatever reason, she’s keeping Weevil out of the loop.

“So, pregnant, huh?” He surveys me over the lid of his cup. “I figured something’s up with you. You seem pretty down, and you’ve got Echolls in your crosshairs.”

I make a face. “Logan and I are fighting. Big surprise.”

“Is he being an asshole about impending fatherhood?” I frown, and he shrugs. “I mean, I just assume. He’s USUALLY an asshole, it’s why WE fight.”

“More like, he’s throwing a tantrum,” I say, considering. “This…accident seems to have brought out his worst coping mechanisms. He’s a stew of jealousy, overprotectiveness and attitude—you know how he gets, when he’s feeling conflicted.”
“Letting other girls crawl all over him, while he smirks at you?” Weevil guesses. “I’d be happy to put a dent in his face, if you think he’s lining up your replacement.”

“Trust issues aside, I don’t,” I say. “But thanks for the offer.”

He shrugs, because Weevil doesn’t push when it’s not his business, then goes back to eating. After a while I ask, “So how are you doing? Since I told you about your dad, I mean? I see Dick every day, but he hasn’t mentioned any tearful bonding moments.”

“V, I’m not sure I want to go there with that guy.” He studies his food instead of me. “Dick senior’s a felon, and the brother’s a psycho; whereas I’m trying to clean up my life. Besides, I’ve done fine without a father this long. It’s not like I’m six and feeling the absence.”

“How about your mother?” I slurp up the last of my shake. “Any improvement there?”

“We’ve been talking on the phone,” he says, and this time he meets my eyes. “Things are tense, but getting better.”

“Just so you know,” I tell him. “Bro loyalty trumps EVERYTHING with Dick. If he knew you were related, his whole attitude towards you would change.”

“Maybe.” Weevil shrugs, skeptical. “Or maybe he’s a douchey white-boy piece of shit, and I’d be wasting my time trying to bond.”

“He’s a better person than he has to be, here,” I say, considering. “But fair enough. My plan is to keep my mouth shut, and leave any revelations to you.”

“Let me think about it,” he tells me, wadding up his fry wrapper. “No commitments.”

“Fine.” I toss my napkin down. “I’m going home. I’ve got a half finished Vogue on the coffee table that’s not going to read itself.”

“Give me five to finish my dinner.” He bites into his burger with relish, talks through a mouthful. “Echolls may be acting like a bitch, right now, but he’ll freak the fuck out if I don’t walk you to your car.”

Half an hour later, I settle on the couch with tea mug and magazine, click on the TV for background noise, and am confronted with breathless news coverage about the arrest of Cassidy Casablancas.

“The suspect was traced to the Camelot Motel in Neptune, California,” a pink-clad reporter intones, trying for both serious and outraged despite a comically kittenish voice, “a low-cost establishment on the edge of town, with rooms that rent by the hour…”

Shit, I think, have Logan and Dick heard this? And will Dick melt down when he does? Or just mouth off, get hammered, and puke, later, all over my living room floor?

I sit watching the inane coverage, pondering this dilemma, until my cell rings. Reaching across Loki (who’s gnawing on a Greenie beside me, ignoring his dog bed), I check caller ID. Weevil.

“That was fast,” I say, crossing my feet on the coffee table. The dog plants his front end on my lap. “Have you found more information already? And did you hear the cops just nabbed Beaver?”
“Number one yes, number two, about fucking time,” Weevil says. I can hear traffic behind him. “Guess where I’m staked out, waiting for our reluctant heroin dealer to emerge?”

“The Seventh Veil?” I try, clicking off the TV. Because it’s not like they won’t repeat this story ceaselessly. “Junior League headquarters?”

“The Toco Loco Cantina,” he corrects. “Which last came to my attention when some Russians shot it up, right after Van Lowe chased you away. Piznarski showed here half an hour ago; and ten minutes later, so did the redhead who hassled Parker at the Pussycat Lounge. In the ordinary course of things, a Fitzpatrick walking into a Sorokin hangout would mean blood spilled.”

“Holy shit, they’ve teamed up!” I say, putting it together. “Neither one had the mojo to make it on their own, after all the FBI seizures and arrests, so they pooled resources!”

“I can’t imagine Lev Sorokin willing to share power,” Weevil says, doubtful. “But based on what I just saw, looks possible.”

Shit, I think, it all makes sense. Other V’s downplaying the investigation because Logan joined the Castle, and Jake brokered a Logan-Gory cease-fire. She figured out before I did that this job would render that null—but wanted to take Gory down so badly, she didn’t quit.

After witnessing the bloodbath on Jake’s boat, and viewing that awful sex tape, I can’t say I blame her.

“This is bad.” I set my tea down on the table, hand shaking. “If the Sorokins find out we’re onto them, things could get dangerous. We need to keep this knowledge to ourselves, like you and me, that’s IT. Tell the client we can’t help her, give the retainer back. We’ll have to shut their scheme down on the sly.”

“It ain’t like you to get cold feet, V,” Weevil admonishes.

“If it were just me in danger, I WOULDN’T,” I say, as the dog hops up and runs to the door. He scratches, and faintly, outside, I hear voices. “But it’s NOT just me anymore. Nobody messes with my family, and you’re NOT going back to jail. Look, Logan’s home, I’ve got to hang up. Keep this hush- hush until we talk again.”

I pocket my phone and grab my magazine as they key dings in the lock. Glance faux-casually up as Logan stalks in, thundercloud-furious, and throws his jacket across the room. He’s followed by an uncharacteristically solemn Dick.

“I guess you lost at ski ball,” I say, as Logan takes his hat off, tosses it after the coat. He scratches, and faintly, outside, I hear voices. “But it’s NOT just me anymore. Nobody messes with my family, and you’re NOT going back to jail. Look, Logan’s home, I’ve got to hang up. Keep this hush- hush until we talk again.”

I have no fucking clue,” he sighs. Slumps onto the arm of a chair. “Logan took her outside like an hour ago, because the fumes in the arcade were making her dizzy, and something happened nobody else saw. Just, Logan came steamrolling back in a few minutes later, going ‘Break up with that bitch, or pack your fucking bags,’ and took off for the car. So I go after him, all ‘What the FUCK, dude?’ And he says ‘She’s a loser. I’m not letting her drag me down’. I don’t even know where she WENT.”
I digest this, as the shower kicks on in the master. “He didn’t say why? Like in the car, on the way home?”

“Rons, he didn’t say ANYTHING.” Dick scowls. “But I guess I’ve got to dump Carrie for good, now; it’s not like I could choose HER over HIM.”

I cross my arms as he escapes and locks his door, thinking Jesus, what a night. Decide to beard the beast in his den, in search of answers.

Logan’s just emerged from the bathroom when I enter, hair wet, clad in a pair of boxers. He pauses for a second, then strides past to turn down the covers.

“What happened?” I ask, a question met with aggressive silence. “Did Carrie hit on you? Is she making slipstream threats?”

“Oh, YOU’RE still here,” he says, in his most annoying I-could-care-less voice. “Don’t sweat it, Veronica; the five missions you care about aren’t in danger. I just have a low tolerance for assholes, and she crossed the line.” He removes his phone from his pocket, plugs it into the charger. Frowns as he checks the time. “What are you doing home so early? Didn’t you go to work?”

“I quit,” I say, pointedly. “Like you told me once, we don’t need the money. And no amount of client cred is worth making nice with Piz.”

“If this is your way of apologizing,” he tells me, flopping onto the bed backwards and switching off the light, “you’re on the wrong track. The library’s my current beef with the OTHER version of you.”

“I’m NOT apologizing.” I shove Loki away as he presses close to my leg and whines. “That would imply I’m wrong about you joining the Castle. I’m just updating you on current events, and encouraging you to do the same.”

“Yeah, thanks for clarifying.” He kicks the covers moodily away. I wish he’d get dressed, because all that skin and muscle is messing with my mad-on. “Look, you were right about Carrie from the start, and Veronica was wrong. I dealt with it. End of discussion. Ask me any more questions, and I’ll rent another fucking room.”

“Much as I admire your facility with caustic evasions,” I say, “Carrie knows about the SLIPSTREAM, and we can’t afford to alienate her. Also, just FYI, I turned on the news when I got home, and they were hauling Beaver away from the Camelot in cuffs. So I really need you to be present in this moment, and DEAL.”

“Veronica.” Logan removes his arm from his eyes, flashes me a pitying look. “Suppose Carrie DID tell? Who’d believe her? We’d stonewall, someone would pump her full of meds, and eventually she’d quit talking. Problem solved.” He shifts against the pillows like he can’t get comfortable. “And as far as Beaver…good. I mean, not good for Dick, he’ll come apart at the seams. But it helps with MY peace of mind. And since we’re being selfish, judgy assholes today, that’s what matters, right?”

I cross to sit on my side of the bed, because boy is he still pissed, and he pointedly turns his back. With a heave of covers, I settle, and stare at the ceiling, mind whirring.

I’d like to tell Logan about Other V impersonating me; but I’m pretty sure, based on his reaction earlier, that he knows. And I CAN’T mention Other V investigating the Sorokins—that would make an already fraught situation worse. Plus I’m selfish enough to work against their estrangement, at any
cost. If Logan and Other V break up, he won’t be around to help--and I NEED him.

I just have to wrap this case quickly, before anyone finds out I’m investigating. And learn what happened with Carrie, since she may retaliate.

Loki jumps on the bed, wary, and settles in the wedge of space between us. I toss and turn, wishing Logan would close the distance, until I fall into edgy sleep.
I fight my way to the surface because someone’s crying.

Thin reedy wails, more like some small jungle cat than a human, piercing my eardrum and ice-picking my sleep-slurred brain.

Peanut. Right. Thirty-six hours ago I fucking GAVE BIRTH.

I roll over, then back, seeking both source of sound and coherence. Beside me, Logan groans and covers his face with a pillow. “Your turn,” come the muffled words from beneath it. “We’re out of breast milk anyway until you pump again.”

Shit, I think, sitting up. There, in the bassinet beside the bed, is my kid. I am responsible for a CHILD, when I can’t even keep a houseplant alive. I tuck the ruffles aside to study her, face contorted as she squalls. Peanut’s HUNGRY. And that nurse never showed up at the hospital, to teach me how to feed her.

I reach for the angry, red, writhing bundle, trying to remember how to even pick infants up—something about supporting the head. Like ANY of us paid attention to Ms. Hauser. Gingerly, I lift her squirming form; gaze at her tiny, squished, big-eyed face. Slide down the strap of the tank top I’m wearing.

She strikes.

I squeak, because it HURTS. My boobs are swollen and tender, my nipples abraded, and sitting on the recent trauma zone proves…not the smartest choice. She gnaws her little jaws, settling in, there’s an enormous feeling of release—then she commences to drink, with Logan’s flair and my determination.

A rush of love washes through me, as I gaze down at her fuzzy skull; her small hand kneads my skin. I’m guessing it’s partly hormonal, because I feel sort of HIGH, but maybe, also, partly….

Not.

The alarm sounds on the bedside table and Logan erupts in a surge of motion, sending pillows and blankets flying as he fumbles to turn it off. He groans, a long string of indeterminate vowels. Says, “It’s time for your pain pill, Ronica. Where’d you put the bottle?”

I shrug, running a finger over the tuft of reddish hair erupting, kewpie-style, from Peanut’s scalp. “No clue,” I murmur. He shoots me a sardonic look that turns quickly to concern.

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“Hey, what’s wrong?” He brushes my cheek, and I realize tears are streaming down. Busies himself fluffing and stacking pillows, then eases me into them. “Lie back, baby, come on, just prop yourself on these…there you go. Better?”

I nod, because this is way more comfortable. Peanut pops loose, starts rooting; Logan takes her from me, gingerly rotates her, adjusting my shirt to switch sides. She clamps down again, I whimper, and he kisses my forehead. Climbs off the bed and wanders into the bathroom, giving his chest a somnolent scratch.
In a minute he’s back, pressing a capsule between my lips, chasing it with a sip of water. I swallow, and he settles on the bed beside me, stroking my hair. “I’d say it’s insane how much she eats,” he informs me, “but she IS half Mars.”

“What’s the word on Beaver and Duncan?” I ask, and he shakes his head, which I can feel but not see as the pillow shifts.

“Nothing since the hospital,” he says. “They’ve been missing for weeks. Danny’s got guys on shift, walking the grounds—Bruce is in the living room right now. I can ask him if they talked to Clarence while we were sleeping.”

“What about Victor?” I yawn, as Peanut quits lamprey-ing and begins to doze.

“Who?” Logan rouses, takes the baby away. Burps her, checks her diaper, then deposits her in the crib. “You mean the old guy we busted out of the mental hospital, because you were convinced he was my grandfather? Guess he scuttled off to wherever con artists go, when they realize the jig is up. Hopefully he’s just nuts and not murderous, like more RECENT escapees.”

Something about the way he emphasizes ‘recent’ penetrates my sleep-fogged brain. I roll painfully over to the nightstand, fumble out my phone and check the date. It’s June twenty-first.

I flop back onto the pillows, trying to focus. More than two WEEKS have passed, since the last time I turned up here? It should have been two DAYS, or maybe even less; time hasn’t warped in the present-focused realities since the beginning of the slipstream. Which means something is wrong… something has changed. But WHAT?

“Are you okay?” Logan rises up on one elbow to look at me. I guess my flouncing makes it hard to sink back into sleep. “I have lanolin cream in my nightstand if she chewed on you too much.”

“No, it’s just…” I start. Then there’s a knock on the door, and I don’t have to make up an excuse.

Logan groans, gets up, stumbles over; cracks it open and shushes whoever’s on the other side, as Peanut ominously stirs. “What?” he asks, with zero attempt at charm.

“Somebody’s gonna have to rise and shine,” a deep masculine voice says, which makes me sit up and check my shirt. “Veronica’s mother’s here.”

Logan thunks his head against the wall. “What, again? It’s seven-thirty in the morning!”

“You want me to tell her you’re crashed?” the guy asks.

“You think it would help?” Logan sounds like he’s considering it. “Or would she wait us out?”

“Man, I’ve got no clue. My sister-in-law’s mom was like this though, when they had their first kid. She moved IN with them for three months, my brother couldn’t get her to leave.”

“Don’t even joke,” Logan says, flat. “The thought of dealing with Lianne for more than an hour at a stretch fills me with existential dread.”

I move carefully over the edge of the bed, shove dirty laundry off the corner chair. “Do I have a robe here somewhere? I’ll get rid of her. I know just how to play on her fears.”

“No, but we should probably get you one, since we’re tragically never alone anymore. In the meantime, here.” He hands me the erstwhile brown sweater, hidden under a towel on the floor. It smells musty, but like him, so I shrug it on.
“Go back to sleep.” I kiss his cheek. “I’ll join you as soon as I can.”

He stumbles towards the bed, glancing apprehensively at the crib, then falls into it face-first. I duck under the gargantuan arm of a smiling Bruce, and begin the search for my mom.

She’s fidgeting around the living room, making like she’ll touch pictures but not actually connecting. Her outfit consists of heels, a hot pink Lilly Pulitzer printed with white cats, and dangling, curled-up kitten earrings. Not the ensemble I’d wear to cuddle a tiny barf machine, but whatever…she can afford to replace it.

“You should have called,” I tell her, tugging my lapels tight against the morning chill. The painkiller’s kicking in, and I feel pleasant, loopy. “Logan and the baby are asleep.”

“Oh, honey, I’m sorry,” she says distractedly, picking up a clock from the mantel, setting it down. Her hand hovers over a photo of Logan and me sitting in a beanbag Junior Year, drifts away. “It’s just so crazy at my place right now, and I thought wouldn’t it be nice and peaceful to visit Veronica? Hold my granddaughter in her beautiful new home?”

“It wasn’t so quiet half an hour ago, when Peanut was screaming her head off,” I say. “And as for peaceful, we’ve got armed guards patrolling. Maybe Pax Romana?”

“Very funny, Veronica.” She waves a dismissive hand. “I know how protective Logan is, but this security detail is just overkill. You know Duncan’s not dangerous. And I don’t see how that other boy poses a threat to ANYONE. He was always so shy and QUIET, back when he and his brother used to come around.”

“Duncan tried to kill Dick while he was sleeping in the hospital,” I say, flatly--Beaver’s not a subject for debate. “And he was in jail, prior, because he murdered Aaron Echolls. I’ll give you that he’s a low-key madman, mostly. But how could you possibly believe he’s not dangerous?”

“Now come on, the poor boy has a CONDITION,” she says. “He’s not violent by NATURE. Jake’s been beside himself worrying about Duncan running around untreated, and of course he’s such a MAN, he never wants to admit he has any feelings. And it doesn’t help that Celeste’s been filling his head with unhinged ideas all morning. I don’t care how collected she seems, that woman has ISSUES.”

“CELESTE is unhinged,” I say, dubious, remembering how composedly she admitted to murder. “Celeste KANE.”

“I’m convinced she’d do ANYTHING for her darling son.” Mom doubles down, bitter. “Honestly, is it surprising I needed some air? Interacting with that woman could drive a SAINT to drink.”

Ah, that’s it, I think. Lianne’s trying to distract herself, via us, so she won’t booze it up during crisis time. Jake must have mandated decorum.

But distract herself from WHAT? Certainly not Jake brooding, he’s her preferred obsession. And why is Celeste ‘interacting’ with Jake this early, anyway? And since when do we only need to worry about the OTHER boy?

“Mom,” I say slowly, “Are you here because Celeste is at your house right now?”

“Didn’t I just say that?” She grabs a book from the coffee table and examines the back. From the bedroom comes a thin, reedy cry, and she says, with relief, “Oh listen, the baby’s awake.”
I give her a narrow look, because as IF she’s getting out of an interrogation. But I return to the Master anyway, because that noise is genuinely excruciating.

Logan’s still face-down in the pillows, snoring. His snore has a slightly fake cast, but I figure he deserves the extra half-hour of inaction, so I don’t call him on it. I carefully pick up the baby, check her diaper—still dry, thank GOD—and carry her back out. Maybe she’ll disarm and distract, so I can get Lianne to spill the beans.

Peanut slows from wails to squawks as soon as I tuck her into my chest, like she’s performing a wordless monologue; her bright, dark eyes catalog everything as I carry her out. When she spots mom her noises get more frequent and almost…interrogative, and I think, oh great. She’s as extroverted and novelty-seeking as her father.

Mom smiles, that superior cool-girl sh-tick activating, and takes the baby with flair, rubbing her nose against Peanut’s. My kid gurgles conversationally, and I reflect that Mom has at least ONE parental skill.

“So why does law enforcement not need to look for Duncan?” I ask, settling on the arm of a chair. Watch her clack along the hardwoods, grinning at the baby. “And what specific crazy ideas has Celeste been sharing?”

Bruce goes on red alert over by the window, while remaining as invisible as a giant Viking can. I shake my head at him, just slightly, and he subsides back, arms crossed.

“Oh, Veronica, you know I can’t talk about this,” she says, absently. “I can’t, can I baby? No I can’t. I’ve been told in no uncertain terms not to mention Duncan to ANYONE. You know, Veronica, Leilani looks a lot like Logan, but I think she has your CHIN.”

“How did Jake manage to track Duncan down, mom? Did Clarence find him?”

“No, of course not.” She abandons tactics of diversion with a put-upon sigh. “This was an FBI investigation, Jake told Clarence not to interfere. Some man found him wandering around downtown, and made Celeste jump through hoops before handing him over. She’s the one who brought the poor thing to my house—I’ll bet she paid a FORTUNE in ransom. And let me tell you, when that boy showed up, he was a MESS. I mean not physically, but he was…rocking.”

“Care to describe the kidnapper?” I ask flatly, though I have a gut feeling I know.

“I don’t know, honey, just some weird old man was what she said. I heard her tell Jake he looked like Doc from Back to the Future. Remember how much you liked those movies as a kid?”

“Yeah, at one time they seemed implausible,” I mutter, because she’s clueless. “Duncan’s probably just freaked out because he thinks it’s Sophomore Year, and there’s too much conflicting evidence. His parents were still married, and lived with Lilly in a different place, when he went to jail. Which, incidentally, is where Duncan belongs--prison. Not watching bad Nineties TV on your couch, while Celeste and Jake plot.”

“Veronica, I have no idea what you mean. I don’t know ANYTHING about people who belong in prison. Besides, I’ve got a feeling Duncan will take a trip somewhere far away, very soon. Celeste is making sure of THAT.”

I grimace, raising my brows at Bruce, because this right here is my smoking gun…but I’m strangely reluctant to call the Feds.

I’d have trouble pinning Jake’s many crimes on him, in any reality, if push came to shove. He’s...
smart and strategic, skirting but not breaking laws; and even when convicted, he’s never served time. If the cops showed Chez Kane, right now, though, and found him harboring an escaped murderer? Not even HE could get off scot-free. He would pay for icing down Lilly’s body, cuckolding my dad, ordering the Hearst Reality car crash.

But Duncan would suffer so much more, in that maximum security asylum, than he would in a cushy sanitarium overseas; and he’s endured a lot already, at the hands of Beaver. Besides, all he did to get locked up was murder Aaron—and that asshole unequivocally deserved to die.

Plus, if I take Jake down…what will happen to mom? I mean, sure, I resent the hell out of MY mother, who abandoned me the second things got tough, and stole my college fund besides. Destroying her True Love fantasy, and alienating her from her daughter and granddaughter in the process, would certainly feel just.

But Lianne hasn’t proved as terrible, in the slipstream, as she was back home. She came running with a lawyer, when I got arrested for murder in Improved Past. She fought for a YEAR in Prison Reality to get me out of jail, after everyone but Dad gave up. She sat at my bedside in Hearst Reality when I lost the baby, fighting her own drunken demons to offer support.

She ran, in my reality, to lead her dangerous connections away. Because she knew she couldn’t control her drinking, or physically protect me, if she stayed.

Logan was able to forgive Lilly, in Ideal Reality, for sleeping with Aaron, in an attempt to distract his abuser. Can I forgive my mother for doing basically the same? She’s an addict—a sad, needy person who falls apart at the first setback. But it’s worse when she’s unhappy with her choices… which she’s NOT, here.

This Lianne isn’t GOOD, any more than this Jake is. She’s clingy, self-involved, and maybe slightly delusional; he’s the same jerk he always was. But they raised Other V after the divorce, and she chose them over dad. She CARES.

Whether or not I find it in me to be merciful, though…knowledge (and photographic evidence) is power. I’ve got to head over to mom’s, and check out this fugitive-harboring myself; make sure Duncan doesn’t get offed, like the corporation-killing problem he is, before he escapes to better tomorrows.

Which means I need someone reliable to go with me, so Logan doesn’t turn berserk…and someone ELSE reliable to stay here, and watch my mom watch the kid. She can change the diapers; THEY can make sure she doesn’t chug our Kahlua, then drop Peanut on her head.

I study my mother for a minute, baby-talking and nuzzling like the rest of the world has stopped mattering, and sigh.

“So,” I say, making both her and the kid turn. “How do you feel about a little one-on-one grandma time with what’ll probably be your only grandchild? Because I have a really important errand I need to run.”

XXXXX

When I return to the bedroom to dig clothes from the dresser, Logan’s awake, charming someone on the phone. He frowns as I drop the sweater, crouch to retrieve shorts, and discover that even with pain pills, this is not a good plan; makes his excuses, and quickly hangs up.

“Is she gone?” he asks, helping me stand, and holding out a pair of yoga pants like I’m two.
“No, she’s cooing at our daughter,” I say, accepting his assistance. “Why? Were you HIDING in here?”

“I was talking to Wallace, thank you. He and Jessica send felicitations from Uganda. Apparently the child-soldier documentary is going well; they’re going to end up festival-circuit stars.”

“Aw, he called from halfway across the world just to be a pal?” I point at my tennis shoes, abandoned in the corner, and Logan hands them over. “Wallace really is, genuinely and unequivocally, the best.”

“Dick emailed him about the whole Beaver-drugging-you fiasco. I think…he’s trying to make amends for freaking out about the Boat drama. Which is nice. I’ve missed having him around.”

I nod, because I didn’t even know Logan and Wallace were estranged. Ousting Victor to the impostor fringes has uncovered a previously-hidden, gaping hole in Logan’s normally packed social life.

“Things going any better with your mom?” He kisses my scalp as he reaches past to retrieve his own sweats. “Is she still doing that running-in-circles nervous hamster act? And has Jake managed to keep his shit together in these trying times?”

“Better than you’d expect.” I tie my shoelace in a neat bow. “Celeste and Jake have Duncan; apparently he was delivered to mom’s door, in exchange for a fat packet of cash, by a guy who sounds a lot like your fake grandfather. My sense is, they’re planning to disappear him to some nice, cushy sanitarium overseas, where he can live out his days with zero painful moments. And never again generate bad PR.”

“Hmmm.” Logan pulls a Rip Tide t-shirt over his head, and brushes his bed-hair back carelessly. “It occurs to me that proof of this plot would be a good thing to keep in reserve…in case we ever need to persuade Jake to our way of thinking.”

I tap my nose and point at him. “Bingo, great minds. I’m headed over there to pin Jake in my crosshairs, and extract a promissory note for this pound of flesh. You want to tag along? Mom’s agreed to babysit Peanut, and Bruce has agreed to babysit HER.”

“As long as she’s not currently drunk,” he says. “And you can handle the outing. Backing you up while you twist the screws is my primary marital role anyway.”

“Oh, ha-ha.” I grab the brown sweater off the floor and shrug into it. “I’m just glad to hear Duncan’s out of Casablancas clutches. I’m sure Beaver didn’t plan him a happily-ever-after.”

“Maybe Donut can shed some light on Beaver’s goals, too.” Logan locates a jacket and toes into Sketchers. “If he’s feeling coherent. There are a lot of things about this situation that don’t add up, and I’d like answers.”

“Well here’s a piece of the puzzle I just uncovered—the Fitzpatricks have had ties to the Sorokins for a year. There’ve been hints of interaction, in retrospect; for example, Molly Fitzpatrick mentioning the Boat Disaster in advance. And Kendall couldn’t have known about that Toco Loco windfall without an insider tip. But I didn’t consider a PARTNERSHIP until today.”

“Huh. Well I guess that explains how Kendall got the hard drive. She went through the Fitzpatricks to the Sorokins, who must’ve had dirt on Jake. I mean, she MIGHT have ripped the thing off during a house party, but I couldn’t figure out how she got the invite. Big Dick wasn’t rich or famous enough to be welcome at Kane shindigs.”
I nod. So Kendall and the hard drive are still a feature of this reality—and the drive’s contents are known. I guess the only shift since last time I turned up here, then, is the absence from our lives of Victor. Which is a relief; frankly these pills are making my head swim, and my logic’s mildly impaired.

“Ready to spy on some billionaires, and threaten my stepfather with jail?” I watch him check his reflection, blow off grooming with a scowl. Only a blow dryer, a half-hour, and a palm full of gel can tame his bedhead.

“Ronica.” He adopts a fake-stern look that makes me smile. “Like you don’t know I was BORN ready.”

Jake and mom, it turns out, moved into a red-stone Spanish monstrosity in the heart of the ‘09 after our house burned down. The community is gated, the guard in the watch house armed, and only the fact that he knows me by name gets us in.

We park around the corner, behind a mansion under construction, and skulk in the woods surveilling the back. “We have to break in,” I say, guesstimating floor plan based on windows. “It’s not like they’ll answer the door. Any ideas?”

“Second-story window,” he decides, squinting at the building through too-bright morning sun. “The home gym’s up there, as I recall—and I’d guess working out’s low on the priority list today. If you’re still carrying around that glass cutter, I can go up the wall, then let you in through the service door.”

“It’d be easier if I climb, too,” I say. “We want to minimize the wandering around.”

“No way,” he says, with a flat, negating gesture. “Doc made me swear, six weeks before exercise or heavy lifting. Besides, you’re loopy from the meds, you’d probably fall.”

“Fine.” I grit my teeth, because that doctor is a PAIN. Dig through my bag until he bats my hand aside and removes the tool. “Don’t lose your grip and crack your head open.”

He winks and climbs up the brick like a monkey. I’m grateful once again that Danny Campos exists.

Quick and efficient, Logan cuts the glass and removes the screen, slithers through. I ease deeper into the woods, keeping my eyes peeled for the indicated door—try to game out this reality’s most immediate threat.

The sanitarium’s shut down, thanks to the breakout and subsequent investigation. We’re done searching for Beaver—he’s an escaped, convicted murderer, subject of a manhunt. I’ve had the baby, so I’m no longer at risk of miscarriage. Which means the only loose end is Dick.

I warned Weevil and Mac to check on him because I discovered Victor was a fake—but Victor’s been missing for months, here. Did Duncan find him alone, and inject the insulin? Was Dick nowhere to be seen this morning, when he’s normally underfoot CONSTANTLY, because he’s in a coma? Or DEAD?

What has my life come to, that DICK CASABLANCAS merits worry?

“Ronica!” Logan whisper-yells, and I spot him by an open side door, waving. I sprint across the lawn, enter a beige-veined marble kitchen, and he says, “I found Donut. He’s dressed tropically, and
Celeste was waxing rhapsodic about the weather. I’m thinking South America, based on her travel narrative.”

“Someplace without extradition treaties, no doubt.” I follow him down the hall. “We both know he’d prefer Australia.”

“I snapped a photo of her holding his hand,” Logan murmurs, easing past me and peering around a corner. “It’s disturbing on a fundamental level that ice-bitch Celeste cares enough to sneak him out of the country. Whereas MY sweet-natured mom could give a shit I exist.”

“Us bitches love our families fiercely.” I twine my fingers with his, cross under a creepily sumptuous brown-and-gold archway. “Even if we fail to show it in the healthiest ways.”

He smiles down at me. “I’m so glad you’re my girl.”

I lean against his shoulder, he puts an arm around me. Murmurs, near my ear, “Donut and Celeste were in that guest room. Wait here while I check it out.”

Sinking back against the wall, because I’m still pretty loopy, I watch him creep down the hall and peek. He gestures with his head; I push off and follow.

Duncan’s sitting in a blue chintz chair that’s British-Royal expensive, hands folded in his lap, gazing at a painting of an oceangoing ship. At first I think he’s fugue-ing, because his face is expressionless; but then he sees us, and faintly smiles.

“Hey man,” he greets Logan, re-crossing his feet on the ottoman. “Did you bring Veronica over to say goodbye? Mom told me it was too dangerous to visit you. I can’t leave the house.”

“We couldn’t just let you disappear.” Logan ushers me before him into the room. “Had to make sure you were OK.”

“Oh, sure, I’m fine NOW,” he says, unperturbed. “The place I’m going will be a lot better than that last dump. I didn’t like the hospital at all, and it was lame visiting Cassidy in the house with green shutters. Mom says this new villa is right by the ocean; it has a pool, and a wrap-around porch, and toucans. I don’t have to do anything I don’t want, either, ever again—THAT makes me happy. I know ridding the world of bad people is necessary, but I’d really rather just chill.”

Logan raises his brows—guess he hasn’t sussed out that Beaver brainwashed Duncan to kill, here. I just nod, because my position, vis-a-vis suffering, depends on whether people deserve it.

“I wish you could come with me, Veronica,” Duncan says, with a trace of wistfulness. He glances at me, spear of blue, turns back to the still, grey painting. “Sounds like you’d love it there.”

“I AM fond of a good tropical vacation.” I keep my voice gentle. “But my family would be sad if I disappeared.”

“Yeah, that’s basically what mom told me.” Duncan shrugs—so much for the great, doomed love he supposedly harbors. “Hey, will you guys tell Dick I’m sorry he didn’t get his medicine, next time you see him? I TRIED to give it to him. But that gang asshole who always wants to fight showed up in his room. It was SO weird, dude kept yelling, “What are you doing to my brother?” I told him I don’t even KNOW his family, but he punched me. Then I can’t remember anything for a while.”

“Don’t sweat it. Dick got plenty of ‘medicine’ when he ate Veronica’s dinner,” Logan says, grimly. “And let’s agree not to speak of the whole brother thing—that’s a weird and sordid tale I wish Dick hadn’t told ME. He’s in Hawaii right now—Dick is—having some R&R with our friend
Mac. Or rather, she’s making deals with surf companies, and he’s coping badly with the whole Cassidy situation.”

“I don’t remember Mac.” Duncan frowns, in his faux-thoughtful way. “But Hawaii’s got excellent surfing. Why didn’t you go with him? You’re usually the first one buying a ticket for that kind of trip.”

“Yeah, normally I would have,” Logan agrees, leaning against the wall. “But you know how it goes. I blew out my knee. Now I just surf for fun on the baby waves, and make custom boards. I’ll send you one sometime, if you want.”

Duncan nods, refocuses abruptly on me. “I’m sorry we didn’t get to go to prom, Veronica. I wanted it to be a romantic night. I told Lilly to help you pick a white dress, and I meant to take care of the flowers.”

“How about we just pretend ‘prom’ happened as planned?” I say, gently. “Imagine I wore blue, and you bought a matching suit, and the Faders played while we danced. Imagine Logan got drunk and flirted with a hot girl named Jackie Cook…and you let him sleep on your couch, so he wouldn’t get in trouble.”

Logan gives me a sardonic look, but Duncan laughs. “That sounds like Logan,” he says. “You and Lilly need to get a handle on the partying, man. You could both achieve so much more.”

“Working on it,” Logan says. “I’ve been trying very hard, lately, to act like a grown-up.”

“About time!” Duncan teases, hearty. “You need to step up and take care of Veronica, since I won’t be around. You’re the guy who always has my back. I’m not sure I trust anyone else.”

“Man, I think it’s the other way around.” Logan pats his shoulder, getting choked up, because ugh. He is SO LOYAL to his misfit pals. “You got rid of my dad. You saved ME.”

“Like I told you,” Duncan chides, dismissive. “We’re FRIENDS, man. That’s what friends DO. They protect each other.”

“Yeah,” Logan agrees, blinking rapidly. “But I’m saying thanks one more time, just the same.”

He bends and hugs Duncan, fearless as always, and after a second, I do, too. Because like Dick, and Lianne, and so many other people in the slipstream, this Duncan has never purposefully hurt me. And I loved him, once. Plus, it’s my last chance to say goodbye.

Duncan plants one on me, the close-lipped, uptight kiss he favors; I allow it, because I don’t want him going berserk. Then Logan takes my arm and pulls me into the hall, tugging me tight to his side as we walk away.

“We can’t turn them in for this, ever,” he mutters, resolute. “Our confrontation with Jake has got to be a ruse. Duncan can’t go back to that asylum, where people victimized him and messed with his mind. I don’t care who he killed, he doesn’t DESERVE it.”

“Don’t worry.” I pat him, reassuring. “Donut’s going to live with the toucans, like he was always fated to do. I just want to make sure Jake doesn’t interfere with my Sorokin plans. Plus I need to force him to leave you, Dick and Wallace alone.”

“You have a PLAN for Gory?” He steers me sideways, down a flight of stone stairs. “Why haven’t I heard about this? No, go right, sugar muffin; I’d lay odds Jake’s in his library, unravelling. Lately it’s become his lair.”
“Like a supervillain?” I lift a brow.

“You saw him at the SWAT takedown.” Logan shrugs. “Everything he’s worked for is in danger. He’s having his first encounter with failure, and not handling the experience well.”

Swinging the door open with a grandiose flourish, like HE’S the detective in this relationship, Logan unexpectedly reveals a tableau that proves us both right.

Jake’s slumped at a table covered with laptops and papers, unshaven and unwashed as advertised, face sagging in lines of defeat. He’s staring off into space, pondering mortality instead of focusing—which makes sense, if this is his first time facing it.

And beside him, in a business suit, hair cut in that sleek, slanted bob I noticed a couple visits back, sits Lilly. She’s wearing dark red lipstick, waving a sheaf of papers, and saying, “Honestly, it’s BETTER if we roll out to limited notice and fanfare. Before this happened, every tech blog would be picking the product apart at the seams. But NOW…” she pauses, registering our entrance, and says, “Holy shit, what are you guys DOING here?”

“Wait a second,” I say, as everything shifts and rearranges in my head. “Wait one FUCKING second. Lils, are you IN on this spyware fiasco? Are you COLLUDING?”

She rolls her eyes, tosses the report on the table. “Ronica, it’s not SPYWARE. You need to calm down. And this SO isn’t the time to debate business ethics, anyway.”

“Let’s skip to harboring murderous fugitives, then,” I retort, because color me disillusioned. “Can you maybe find a moment to discuss THAT?”

Lilly spares a glance at Jake, who’s rousing and doesn’t look happy. Says, “Come on, let’s give Dad space. He needs to read this brief before a conference call at one, and he’s having trouble focusing.”

She leads us down the hall, heels clacking on tile; Logan raises his brows as he follows, clearly also surprised. When she reaches a nook beside a bay window, furnished in sumptuous brown leather and teak, she turns and says, “All right, shoot. What, exactly, is so scandalous you’d ditch your newborn to show up here, guns blazing? You don’t seriously expect us to send Donut BACK to that place?”

“How long have you been working for Jake?” I demand, cutting off Logan before he can answer. “Have you ALWAYS known about this scam he’s got planned?”

“DUH, since both of you turned him down,” she tells me, like it’s obvious. “Come on, Veronica, you said so yourself—SOMEBODY’s got to save the family name. And I’m the heir apparent, now that Donut’s going permanently coconuts. Why do you think I changed my major and suddenly got so busy? Why else would I cut Jackie loose, except to protect her from this CIRCUS? The whole Donut-escaping thing drew paparazzi like flies, and some photographer in a Gremlin almost ran over her KID.”

“But you and Jackie LIKED…” Logan says, and trails off, because ‘circuses’ can be safely left unspoken.

“Sure, she enjoyed drama HERE, while living her fantasy existence. THERE, she’s all about playdates, and motor-skills-development, and Sam.” Lilly sighs. “Look, I had to choose. Save the family fortunes, or get serious at twenty-one. I can have kids and a relationship ten or even twenty years down the road; but I WON’T have any money left, if I don’t step in now. And really—can you
“So Carrie lied,” I muse, which makes Logan snort with exaggerated astonishment. “She said you drifted away from us because you were PARTYING.”

Lilly huffs impatience. “Like I would EVER discuss my private life with Carrie Bishop. I know you persist in standing by her, babes, and I admit she can be entertaining. But she’s been gossip-obsessed since childhood. And she’s got no discretion at ALL when she’s high, which is always, these days.” Lilly sits on the arm of a chair, unapologetic as ever. “Look, this is just a pit stop for me. I’m going back to helping kids in need, once I save the day. But SOMEONE had to step up, here, and neither of you was willing. I don’t have Logan’s business acumen or your ambition, Ronica, but I’ve got great shark instincts and a total lack of fear—which, believe me, are coming in handy.”

“What about Celeste?” Logan asks. “I thought SHE was the silent-but-ruthless partner?”

“Celeste sold me her shares, and funneled the money through the Caymans for Duncan. She can’t even LOOK at dad anymore, since he admitted Donut’s a liability. I wouldn’t be surprised if she left the country too, for good.”

“I just…” I lean against the window, feeling tired. “I never would have believed in a million years that you’d condone MALWARE.”

“Veronica, data mining is the wave of the future,” she says, impatient. “Twenty years from now, even TEN, maybe, everybody’s going to be doing it. There’s a fortune to be made from personalized advertising. If we don’t get in on the ground floor, we’ll be left behind.”

I gaze at her, my best friend--the girl I loved SO much I endured three years of hell to put her killer behind bars. I get her position, I do…she’s pragmatic, and Mac recently made the same point. She doesn’t understand, either, because this reality’s so different, that I drew a line in the sand between myself and Jake long ago. It’s just…I never expected HER to stand on any side but mine, unless she felt I’d done something wrong.

Could this be how, even though she didn’t die, Lilly’s managed to meet her fate? Was the Fabulous Lilly Kane always destined for sacrifice on the altar of the family name?

“So I guess you showed up to lecture me?” Lilly asks, like the battle cry to save her from herself didn’t just sound. “Or did you want to…say goodbye to Duncan? We’re not supposed to admit he’s here; but surely that rule can’t apply to YOU guys.”

I open my mouth to answer, then shut it, because I remember; I came for blackmail material, and maybe revenge. I can’t say that, though. Because in this reality literally everyone, including me, is beholden to Jake.

“We’re here because of Gory Sorokin,” I tell her, decisive. “Your dad’s associate.”

“Ugh, the weird protege?” She makes a face. “I hate that guy. I have no clue what he did to ingratiate himself, since it seems like DAD can’t stand him either. But he’s always lurking around, thinking he’s God’s gift, and totally grossing me out.”

“He’s the BOAT SHOOTER, Lils,” I say, exasperated. “The one who planned the whole fiasco; not to mention a Russian Mafia don’s son. He’s declared war on Logan and I, and Jake’s protecting him. I need that to stop, so I can neutralize the threat.”

“Are you SHITTING me?” she demands, eyes going furious-huge. “That asshole showed up at MY party, KILLING people, and Dad’s not railroading him into JAIL?”
Her mouth drops open in unfakeable outrage, and she grabs me by the wrist, dragging me back towards the library full-speed. “We’ll just see about that,” she mutters, stomping, while Logan saunters behind and smirks. “I don’t CARE how far our stock’s gone into freefall! Dad’s job is to protect the family, no matter how much we fuck up. You can be damn sure I’ll hold him to it, or make him suffer the consequences!”

Jake’s still sprawled in his chair when we reappear, frowning at the sheaf of papers now clutched in his fist. He’s barefoot, I notice, with a coffee stain on his Kane Industries t-shirt, and the three-day beard he’s sporting is grey.

“Gory Sorokin shot up my yacht party?” Lilly demands, without preamble, which makes Jake focus blearily and set down the papers. “My friend Luke lost a LEG because Sorokin wanted to buy DRUGS, and I had to sit with that creep through a DINNER?”

Jake looks to Logan, concerned. “Why are you here talking about Sorokin? Has he violated the deal? We all know the consequences are severe, I can’t imagine he’d risk them.”

Logan gives a faint head shake, quirks his eyebrows apologetically in response to Lilly’s murderous look. “Lils is pretty mad about the whole ‘consorting with killers’ thing, though. And Veronica’s worried he’ll try to provoke US into violating.”

Jake looks up at the ceiling, weary. “Lilly, it’s impossible to do business in this country without belonging to certain networks, and membership requires…reciprocity. I’m by no means happy about some relationships I’m forced to endure; but the company would have gone bankrupt years ago, if I hadn’t.”

She makes a scoffing sound of outrage, and he continues. “And Logan’s currently learning the same lesson. It doesn’t matter how much Sorokin provokes, son—you KNOW that. It’s your responsibility to comply with the terms. Most powerful people test boundaries. That isn’t grounds to nullify deals made for everyone’s protection.”

“IS Gory powerful, still?” I ask, because UGH. This is some sell-your-soul BULLSHIT! “Do you know that for a fact? Or is he a lone wolf who’s run afoul of persuasive friends, and depends wholly on you to keep him out of jail?”

“I hope that’s a hypothetical question,” Jake chides, but his gaze sharpens with interest. “Because if you’ve investigated the Sorokins in the last year, and they find out, even Clarence can’t shield you from the consequences.”

“WOULD Clarence?” I ask, the masked driver in the car crash still vivid in my mind. “Shield me, I mean? If I became a nuisance?”

“He’d BETTER!” Lilly’s hair swings sharply as she commences pacing in outrage. “Just like YOU’D better, Dad! I can’t believe what I’m HEARING!”

“Of COURSE we’d protect you, Veronica. You’re my STEPDAUGHTER,” Jake says, genuinely outraged. “Look, I tried to send the three of you to New York to get you AWAY from all this ugliness. I offered Logan a place in the Kane business fold, and other…protective organizations, to put him in the best defensive position. You’ve made my life extremely challenging, foiling my associates’ business deals, refusing my help—even precipitating this crisis with Duncan, by airing your concerns about his asylum to the FBI instead of me. The fact that you’re still pampered and safe, despite being a CONSTANT source of problems, should tell you everything you need to know about my loyalties.”
I cross my arms, secretly proud I’ve been a thorn in his side. “If it turned out Gory’s no longer allied with the family business… would the importance of this non-aggression pact decrease? Would it be acceptable to take him out, like we’d clearly all prefer?”

“The calculus of my relationship with him would change,” Jake admits slowly. Considering. “Gory’s protected status depends on his connections. I’m certainly not the guy's pal.”

I look at Lilly, my BFF 4-Ever, who’s entangled in Kane shenanigans to a liable degree. At Logan, who knows this way lies peril, but wound up trapped by circumstance. I recall that mom lives in Jake’s house, here; and most of his behavior, while shitty, has BENEFITED us…his family.

And I choose the path, for my loved ones, I would never, otherwise, consider.

“I don’t have proof of Gory’s fall from grace,” I say. “Although I’ve heard convincing rumors. But I DO know you should get shut of him, fast. The FBI has code for spyware you’ve attached to your upcoming browser.”

“Oh my GOD, of COURSE they do!” Lilly flails disgust. “THAT’S why you came--to warn us, all tied up in pissed-off knots!”

I raise a quieting hand. “A rank-and-file Fitzpatrick turned it over, in exchange for immunity. They’ve also obtained a member list for Jake’s secret society, and video of pledges’ confessions.”

“When?” Jake asks grimly, sitting up in a surge of angry motion.

“Recently,” I say. “Within the last two weeks. But that’s plenty of time for a pro to connect the dots. You need to strip that code from the search engine before it debuts, and replace it with something house-made; my associate Mac wrote some excellent data-mining software, which I’m sure she’d be happy to license. If you cut ties with Sorokin now, BEFORE the investigators come calling? All they can prove is that you belong to the same club.”

“Ugh, I should have known that stupid Skull-and-Bones knockoff was chock full of criminals,” Lilly chides, rolling her eyes in exasperation. “Honestly, Dad, no amount of mutual-back-scratching is worth this. No one CARES about you kissing a boy once, it’s 2007! That might even give you hipster CRED!”

He frowns at her, she counters with a defiant fix-this-now glare, and I think like father, like daughter. Smother an involuntary smile.

“Thank you, Veronica,” Jake says, with emphasis, turning back to me. “This is a financially critical time for the company. Indictment in an FBI investigation might have ruined me.”

“Thank me by protecting mom and Lilly, always,” I say. “Help me figure out a safe way to take Gory down. And for God’s sake, let all of us live our lives however we want, instead of pressuring us to follow in your footsteps. Not everyone’s a cutthroat businessperson at heart.”

He nods, and I flash my cruellest smile. Hold up a finger, because there’s a catch. “One more thing. A caveat, if you will, since unfortunately you associate with questionable people. Should I NOT be thanked in this fashion—should anyone I love, my dad or daughter for example, be hurt in some way that’s traced back to you? I can ALSO prove you collaborated with the Russian mob to put spyware in your products. That you harbored an escaped murderer, and helped him flee justice. And I, too, can provide the press with all Castle member confessions, including your own.”

Logan lifts his brows, and I add, “Of course, I wouldn’t DREAM of doing my kind and benevolent stepfather so wrong, when he’s been nothing but generous my whole life. But in the
event of my unexpected death, all that proof goes straight into the hands of someone who WOULD. Someone whose identity you’d never guess. So I hope we understand each other, here? And this is the start of an unofficial, but mutually advantageous, deal of the kind you so enjoy striking?”

Exasperation and outrage creep through Jake’s expression, but he’s a stone-cold businessman and he keeps his cool. He nods, short, jerky, and my smile grows. “Don’t forget to inform Clarence of the new world order,” I say. “Lils, I’ve always loved you unconditionally, no way am I stopping now, even if you DO turn into Gordon Gekko. And just FYI? Probably it’s best none of us mention this convo to mom. She’s fragile in general, as you know…and TERRIBLE at keeping secrets.”

I wink, head for the door. Logan tosses, “See you at the next family barbecue,” over his shoulder, and follows.

I stop in the garden, tilt my face to the sky; take ten deep breaths, eyes closed, as I let down from the adrenaline rush. Logan’s fingertips glide across my forehead, gentle, stroking my bangs to one side.

“I’m impressed with your brutality,” he murmurs, breath warm on my skin. “I’ve maybe even got a slight boner. Did you really stash all that data somewhere? Or just make the world’s most reckless bluff?”

“If Dad hasn’t kept a copy of Kendall’s drive, I’ll eat my shirt,” I say, still breathing hard, eyes squeezed shut. “I’ll have to call him from the car, though, and convince him never to write that book. So much for his Famous Author future.”

“He won’t care,” Logan soothes. “He loves you a whole lot more than money.”

My mouth twists into a grimace, because that’s true. And Dad suffers because of it, a lot. “I didn’t crush Jake, Logan. I WANTED to—I wanted to make him SQUIRM. I hate that guy’s GUTS for saving the Boat Killer from jail. But I helped him instead, because it’s best for the rest of you.”

“My hero,” he murmurs, affectionate, and I cut him off with a head shake. It’s crucial he knows this is serious.

“I’m supposed to consider other people’s feelings, not just mine,” I explain, the sadness of the last few days leaking through. “That was our decision. But I didn’t KNOW as much until recently, so I’ve demanded you side with me against him, here. And it’s caused you grief.”

I take a deep breath. “So even though it ran counter to every urge I’ve got, just now, I backed down. Proved I CAN do what your Veronica asks, and I DO care that she’s happy. I can’t stop being me, Logan, but I’m TRYING to choose the best path.”

“Let’s go home and watch our kid sleep,” he says softly, instead of responding. I lift my lids to see him smiling down at me…so tenderly, one corner of his mouth crooked, zero confusion so he HAS to know who I am. His eyes are sunshine through amber, his expression soft as sighs. “I’ll rub the part of your back that always aches. It’s the best way I can think of, right now, to show how much I love you.”

“Deal,” I say, ducking into his arms. He holds me tight, pressing a kiss to my head. His heart throbs slowly against my cheek, warm and sure.

THREAD FORTY FOUR INVERTS

My universe spins and shifts as I bury my face in his chest, and then I’m sitting in the corner of Java the Hut. It’s after closing, based on the loud rap music emanating from the kitchen, and I’m
clutching a steaming latte. The sky’s indigo through the windows, colored jets of going-out traffic periodically streaming past, and Carrie sits across from me in her white shirt and brown vest. This shocks me; she’s been WAY too Courtney Love lately to hold down a job. Plus on my last visit here, Logan told me she was shunned.

Of course, if she got bounced from Julliard, Winston MAY have laid down the law, employment-wise. And my presence here, in the dead of night, seems somehow less than aboveboard.

“Did you make it out of the house without him noticing?” she asks, tamping a pack of cigarettes and removing one. “It’s not like I want you in TROUBLE.”

I shrug, because I have no idea, and say, “Why would I get in trouble for having coffee with my friend?”

“Because you live with a drama queen?” she suggests. I resist the urge to roll my eyes, and say ‘it takes one to know one’. “But I’m glad to hear Logan Echolls isn’t the boss of you. And you’re still willing to come when I call.”

“Was that in doubt?” I’m not being snide— I genuinely have no clue. As I recall, Ideal Reality Veronica maintained ties with Carrie even after Logan ostracized her. But things have changed in the slipstream quite a bit, since Bobby’s birthday.

She shrugs, trying but failing to look blasé. “A lot of my calls go to voicemail, these days,” she says, with forced lightness. “And never get returned. You know how it goes, when Logan makes his Decrees from On High.”

Boy, do I ever. “Yeah, he’s not happy,” I say. “Actually that’s an understatement.”

“I bet he didn’t tell you why, either.” She lights a smoke with a match, lazily waves it out. Watches me, above the cigarette, with inscrutable eyes. “Just made some Solomon-like hand gesture, pronounced me the villain, and moved on to Destroy the Unbeliever phase.”

“Do YOU want to tell me why?” I ask, instead of confirming. Because it’s not like feeding her data will make her LESS likely to lie.

“No,” she says. “It was a dumb misunderstanding for which he’s responsible, but he’s absolving himself by blaming me. Because God forbid Logan Echolls might ever be WRONG.”

Wow, I think, obscure and deny. Bold choice of tactics, when it must be widely assumed he shut down a pass. Either she’s REALLY secure in Other V’s friendship, or she’s ballsier than I thought. Because Logan’s punishments are surgically precise—no way did he overreact. “So what am I doing here in the dead of night, where nobody who matters can see? Since you have no plans to beg my forgiveness?”

“Because I’ve got SERIOUS problems,” she says, blowing out a ring of smoke. “Namely, Cobb. And you’ve always ridden to my rescue before, even when it pissed off Logan.”

“Why is Cobb still an issue?” I ask, folding my arms. “Logan chased him away definitively at Enbom’s pool party, and I haven’t seen hide nor hair of him, since.”

“He texted me a photo of Dick and I snorting lines of coke yesterday,” she says. “I’m naked, we look pretty friendly, and there’s another girl in the room. He’s threatening to show it to dad if I don’t hook him back up with his ‘09 client base. The thing is, my folks…they’re still pretty messed up about what happened to Corny. I’m worried this would wreck them.”
Or afraid they’d cut you off, I think cynically, because I’m a bad and suspicious person. “So you want me to what? Somehow get rid of the photos? Because once something’s recorded digitally, it’s virtually impossible to scrub from the web.”

“Screw the picture. I want you to put him in JAIL. If he’s willing to take me down, why should I have mercy? The guy’s dealing for the Fitzpatricks. Pictures of him selling to schoolkids and carrying profits to their lair should get him out of my face for a good long while.”

My ears perk up, because the Fitzpatricks and Sorokins are murder buddies; if Cobb can turn evidence corroborating that, I’m willing to play along with Carrie.

Plus, maybe I can use travel time to unearth clues about her fall from favor. SHE may not want to talk about what went wrong, but I would VERY much like to hear.

My phone, which is sitting on the table beside my now-lukewarm coffee, rings. Logan’s number pops up, and I promptly hit ignore; no way will he approve of what I’m doing, but no way am I letting him stop me. He was a dick last time I showed up, he’s still not forgiven. Besides, helping Carrie CAN’T be on the list of Other-V-forbidden activities, because she showed up here when called.

“Screening?” Carrie asks dryly, taking one last drag and stubbing out her cigarette. “Who’s fallen from favor? I mean, besides me?”

“It’s my dearly beloved.” I stash the phone in my bag, from whence it rings again. “Why, do you WANT me to answer, tell him we’re hanging?”

“Pass,” she says, with an eye roll. “I’m done here. Let me get my coat, and I’ll take you to the pool hall where Cobb markets his wares.”

XXXXX

We’ve been in my car for ten minutes, and she’s smoking out the window despite probably knowing I hate it, when she says, “Well. Shall we talk about the weather? I do so love these awkward silences.”

“Oh, you want to have a best buds tete-a-tete?” I ask. “Do I get to choose the topic? Because I’m DYING to know why my boyfriend shunned you.”

She sighs, releasing a gout of smoke into the cool night wind. “I promise it won’t ever affect you, Veronica. For once in your life, just let something go.”

“There are only a few things you could have done that would make him this mad,” I say, not complying. “And neither points to you being a good friend.”

“I was taking care of what matters most to you,” Carrie says, cryptically. “Just like we always promised each other we would. Besides, it’s not me you need to worry about, ruining things for you and Damien. It’s that psycho-future-ghost version of yourself who stirs up trouble.”

“Why would I be worried about future me?” I ask. “Logan and I are ENGAGED.”

“And the way he popped the question is a perfect example of what I mean! Come ON, Veronica. The ring he spent a year designing for you was one size too big? There’s no way Logan Echolls would make a mistake that sloppy. He just wanted an excuse to hold on to it, so he could propose again to HER.”
I start to answer, and she holds up a hand. “I know, I know. I’m not speaking ill. I realize you love him, and baby-daddy-commitment etc. But seriously. You DO realize how fucked up it is that the version of you he wants most is the one that’s gone completely whacko?”

“IS she really more messed up than me, though?” I ask, feeling somewhat defensive. “Because I’ve got sedatives, lock-picks, listening devices and untraceable phones in my purse as we SPEAK.”

“Yeah, but YOU know when to stop, and you do so before things get too chaotic. Or at least you USED to, before you went on this latest revenge rampage. Frankly, I worry you’re headed down the path to Doomsville. And if you end up there, I’LL have to start wondering whether YOU’RE a bad influence.”

“Why do you care so much if I crash and burn?” I ask. “You prefer being stranded in Doomsville all by yourself? Or, rather, with only Dick Casablancas for company?”

“Touche.” She tosses her cigarette out the window in a move that would enrage Smokey the Bear. “And exactly why I need your help. If I can get Cobb’s foot off my neck, maybe I can ditch Dick, and buy a one-way ticket somewhere better.” She points at the streetlight ahead. “Hook a left here. It’s on the right side of the road, at the end of the strip mall--Slick Willie’s. You’ll spot it a mile away, there’s enough neon to light up Vegas.”

I cruise past the place (which despite the excess signage is ramshackle; without Carrie’s entrée, Cobb’s really come down in the world). Circle the block, to check out rear parking. Then turn back towards the coffee shop, and accelerate through a yellow light. “OK describe the interior. It’s one-story, right? Are there any dark corners or offices? Does he do the deals in the main room, the john? The lot?”

She lifts her brows. “Aren’t we going to, like, put on disguises and run some scam inside, while you take secret pictures?”

I lift my brows right back. “Nope. You, the person he’s blackmailing, aren’t going anywhere near him, because Cobb’s not dumb. I, the detective working the case, will stake him out unobserved--possibly with more muscular backup, thus making the situation less risky. You’re going to walk me through the floorplan and his routine, while I drive you back to your car. And once I’ve got an airtight case, I will present you with a Manila folder containing all relevant facts.”

She studies me in silence. Sighs, as she maybe realizes things HAVE changed between us. “Fine, I get it. You’re doing me a favor, it doesn’t have to be fun. The building’s one big room, just a bunch of pool tables and dirty linoleum. There are nasty bathrooms off in the east corner, and a bar along the western wall. Cobb makes his sales in the lot behind the dumpster, because he’s pure class. In between customers, he hustles people at pool. Guy considers himself a shark because he looks so unassuming; it’s a whole big ego thing with him, apparently.”

“Is he?” I ask, shifting gears. “A shark, I mean?”

“Better than me,” Carrie shrugs. It doesn’t affect her, so she doesn’t care. “I’m no expert, but I’ve seen him lose when he’s playing for stakes. He mostly wins, though.”

“He won’t win this time,” I say, with emphasis. “I’ve got a policy against criminals profiting.”

She laughs. “So really, I’m doing YOU a favor.” Digs around in her purse for cigarettes, scowling when she realizes the pack’s mashed. “You get to prove your mental superiority to a guy you can’t stand, AND proclaim your independence from Logan--all while performing heroic deeds for a friend who doesn’t deserve it. There’s no aspect of this scenario where you don’t win.”
I frown, because what the FUCK is going on with her and Other Veronica? From what I can tell, she’s been treated better than she deserved since the very beginning. And still, even AS she’s getting saved, she comes off bitter. Carrie Bishop needs help that goes beyond Narcotics Anonymous. “It’d be pretty dumb of me, tactically, to prefer situations where I lose,” I say, mildly. Pull up in front of Java the Hut, and park with a jerk.

“How would you know?” Carrie swings the door open. Stands, silhouetted, in all her dark-eyed implacable mystery, against the misty night. “You’ve never really lost anything in your life.”

I have, I think, as she walks, insouciant, away. In a thousand different ways, across the slipstream, let alone prior. I’ve lost everything and everyone I’ve ever loved. My life has been DEFINED by loss, in fundamental ways, much like hers has, here.

But I can’t say that, without clueing her in that she’s been spilling Other V’s secrets to the future version she hates. And I wouldn’t, even if I could. Carrie doesn’t want to buy what I’m selling.

My phone rings again, buzzing muffled by fabric, and I lift it out to examine Caller ID. Logan. I stare, not answering, until it stops. He’ll prevent me from carrying out my plan—the REAL one, which prompted me to turn around and bring Carrie back—if I warn him. But I think Other V would agree it’s the best option. And her opinion’s the only one that matters here, right?

Two hours later, after a laughably simple stake out and a trip to One-Hour Photo, I push open the door to Slick Willie’s, and blink against smoky, neon dimness.

It’s a big dark cave, walls painted black, shabby industrial flooring and pool tables worn thin. Loud oldies rock blares, Bob Seeger if I know my Dad music; the mostly working-class, mostly middle-aged crowd ignores me.

Stuart Cobbler, sullen, pimply menace, has a table in the corner all to himself. He’s running balls with creepy, unblinking focus, repeatedly shaking back long greasy hair. He doesn’t watch me approach—he could care less about humanity, unless they’re ripe for manipulation—and actually jerks in response, when I slap a handful of photos on the table.

“How about we play Let’s Make a Deal?” I tap the top one—a clear snap of him accepting cash for pills—with one fingernail. “You tell me everything I want to know, and back off Carrie, and I might be willing to make these prints disappear. Otherwise, they go straight to the police.”

“Wouldn’t that be Twenty Questions?” he asks, snide, looking up from the photos. There’s no light in his eyes; and I really wish, now that it’s too late, I’d called Logan to come flex behind me. “And what makes you think I can’t just make YOU disappear?”

“Well for starters, my dad’s a former sheriff, and my stepdad’s Jake Kane,” I say, because bravado is key. “Beyond that, I’m small but wily, and the deal I’m offering tilts in your favor. Frankly, if you tried anything shady, you’d be an idiot; and I’m informed that, gross as you are in most respects, dumb’s the one negative thing you aren’t.”

“You won’t turn me in,” Cobb scoffs, examining the chalk at the end of his cue. “Not when I can ruin your best friend’s life easy as snapping my fingers. Why are you here, anyway, without your clinically diagnosable asshole boyfriend? What do you even WANT?”

“Aaw, how cute, look who’s dabbling in armchair psychology. Those dark thoughts you can’t stop having got you worried?” I pick up the photos, flip through a few, lift my brows at a particularly
incriminating one. “You and I both know snaps of Carrie snorting coke naked after a night of debauchery won’t do anything but embarrass her. She’s been clean long enough a drug test would come back negative, and all three romp partners are well over eighteen. These pictures I have of YOU, though—especially coupled with your unsurprising prior conviction—mean guaranteed jail time. All I want right now is information, but hey, it’s your choice. If you prefer threatening me to practicing self-preservation, I’m happy to go about my business.”

His murderous expression gets blacker as his phone beeps; he pulls it from his back pocket to check the text. I frown, but am distracted by a tap on my shoulder. Turn to find a large biker in denim vest and forked beard, gesturing at the unused table.

“He done?” the guy asks, pointing at industriously-typing Cobb with the tip of his cue. “Mind if I snag this for a game?”

“Sorry,” I say. “We’re just about to go toe-to-toe.”

“Sweetheart, you don’t want to play this loser,” the guy murmurs, and he sounds paternal rather than pervy. “He hustles people, you’ll lose your paycheck.”

I grin because aww, chivalry’s not dead. “No need to worry about me, I’m tougher than I look. But thanks for the tip.”

He uses the cue to salute and heads back over to his waiting friend, shaking his head.

When I turn back to Cobb, he’s pocketing the phone, gesturing at the table with his free hand. “If you want to talk to me, we have to play. Know anything at all about pool?”

“The colored balls go in the holes, right?” I ask, innocent. “But not the white one?”

He smirks, humorless, and starts racking. “You want to make a side bet? Hundred bucks a game? That’s pocket change to an ‘09’er like you, and I might find the cash incentive motivating.”

“If it loosens your tongue, why not?” I gesture for him to break. “You start. Show me how it’s done.”

He leans down, lines up the shot. Breaks too hard, scattering balls aggressively. “So what is it exactly you’re all worked up to find out?”

“Well, I’m already aware you get your product from the Fitzpatricks,” I say conversationally, selecting a cue from the rack on the wall and examining it for warping. “And I know who they’ve teamed up with, to ACQUIRE that product. What I DON’T know is, how are the Fitzpatricks organized enough these days to pull ANYONE’S strings? Because I’ve spent the better part of two years putting those assholes in jail; yet they spring back up like mushrooms every time it rains. Frankly, I’m annoyed.”

Cobb misses sinking the six by a hair, gestures ungraciously for me to go. I intentionally flub, because I want him off-guard, and his smirk struggles not to grow. “They’ve ALWAYS been organized,” he says. “Their group’s just smaller than normal. Maybe you didn’t notice, because maybe you got confused about who used to be in charge. You’re a literal thinker, Veronica, with some surprisingly traditional views.”

He makes a bank shot, presumably to demonstrate how he’s NOT, and I say, “So it’s the priest running the show?”

This elicits a full-on sneer. “Why would a PRIEST pay me to keep Logan Echolls off that boat?
Father Fitzpatrick’s probably on his knees as we SPEAK, saying novenas for your soul.”

“So Carrie didn’t write the letter, after talking to Molly Fitzpatrick? Then ask Corny to deliver it?” I watch him put his rudimentary geometry skills to use, and mourn the state of public education.

“Sure, but who brought Molly Fitzpatrick to the show to hang OUT with Carrie? Who convinced Carrie that letter was NECESSARY? You’re hopelessly outclassed if you don’t dig deeper, Veronica. I’ve been pulling Carrie’s strings a LOT longer than she realizes.”

“Nonsense is still nonsense, no matter HOW deep you dig,” I say, exasperated, because now he’s just trying to gaslight me. “If the Fitzpatricks wanted to protect Logan from death on the Nautilus, why’d they corner him with machine guns? The folks in masks were VERY determined to make sure he got sh…”

I pause, because I realize….maybe they WEREN’T aiming at Logan? What if he was just, with his usual awful luck, standing next to the person they DID want to kill? Because that person—DICK—had an insurance policy attached; which paid out, in case of his unexpected death, to known Fitzpatrick stooge…

“Kendall CASABLANCAS?” I demand, through a red film of rage. “KENDALL wanted Logan off the boat? KENDALL’S running the Fitzpatrick gang? She won’t even go to the trouble of fetching magazines when they’re out of reach of her lawn chair! She makes the MAID bring them over!”

“Tsk,” he says, enjoying my discomfort. “So SEXIST! She’s ALWAYS been the idea person. Like Henry Kissinger with fake boobs—but she took the reins for real, after your FBI stunt Junior Year. She was into the idea of Echolls as a boy toy, made some crack once about how he’s not overburdened with morals; but she wasn’t happy when he got her banned from that health club. My guess is, she wanted him to suffer, after all his friends bit it at the yacht party. Sounds like her style.”

I grip the cue so hard my knuckles go white. Kendall tried to keep Logan off the boat because she knew what was about to go down. Kendall Casablancas, and her absent morality, and her intensely annoying EVERYING…SHE was the female boat shooter!

“Sorokin and Kendall are PARTNERS,” I realize. That rip-off she staged at the Toco Loco….she must have been working WITH Gory. He needed funds to start up his new-and-improved, American-born crime family, and she was scheming for a fresh source of income.

“Well yeah,” he says, “If by ‘partners’ you mean ‘they’re screwing’. That blonde jerkwad Russian dude has drug connections, and she provides the men on the street. They’re the current gangland power couple.”

Shit, I think, and then hot on the heels of that, Logan was wrong; THIS explains her drive-obtaining access to Jake. But all I say, as Cobb misses an easy bank shot on the ten is, “WOW, this conversation has been illuminating. I’d say you’ve earned that packet of photos.”

I gesture at the pictures, sitting on the table’s rim, and sink the last three balls he REALLY should have managed, if he’s scamming people weekly in a bar full of bikers. “Tell you what, I won’t even collect that hundred dollars. Some phrase involving candy and babies springs to mind.”

“Wow, CHARITABLE,” he says, looking pointedly over my shoulder. His loathsome smirk returns. “Too bad all your newfound clarity came at a price. Enjoy jail, Mars. I’m not sure what they’ll charge you with, but the trial should be entertaining.”
I turn to see two deputies push past the door, scouting the room for, apparently, me. Remember the text Cobb sent, while I was talking to that biker. Spin to make a run for it—but Cobb grabs my arm, hard enough to bruise.

“Uh-uh-uh,” he chides. “You broke the unspoken Neptune rule—secrets stay buried—and now you need to pay. Didn’t I warn you, back at the beginning of this conversation, that I could make you disappear?”

I cast around for help, notice jean-vest and his burly buddy watching with concern, and summon fake tears that would make Logan proud. “Oh my God, stop it! You’re HURTING me! I’m sorry I won, okay?”

Jean-vest flings down his cue and barrels over, grabbing Cobb by the shirt and shoving him away from me. “Get on home, sweetheart,” he tells me, hand curling into a fist. “Hustling pool is one thing, but we don’t truck, here, with mistreating ladies.”

“Cops by the door,” I hiss, as the deputies come running. Jean-vest laughs, winks, and punches Cobb in the face. His friend throws a handful of balls on the floor, in the deputies’ path, and a free-for-all ensues, as patrons take the opportunity to vent their frustrations with life.

I crab-crawl for the emergency exit, ducking under a horizontally-swung pool cue; skirt two Eminem wanna-be’s throwing balls at peoples’ faces. Shove it open, thanking God when it doesn’t trigger an alarm, and scurry into the lot.

Where Vinnie Van Lowe’s waiting, arms crossed, leaning in full uniform against the hood of his cruiser. When he sees me he shakes his head, and reaches for cuffs.

“Why are you ALWAYS in the alley behind unsavory businesses, every time I finish work?” I demand, as he saunters over. Don’t even try to escape, because there’s one thing I’m sure of, with Vinnie— he’s willing to make a deal.

“Must be…whaddayacallit…synchronicity.” He opens the back door, puts a hand on my head to shield it as I duck in. “Great minds such as ours, they work on parallel planes, VMars. No way were those idiots gonna catch you, so I covered the escape route.”

He slams the door, climbs in front, and I say, “You have to know you can’t throw trumped-up charges at me and expect them to stick. My stepfather owns the person who currently owns you.”

“Who said I was charging you?” He guns the engine. Glances back, making the duck-face of pure exasperation. “I have to put the cuffs on and take you down to the station, so this looks good. But we both know your arrest report’s gonna disappear faster than DB Cooper. What the hell were you thinking, coming at that particular consortium directly, VMars? You’ve been extra spunky lately, but this takes the cake. I had Fitzpatricks SPECIFICALLY calling me to stop you from sticking your nose in, AGAIN; and I think to myself, what happened to that deal between me and Veronica? Weren’t we supposed to warn each other, when shit having to do with the Sorokin jerkoff goes down?”

“When you say ‘Fitzpatricks’ called you,” I counter, trying to cross my arms and belatedly remembering the cuffs, “do you mean KENDALL? SHE’S in charge of the gang, Vinnie? And you didn’t think this was important to TELL me?”

“You seem confused about the nature of our arrangement.” He turns on his siren so he can run a red light. “I agreed to keep you posted about what that loose-cannon freak-show does, because he’s bad for both our brands. I did NOT agree to share with you all the details of my personal friendships.
That in no way, I might add, affect the integrity with which I perform my job.”

“Riiight.” I ooch away from an upholstery tear that’s jabbing my thigh. “You can’t affect something nonexistent. Now, I have concerns about the too little, too late nature of this deal. You must have known about their alliance from the start--you were guarding Kendall’s escape route, the day they ripped off the Russian mob. That must have been for seed money, right? To buy the drug shipment I foiled on the Nautilus? Which, by the way, you subsequently covered up, to prevent Gory’s prosecution.”

“As a personal favor to your stepfather,” Vinnie puts in, tailgating a Honda until it pulls over. “I wouldn’t go throwing accusations around, Ms. Glass House. Besides, it’s not like I knew back THEN he was crazy. A lot of people very beneficial to my wallet vouched for him. It wasn’t until he ripped off his family AGAIN, and got CAUGHT, that the association turned dangerous. Some guy whose own UNCLE is trying to off him is not the quarterback you want on your team. And if I were you, I’d try convincing my stepfather of that a little harder.”

“When you say things turned dangerous, do you mean for Kendall, too? No wait, of COURSE you do, Jake’s only protecting Gory, not her. No WONDER she stole that drive for leverage!”

“I have no clue what you mean by ‘drive’, and I’m not asking.” Vinnie turns past the Seventh Veil, flashing his lights in a friendly fashion at the strippers smoking on the curb. “I have enough problems without borrowing more of yours.”

“Tell me more about Gory’s second theft,” I say, relaxing against the seat. “In the spirit of mutual back-scratching. Details are always helpful.”

“I don’t know much,” he says, with a shrug. “Russian mob owns some software company called the Big Bear, used spyware to collect data on enemies. Some nickel-and-dimer in that organization came to Gory’s attention when he copied it, used it to run some fake-IT-specialist con. So THIS genius decides he’s got a death wish, and rips off the original. I have no clue why he wanted it so bad. But he must’ve sold it to SOMEONE, because the Russkies were bitching he violated their exclusive arrangement. Lately everyone who TALKS to that asshole ends up dodging murder attempts.”

“Good thing you and I have a deal, then,” I say. “If he goes off the deep end and comes after me, I’m confident you’ll let me know.”

“Good thing,” Vinnie agrees, sardonic, and pulls into the station lot. “I gotta book you now, so it looks like I’m doing what they want. I’d advise against calling the boyfriend to pick you up. Every time he visits the jail, paparazzi swarm.”

“My dad will come,” I tell him, resigned. “I don’t feel like fighting with Logan, or explaining this to him, anyway.”

“Probably wise.” Vinnie shuts off the car. “When you really get going, V Mars, your behavior defies explanation.”

XXXXX

I’m slumped on the bunk in Cell B, staring at a crack in the ceiling, when a shadow falls across me. I turn my head to look, and there’s dad, resting his forehead on his folded arms.

“You know, I agreed to let your mother and Jake have custody in an attempt to SPARE you experiences like this,” he says, mildly.
“Once a cop’s daughter, always a cop’s daughter,” I say, with a smile. “I find exposing the guilty irresistible.”

“Clearly.” He shows me the key ring curled in his fist, uses it to unlock the door. “Come on, Elliot Ness, I made a contribution to the Neptune Sheriff’s Softball Fund. You’re free to go.”

I follow him out to the car, saluting Inga as I walk past her desk; she sticks a folder under one arm to wave. Dad opens the door to his Corolla, courtly, and drives out of the lot before saying, “You know, Logan called me this evening, right before Vinnie did. Said you’ve been avoiding him for hours—he’s worried.”

I grimace. “Sorry,” I say. “I had something to do, and I couldn’t deal with lectures, during. I’ll talk to him when I get home.”

“Veronica.” Dad adopts his you-know-I-hate-to-interfere-BUT tone, and I brace myself. “Do I have to point out that you’re engaged now? Logan’s ALLOWED to worry, when you do something dangerous. If you don’t want to cope with that level of commitment, maybe you didn’t make the right choice.”

OK obviously Dad doesn’t know I’m pregnant, if he’s still trying leave-the-boy-now speeches. Which is good, because that’s one more conversation I won’t relish. “We fought, and have yet to make up. And HE was unforthcoming first, so don’t try to pin this on me.”

Dad shakes his head. “Honey, this is why I was against you getting serious so young. I relented because you two were adamant you loved each other; but I’m not crazy about the way your dynamic is playing out. Logan’s a gregarious kid…yet he’s become really isolated since you went to New York. The only friend he seems to have, these days, is Dick, and he works out an AWFUL lot. Plus you’ve become so obsessed with this…detective agency, I don’t see how you have time for school. Even if I’m not footing the bill, that bothers me, because your future’s on the line. I want you to be successful Veronica, and secure. Can you just tell me…are you two happy?”

I think about Logan in commando black, saying ‘Who else should I hang with?’ and realize Dad’s right. Wallace has withdrawn because our life is too dangerous, Victor’s a fake. Dick is physically present but emotionally absent, and Lilly isn’t returning calls. Even Carrie’s ‘out’, and Logan and Other V seem on shaky ground. I’m not surprised he joined the Castle, and started taking SEAL lessons from Danny. He doesn’t have anywhere else to TURN.

“I’ve been so worried about Gory Sorokin attacking us,” I tell Dad, because honestly? I need to confide in someone I trust. “And I just found out he and Kendall Casablancas are partners, and his family is trying to kill them both. So if you’re helping her, as I suspect you are, or will be? Try extra-hard not to run afoul of the Russian mob. Their grudges involve dismemberment and Hefty bags.”

“Honey, you know if I WAS in touch with Kendall, I wouldn’t mention it,” he says, frowning as he clocks my non-answer. “An author never reveals his sources. But I appreciate that you keep passing information regarding her to me. For example, the phone message you sent out of the blue the other day, then never mentioned again.”

“Well that’s a frustrating stance,” I complain, instead of explaining. “When I just shared my latest scoop with YOU. You know I COULD figure out what you’re up to, if I gave it the old college try.”

“I’m sure you’d do your best,” he counters. “But your old man’s learned a few tricks you haven’t. And he’ll do what’s necessary to protect you. Because he loves you, quite a bit.”

“I love you too, Dad,” I say. “Even though you’re creepily speaking of yourself in the third
person. And since BECAUSE you love me, you’re willing to do anything I ask…I need a favor.”

“And here I thought you called me from jail so we could bond.” Dad pulls up to a stop sign, surveys me wearily. “Sometimes I miss those uncomplicated high school trips to the zoo.”

“Would you be willing to befriend Logan?” I ask. “Like I know you’re nice to him already, but would you seek him out more? Make him feel like he’s got someone rational he can ask for advice, so he’s less lonely? He likes you. And he’s so desperate for a father figure, he doesn’t always make…smart choices. Or I should say, he lets ME convince him to make dumb ones. He needs an ally with a level head, to help him figure out his best path.”

“Of course I can,” Dad says, compassion and worry crowding together in his eyes. “You know if you need me, I’m always going to help.”

“I know,” I say. “It’s one of the critical bulwarks of my life.”

I put my head on his shoulder, watch the storefronts rush past, and then remember. “Hey, can you take me to my car, instead of home? It’s parked in the donut shop lot, a few doors down from Slick Willie’s. I’ve got my camera case and some duplicate snaps for a client inside. And it would really cramp my style, vis-à-vis ridding girls of blackmailers, if those pictures in particular got stolen.”

“I don’t even want to hear the details,” Dad says, but obediently hooks a U-turn. “I still have a little hair left.”

“That’s the attitude I like to see in a guy,” I tell him, affectionate. “Accommodating.”

He snorts, as if he strongly disagrees. Then the slipstream swoops in, and sweeps me away.
THREAD FORTY FIVE

I’m in a sterile grey office of the type bureaucrats get, once they make just good enough to earn a closed door. It’s got one tiny window covered with blinds, and is packed wall-to-wall with file cabinets and a metal desk. Behind said desk, in an unobtrusive beige pantsuit, sits my FBI nemesis Agent Morris, dark hair knotted haphazardly at the base of her skull. To my left slouches Logan, legs sprawled like he’s playing Super Smash Bros on his couch, arms folded skeptically. To my right sits my frosty, expensive lawyer; shit, I can’t remember his name, despite constantly needing his services. He’s got a briefcase tucked neatly under his chair, and he's posed like an aristocrat, legs crossed at the knee, hands serenely folded. Only his glasses have changed…they’re square.

“So let me get this straight,” Morris drawls, leaning back with steepled fingers in a show of sangfroid. “You’re going to give me one billionaire, one multimillionaire, the kidnapper I’ve been chasing for a year, and every drug dealer of note in Neptune on a silver platter? And all you want in return is immunity for a crime you don’t admit committing, in which I can’t prove you were involved? Plus…a job?”

Oh thank God, I think, relaxing. Or maybe, thank slipstream. At least HERE I get to bring the house of cards down on Jake Kane’s SKULL.

“I don’t actually want you to bribe me with a job,” I say, since no way did Frosty let Veronica ask. “Because, unethical. But it would be great if I could work the internship I’ve earned, fair and square, without dreading your inevitable harassment.”

“This would be the internship for which you turned up a week late, because you ran off to Hawaii with him?” She gestures with a jerk of her head at Logan, who’s now twirling a coin across his knuckles. He shrugs and winks, as if to say, ‘Who could blame her?’ and Morris ALMOST cracks a smile. “So why the change of heart? Last time we crossed paths, you were much less cooperative.”

“When Duncan ran, I was reluctant to help catch him, because I knew the Mannings would take the baby. And the Mannings are EVIL,” I say. “But there’s easily obtainable proof of that evil now, which should put them away for good…they’ll never get custody. Celeste Kane’s had a change of heart, and is willing to raise the baby; and she’s admitted to herself that Duncan needs psychiatric care. Also I’ve got to neutralize Jake Kane, ASAP, because he’s shielding the person who’s trying to kill Logan.”

Morris looks at Logan again. He smirks and says to me, “They all should have known better than to piss you off, honeybuns.”

I shrug, smiling back. “I warn people. I make a point of it. But sometimes, a few just don’t LISTEN.”

Morris’s mouth twitches, and she shifts her lean to a different angle. “I’ve done some legwork since you contacted us to set up this meeting—sorry it took so long, by the way, I was out of the country. Your supervisors in the internship program are impressed, Miss Mars, which I admit surprises me…I had you pegged as a lone wolf. And my boss seemed amenable to your requests. If the information you’ve got for us pans out, I think we can cut a deal.”

“Excellent,” Frosty says, without inflection, reaching down for his briefcase without significantly changing position. “We’ll need an agreement of immunity, in writing, before dissemination of
physical proof. I’ve taken the liberty of drawing up…”

Morris removes a folder from the desk drawer and tosses it onto the surface. “We have lawyers too, Mr. Cunningham. Read this, let me know if it passes muster. If so, I’m prepared to proceed.”

He takes the file and studies it, carefully, tilting his glasses down. Looks up at us, nods infinitesimally.

I turn towards Logan, who nods too. Say, “If it’s good enough for Mr. Cunningham, it’s good enough for me.” Take the proffered pen, and sign on the dotted line.

When I hand the folder back, Agent Morris smiles, not the vengeful smile I’ve feared, but an anticipatory one. “All right, Mars, you got your guarantee,” she says, with a magnanimous gesture. “Time to pay up. You have the floor.”

She removes a tape recorder from her desk, lifts interrogative brows as she switches it on. I grin. Because now I get to fix things properly for Other Veronica, in far-reaching ways I’ve never dared.

“Well,” I say, crossing my hands on the desk demurely, a gesture that makes Logan grin, “It all started, as so many humble tales do, when I went searching for answers about mysterious, toxicity-related drug deaths…and stumbled across a huge conspiracy…”

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“Jesus, I can’t BELIEVE how much bad shit was going on, right under my nose.” Logan skips down the front steps at Quantico, light-hearted demeanor at odds with the anemic grey day. “I wish I COULD travel back in time…I’d kick my own ass, for standing by Jake. I can’t BELIEVE he shielded that asshole who KNIFED me, after all I did to show loyalty.”

“I’m just glad it’s over.” I fish out and don sunglasses as I follow. “This has been a stressful couple of months, and worrying you’d get assassinated wasn’t helping.”

“You know, I actually feel…disappointed.” He glances sideways at me with a self-deprecating smirk. Grabs my hand and grips it, looks both ways before crossing. “All it took to wipe the floor with Sorokin, the Fitzpatricks, and whoever’s scamming Hearst was four hours of you testifying. I was hoping I’d at least get to beat someone up, after cutting my vacation short.”

“Enh, I guarantee we’ll get in trouble again before too much longer,” I say. “An ocean of it stretches before us, as long as fire,” I point at myself, “and gasoline,” I point at him, “interact. But on the plus side, I’ve earned enough FBI cred to salvage my law-enforcement future. Should I be so inclined.”

“ARE you?” he asks, draping an arm around me. “Inclined? Morris reminds me of you, a little, the way she likes to cat and mouse. But she’s FAR more laid back.”

“Says the guy who consistently underestimates the fucked-upedness of hot women.” I shove him sideways with my shoulder, and he laughs. “I’m not sure what my plans are, Logan, to be honest. I LIKE the detective business. Not so many rules, more power to change things. Plus I enjoy being within arm’s reach of you, and you live in Neptune.”

“And you’re worried an FBI career might interfere with our…thing?” he asks. “Despite knowing I’m loaded, and have tons of frequent flyer miles?”

“Well if it eases your mind,” he says, smile going smug, “I wouldn’t mind living here for a while, someday down the road. Virginia’s COOL. I drove down to Norfolk yesterday, while you profiled late into the evening, visited the Naval History Museum. They had a whole exhibit about FIGHTER PILOTS, like my grandfather, you remember? I just kept thinking, how awesome would THAT be, as a career? Supersonic speeds, stealth technology…millions of dollars’ worth of precision equipment, protected from destruction by my hand-eye coordination.” He makes a superman-flying hand gesture, and I roll my eyes.

“Risking your LIFE,” I add, with markedly less enthusiasm. “You have watched WAY too much Top Gun.”

“Well, my childhood dream of being a pro surfer won’t happen, since I spent my formative years drinking and fighting,” he says, cheerfulness undeterred. “But flying JETS—yeah, that’s the most extreme sport I can think of, next to dating you.”

I sigh, because he’s always bringing up variations on this theme, in every reality, under all sets of circumstances. Which makes me think I’ll never stop the Navy-job-coveting, no matter what schemes I try. It may be one of those essential Logan traits, like catnip-irresistibility to women, I’ll need to loathe but accept, if I want us to date.

That doesn’t mean I have to encourage him, though. I mean, there’s accepting fate, and then there’s being an IDIOT.

“You know what I want to visit?” I ask, deftly changing the subject. “But haven’t had a chance, what with all the uproar? Roanoake.”

“Of course,” he says, dryly, leading me into a parking garage and pressing the elevator button. “Veronica Mars plans to solve the unsolvable mystery. Fine, your wish. It’s back to the salt mines for you tomorrow anyway. Might as well enjoy the reprieve.”

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We drag ourselves back to his luxury hotel, once we’re day-tripped out, and I flop, exhausted onto the couch. Logan channel-surfs to Apocalypse Now, tosses the remote on the coffee table, and heads off into the kitchen. In a few minutes he settles beside me, bottle of Jack and Oreos in hand.

He offers me the booze, but I take the cookies. I had a dizzy spell in this reality, last time I was here; and that’s only happened, previously, courtesy of Peanut.

“I still think the settlers went to live with the neighboring tribe,” I say, and he groans and puts a pillow over his face. I flick his arm, because this is INTERESTING, and his laughter’s smothered by fabric. “They MUST have! There’s a preponderance of tribe members with blond hair and blue eyes, and….”

“No more, Veronica.” He makes a time-out gesture with both hands. “I concede. You are right, and I am wrong, and really, was there ever any doubt?”

“Now that’s the attitude I like to see.” I bite into a cookie with relish. “YES, Veronica. You’re RIGHT, Veronica. I’ll tell you anything. If I’d known I could turn you into putty by manipulating icy Feds, I would have put my plan in motion sooner.”

“Yeah, so you SAY,” he mutters, tossing the pillow aside. “If I really DID docilely follow rules, you’d rapidly grow bored.”

“Slander.” I quip, setting the cookies down, because I’ve heard this argument. “I can count on
you to NEVER be boring.”

Logan smiles, but it’s the calculating smile, which means I’m in trouble. “You want me to tell you anything you ask? Even though doing so caused our last, most painful breakup?” He plunks the bottle on the table between us. “Fine, let’s see you walk your talk. Truth or dare, I’ll be an open book. But I expect… I INSIST… on you doing the same. And if you think I’ll go easy, the way I did last time you drew blood, think again.”

“I’m too tired to drink,” I say, waving the bottle away. “But deal. I’ll even let you start, because that’s the kind of open-hearted, nothing-to-hide girl I am. Truth.”

“Fine.” He settles back against the elbow rest, arms crossed. “Why’d you insist on going to Hawaii with me? Shades of Duncan, maybe? Did Piz dump you?”

“Nope,” I say, because Piz’s weird persistence is universal. “He turned shady, but that’s beside the point. Mostly I just got tired of pretending to be someone I’m not. I’d like to own the fact that I’m an asshole, honestly, and date the guy I WANT. And I decided we’re doomed if I don’t acknowledge you’re him, and stop running.”

“Harsh,” he says. Smirks. “But fair. Truth, in the faint hope it may lead to the ‘making things go boom’ part.”

“What did Weevil do?” I ask. “The specific misdeed you hid? I’ve been SO curious since you mentioned it the other day.”

He laughs. “Why? Because him ordering his gang to beat me to death, shoot at my car, and burn my house to the ground weren’t reason enough to shun him?” Logan takes a drink, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “This won’t change your mind either, because Weevil’s too useful. But for what it’s worth; he tied me up in a warehouse, and had his boys play Russian Roulette with my dick. After which they dumped me on the side of the highway, a hundred miles out of town. A bunch of them also cornered us on the beach once, got me pretty good with a knife. I didn’t need as many stitches then as I did this time, but they came close to nicking my kidney.”

I sigh, because it all tracks. Reality to reality, the same things happen, over and over in twining streams. The PCH’ers strike, go too far, Logan suffers. In this case, though, it sounds like WEEVIL crossed a line—and that’s food for thought, once there’s time to reflect. “Truth.”

“Turnabout, fair play, all that jazz.” Logan pins me with his most unflinching gaze, and I smell payback. “What did Dick do to YOU?”

I take a deep breath, stalling—but I promised, so I say the words. “Tossed me unconscious on a bed at Shelly Pomroy’s, and taunted Beav into proving his manhood.” I look down at my hands. “I doubt he thought Beaver could get it up, which doesn’t mean we’re okay.”

Logan flinches, and I say, “Yeah. If he hadn’t made that one particular choice, I could forgive the rest—the accidental roofie, the kissing and feeding of shots. You did basically the same things, and I forgave YOU. But they don’t make Hallmark cards reading, ‘Sorry I egged on your rapist.’ I’m not letting that slide.”

He nods, and I have the feeling this conversation will re-shape lives, despite his surface calm. “Neither will I,” he says, low. “Dick and I are going to have words. Your turn.”

“Why did you stop hiding this year?” I ask, touching the scarred-over cigar burn on his forearm gently. “Not just your back—your whole body, even your actual personality? No more long sleeves
and baggy clothes. No more frosted tips, or bitchy put-downs, or calculated posing, or obnoxious orange. What made you unashamed to be…truly seen?"

Logan lifts his brows. Whistles. “Wow, TWO whole questions down, and neither one’s about my sex life or personal failings?” He shakes his head. “You really HAVE changed. OK, here’s the truth—because this year, for the first time, I finally feel safe. I was hiding my muscles from Aaron, so he wouldn’t see me as a threat. And I was hiding damage, physical PLUS emotional, from everybody else, so they wouldn’t cop to what Aaron was doing, or decide I was weak. My body was a map of secrets...and back then, it was safer to lie. Now, though…Aaron’s dead, and I’m not a minor anymore. I don’t HAVE to pretend. So I won’t. I figure that’s what Larry King bought me, at base level. No further need to fake it.”

“Good,” I say. “Because although I enjoy the excessive leaning, I like real-you best. Your turn.”

“Is there anything I can do?” he asks, slightly plaintive but direct, and I can tell he’s serious because he sits up straight. “To make you trust me? So you’ll quit squirreling me away in your box of secrets, and let me be part of your life? Answer my calls, permit conversation with your dad? Or are we always going to be like this…private intimacy, public estrangement? Because that’s not what I want in a relationship. I’m not interested if you’re ashamed.”

“I was trying to PROTECT you from Dad, Logan,” I say, because this at least I need him to understand. “He doesn’t want me to make the same romantic mistakes he did, and sometimes he gets…judgy.”

“Your dad made MISTAKES?” Logan asks, faux-shocked. “When? Turns out he was even right about JAKE.”

“He got married young,” I say, gently. Settle my feet across his lap, so he knows this isn’t a confrontation. “To a woman who didn’t love him. She gave us a lot of grief before vanishing into the night with my college fund; and his resentment towards her lover screwed up his career. The thing is…I think he worries you’re like mom. That if I stick with you, I’ll end up one of those sad cautionary tales he saw so often as sheriff. But once he knows you—really KNOWS you—I think he’ll realize you’re more like HIM. And he’ll relax, as much as he can, considering he’s a dad who loves his daughter.”

“That’s all very blithe and nice,” Logan says, implacable. “Probably also accurate. But it’s NOT an answer to my question.”

Damn it, he noticed. “You’re right,” I say, with a sigh of resignation. “And I promised. It’s just...hard. I don’t DO intimacy very well.”

I stare at his hand, long-fingered with bitten nails, curled loosely around my knee. Work up my courage. “When you get mad at me,” I say finally, meeting his eyes, “you lash out. You do things you KNOW I won’t like. I used to think that was on purpose, to hurt me—precisely calibrated revenge. I realize now you do it to hurt YOURSELF...sabotage your shot at happiness, by pushing me away.”

I make a face. “It HURTS, though. It hurts a LOT, and accepting mistreatment over and over…it’s the definition of insanity. So in a way, I have to make the same choice, vis a vis you, as I do with Dick. If you hadn’t repeatedly wounded me, I’d find trusting you EASY. But since you did…I’m reluctant to believe you never will again.”

“You’re talking about Madison now,” he says, impressively taking the bull by the horns. Switches the TV off, to better focus. “You want to actually DISCUSS that, instead of just storming
out, strewing ultimatums behind you? Because I have no clue why you even hate her so much. I’m positive she wasn’t involved in what…happened to you, the way Dick and I were. She threw a tantrum and left Shelly’s party before I did.”

“I DON’T hate her anymore,” I say, and it’s weird to realize that’s true. “It used to be easier to blame her, for handing me a roofied drink, than it was to blame Dick who doctored it--I had to deal with him EVERY DAY. But Madison’s just bitchy, not evil. No, the part about your…liaison…whatever…that upsets me, is you chose the target you knew would sting most. You wanted to make someone pay.”

“But that’s just IT, Veronica,” he says, and he sounds almost calm--miserable, but resigned. His face is still and sad, like a painting of a saint. “I had no intention of wounding ANYBODY, or at least I don’t THINK I did. I just planned to ski, get fucked up, and play cards with my friends, in between their family Christmases. I had no clue she was even THERE.”

“You don’t THINK you did?” I ask. “Like maybe the urge was subliminal?”

“No, it’s not that.” He sighs. “It’s just I don’t…remember much.” He gazes down at the bottle in his hand. Sets it the table.

“Come again?” I ask, frowning.

“Of that night. I was wasted, Veronica. It was Christmas Eve.” He pulls one foot up on the couch, wraps his arms around his leg, rests his chin on his knee. “I remember toasting her in the bar, saying something shitty like ‘Oh look, here’s another person ruined by Neptune!’ I remember lying in a bed staring at a ceiling fan, and just brief…flashes of sex. Then I woke up the next morning and puked, found my clothes, and left. Like I left ASPEN, I went home. So now you know the whole sordid tale of my scandalous betrayal. It’s some elaborate Medici-level shit, huh?” He huffs an unamused laugh.

I close my eyes, tilt my head back over the arm of the couch. Something’s occurred to me, and I don’t enjoy the way it makes me feel.

“That’s what happened to me,” I say eventually, keeping my eyes closed so I won’t have to look at him. “At Shelly’s party. Only I don’t remember ANYTHING between when I lay down on the lounge chair, and when I woke up with my underwear on the floor. It’s just…all black.”

“Oh God,” he says, horrified. “NO, Veronica. Don’t give me a pass like that. I would have slept with SOMEONE sober, although…likely a DIFFERENT someone. I’m not asking you to view me as a victim.”

“So what?” I demand. “I would have slept with Duncan sober, back in the day. I was still kind of in love with him. It doesn’t make what happened while I was unconscious RIGHT. ESPECIALLY since he thought I was his sister at the time.”

We stare at each other while the AC whirs; I have seldom seen Logan look so vulnerable. He swallows, visibly, and says, “So does that mean…you forgive me?”

“For Madison?” I ask, startled. Because does he seriously think I WOULDN’T, after this explanation? “YEAH. I mean I hate HER again now…”

“No, don’t.” He makes a negating hand gesture. “She was drinking too. It wasn’t some evil Beaver-esque plot to break my spirit. Just two lonely, trashed people on Christmas, fumbling in a hotel bed.”
“OK,” I say. “Well, I’m still sorry it happened. And I’m sorry I dumped you, and basically called you a…slut, after, because that was…pretty much exactly what everybody did to me…."

He starts to cry. Turns away so I won’t see, crosses determinedly to the window, but I know. “That’s the REAL problem, isn’t it?” he says, after a while. “There’s no way I can make up for Sophomore Year, even though I love you. It’s always going to be a badly-healed wound, and you’re not the type who forgets.”

I can’t say anything because he’s right. And of course he notices--Logan notices everything.

“See? Your silence is proof. And honestly, Veronica, I don’t blame you. I mean, I’ve hoped you would forgive me; I’ve always hoped that, because I love you so much. But it was never a foregone conclusion. I mean, you got RAPED. I ostracized and bullied you to the point that those assholes thought they could do anything. And I didn’t see that trend happening, and I don’t even have a decent excuse. I was just focused on me, and you, and Duncan, and otherwise I didn’t care. But I SHOULD have seen. I should have stopped them. I COULD have, with a few words. If I were you, I don’t know that I’d forgive me, either.” He smirks, but at himself. “You may have noticed, I tend to hold a grudge.”

“Luckily, I don’t at all,” I say, and he laughs.

“I guess what I’m trying to express is, I don’t push because I don’t blame you. I deserve whatever revenge you exact. It’s part of the punishment, you know? It’s FITTING that I love you, and you kick me while I’m down. Just like I kicked you.”

“I’d say I don’t want that,” I tell him, softly. “But we both know how much I enjoy an eye for an eye.”

“Veronica,” he says, turning to pin me with a direct, unflinching look. “Never let it be said I can’t take the hits.”

I stare at him, and he stares at me, as the dark outside the window grows. The sky fades to crimson, then slowly to indigo, while we gaze in silence into each other’s eyes.

“My brain forgives you,” I tell him, finally, voice thin. “My brain has parsed the evidence, and found more pros than cons. My heart has….always loved you, and my body’s always wanted you. It’s just my subconscious, Logan. Whispering in the dark. He’s done it before, he’ll do it again. Abusers lull you, then escalate. Next time it will be worse. This thing between you, it’s just sex. It’s puppy love, you’ll outgrow it. Have some self-respect. Nobody thinks you belong together. He’ll cheat. He can’t be trusted. You know?”

“I do,” he says, crossing his arms. “Everyone I’ve EVER loved has betrayed me. I know EXACTLY how that feels.”

“You turned on me because you thought I would never, and then I proved you wrong,” I murmur.

“Yeah,” he agrees, gently. “You narcing about Yolanda cost me basically everything.”

“I struck the first blow,” I say. “Right to the balls. I started an avalanche, and at the end of it, Lilly was dead.”

“I struck the hardest one,” he counters, a note of amusement creeping in. “I tend to overreact.”

“Are you sure?” I ask. “I turned you in to the COPS. Because of me, you got beaten within an
inch of your life and framed for murder. I dated your best friend and rubbed it in your face.”

“Lilly slept with my abusive father,” he counters, and yeah, the smile’s growing pronounced. “And she’d seen my scars, up close. You can’t top that, Veronica, when you were only ever after justice. Don’t try.”

“I’m in love with you,” I say, and there it is—the trump card. “Deeply, totally and painfully. I don’t like having ugly unfinished business between us.”

“No,” he agrees, lifting one hand to trail a finger along the window frame. “I regret it all now. But doesn’t the bad guy, always? When he has to suffer for his crimes?”

“I regret it, too,” I say, aching to close the distance. “I wish we could start again.”

He ponders for a minute, then crosses the space between us, holding out a hand. “Logan Echolls,” he says, and when I put my palm against his, he shakes. “I’m funny, rich and basically irresistible, but I’m also a damaged prick. Don’t trust me, no matter how adorable I seem. It will only end in grief.”

“Veronica Mars,” I reply, smiling at this. “I’m the smartest person you’ll ever meet, and I look like a perky prom queen. But I’m vengeful and jealous, and fascinated by dark things—plus, I don’t know when to quit, once I get mad. And if I decide someone is mine….I find it almost impossible to let go.”

He laughs. “I’m glad I came to Virginia,” he says, sinking down on the couch beside me. “It’s good to talk these things through. And it’s nice to know you love me, even if you can’t forgive.”

“Logan,” I tell him, shifting to put my head on his shoulder. “Between us? Love and lust have NEVER been the problem.”

“No,” he agrees, draping an arm around me. “We’ve always had more than we could handle of both.”

He draws me in against his chest, stroking my hair. I press my lips to his sternum, nose pushing against soft cotton; breathe his scent, salt and brine, cool water and hot musk. I admit to myself, with a quiet sense of inevitability, that I’m never going to leave him. Even here, where it hurts worst, he belongs to me.

We sit that way in silence for a long time, because really, there’s nothing more to say. After a while he drifts off, but I can’t stop thinking.

I’ve managed to rework most of my trauma, in the slipstream. My rape, Lilly dying, Mom leaving, Logan’s betrayal. But I was spectacularly unsuccessful at erasing trauma INSIDE me, which has slowly poisoned life for Other Veronica. I still suffer from myriad, poorly-healed psychic wounds. I’m untrusting, and unwilling to let go of resentment--because I’m afraid, SO afraid, of what will befall me next, should I choose to let down my guard.

And Improved Past Logan, who loves me in such an untainted way…he’s done everything right, yet still we struggle. Because he can’t understand my issues viscerally, like MY Logan can. Neither Hearst nor Ideal Logan ever got why I kept them at arm’s length, on more than an academic level. Even fucked up Boat Logan’s a swell guy beneath his drunken angst…and essentially blameless for his shitty life.

MY Logan knows he’s caused wounds that still sting, though. He knows his wrongs can’t be undone. My Logan UNDERSTANDS me, and my flaws, and my scars. He knows how low I’ll go,
because he’s done the same.

My Logan is the guy I need to forgive or cut loose, if I want to heal. My life’s the one with which I need to come to grips, before I can grow up—not some retconned fantasy existence I’ve worked to make palatable. And it’s not just my relationship with Logan that needs repair. My Wallace, my Mac, my Dad and mom and Weevil have all suffered at my hands. Or at least I ASSUME they have, if this reality’s anything like the slipstream.

And even if Lilly’s alive in another world, which belongs to another Veronica…she’s dead in mine. So is Meg, so is Beaver, and I have to let my fixations with those people go.

So it’s GOOD that I’ve stopped here in Almost Real Reality, even though it hurts. Though the other part of the slipstream feels safer and more welcoming. It’s not any set of facts that needs to change, before I can fix my life. It’s my opinion about those facts.

If my feelings can’t alter—if my love for Logan won’t diminish, after deep consideration of his flaws—I need to consciously choose to let resentment go.

I drift, pondering this, for a long and silent time. Eventually fall asleep, entwined with him on the cloud-soft couch. His hand covers the small of my back, holding me in place. Protecting my most vulnerable spot.

THREAD FORTY FIVE INVERTS

I’m leaning against Logan, walking down a campus sidewalk at night; he’s got one hand on my lower back, gently steering. In his other, he holds a greasy, half-empty sack of movie popcorn, from which I’m snacking.

“Yeah, it was GREAT,” he says, sardonic, presumably in response to the film. “I was up at six surfing, I NEEDED that nap.”

“You’re a good boyfriend for coming along,” I say--I know he hates outings that lack booze or cards. He smirks down at me, but kisses my forehead.

“I’m trying my best,” he agrees, disconcertingly sincere. “It’s all part of my ‘adversity makes us stronger’ master plan, because I never want you to doubt how important you are. BUT; I’m still of the opinion you owe me, after four hours spent reading subtitles. And you know how I like to be paid.”

“Why sir!” I adopt a Southern accent, and bat my lashes. Happy, because it seems like our brief spate of discord has passed. “We’re in public! What, do you want to do it right there on the park bench?”

He arches a brow, and I add, “Never mind. You probably WOULD.”

“If we kept all our clothes on, maybe no one would notice,” he coaxes, and I can feel myself blushing even though I’m…intrigued. But then he gets a text, and seconds later I get one, putting an abrupt period to romance.

We share a ‘what now?’ look, both fumbling for devices. “Dick,” he pronounces, extracting his phone from his pocket, reading while I’m still digging for mine. “Beaver was just denied bail—there’s so much evidence against him, the judge said no way. Apparently Dick ordered ten shots and pounded them when he heard, which worried even ENBOM.”

He flashes an apologetic look, gestures at my phone with his chin; I show him the message from
Weevil. MEET ME AT THE PIZZA PLACE ON THE CAMPUS DRAG. PARKER JUST TOLD ME SOMETHING YOU NEED TO HEAR. “Parker, huh?” he says, suggestively. “Fourth date in two weeks. Guess he DOESN’T mind being her walk on the wild side, after all.”

“So much for the park bench,” I say, with a big, fake sigh. Which is secretly a little bit real.

He kisses me, locating his keys. “Tomorrow, you and me. We’ll climb up the observatory tower, and bribe the guard to let us do it on the telescope platform. In the meantime stick with Weevs, OK? Make him and Parker take you home, after you’re done, and I’ll meet you there as soon as I round up Dick. I swear I’m not trying to smother, but you’re….you know, in a family way. And Sorokin’s still running loose on this campus.”

“I’ll go straight to the restaurant,” I assure him; with Peanut involved, safety is key. “Don’t sweat it. Now go rescue Dick, before he drinks himself into a coma.”

Logan kisses me one more time--he’s especially touch-hungry today, the détente must be fragile—and lopes off in the direction of, I presume, his car. I turn towards the drag, and start off determinedly across the quad.

I mess with my phone as I go, reading Veronica’s texts, in a shameless-but-futile attempt to get a handle on what I’ve missed…some case involving a missing Dalmatian, and Logan’s apparent over-purchase of eggs. So I don’t see Piz until he materializes practically on top of me. I fumble with my phone, manage not to drop it, and think SHIT, SHIT, SHIT. Campus is pretty much deserted—and he could grab me if I ran.

He’s sweaty and unwashed, beyond his normal, floppily-negligent grooming…his attempt at a charming smile is belied by frantic eyes. “Hey, Veronica!” he says, overenthusiastic and way too fast. “Wow, I’ve been looking everywhere for you, under benches and behind trees, this is like kismet. I’ve been so worried, since you ran out of the library in the middle of our shift. Did your boyfriend do something? Are you OKAY?”

No I’m fucking not, I think, I’m alone in the dark with YOU. And you’re a drug dealer, tied up in God knows what with the Fitzpatrick/Sorokins, who carries a knife. “Why wouldn’t I be?” is all I ask, though; because rule number one is, never show fear.

He toes at something on the concrete, makes a jerky, abrupt gesture towards me he quickly aborts. Is he….nervous? Panicked? “No reason, I just…you vanished without a trace, and we were getting along so well, I THOUGHT. I only wondered…was it something I said, that made you run away? Or did?”

My mind whirls, trying to assemble the puzzle without letting conversation lag. It doesn’t SEEM like he knows I spotted him with drugs; but he looks manic and deranged, and I’d rather not push. “Like I told you before, I hated that job. Decided it wasn’t worth the money, and I’d rather freeload off Logan. He’s fine with that, has more cash than he could ever spend, so I quit.”

“Yeah, sure the library’s boring, but that’s no reason to throw away your independence…I mean especially since you decided to do work-study instead of the detective thing. I know how you feel about freeloding. I hate working there too, but you don’t see ME quitting…although admittedly, I DO need the money. Releasing an album is really expensive, it turns out. Especially when people aren’t buying it at the rate it deserves. And it’s not like I had anything left from mowing lawns over the summer, or even my allowance, after I had to borrow from my dad to pay….anyway. If you quit we can’t hang out anymore. And I really….I want to keep spending time with you.”

Okay, this is creepy. This is Aaron/Woody levels of freaking me out, because he’s standing too
close; and he’s clearly hitting on me, despite KNOWING I live with a guy who beats up interlopers. What the hell is going ON in his tiny, deranged brain that he won’t back down? “Piz, I’m ENGAGED,” I say, trying for firm but gentle.

“I REALIZE that,” he says, whirling in frustration, hands curling around the back of his neck like he’s halfway to losing it. I take the opportunity to thumb open the phone in my hand, and dial Weevil on speaker. “It’s just we had that MOMENT!”

“No Piz,” I say, loud, to cover the sound of Weevil answering. “We had ZERO moments. We’re just two former coworkers, standing outside the Student Union on the South Lawn, who’ve never been romantic in any way.”

His expression hardens, and his tone goes slightly nasty. “Wow, whatever, convenient MEMORY, Veronica. When you spend all your time seeking refuge at a job you don’t need, with ME, because your boyfriend’s such a jerk, it’s pretty easy to assume there’s something happening.”

“Well you know what they say about assumptions,” I tell him, gritting my teeth. “I’m sorry, Piz, but I’ve never liked you that way.”

His face goes still, then, almost…dangerous. “So why’d you take the job, then, and spend so much time asking questions? If you haven’t ever been into me? And why’d you always conveniently show up wherever I went in the building, with a stack of books to shelve?”

Oh FUCK, I think, because he’s looming now; and I never noticed, because he’s so dorky and ridiculous, how much bigger he is than me. “I have a meeting in the Union five minutes ago. I ought to say goodbye now. People are waiting.”

“Well they can KEEP waiting, because you and I need to TALK.” He grabs my arm, hard enough to bruise. “About what you’ve been doing, and what you think you saw.”

“Let go of me right NOW.” My voice strives towards calm, doesn’t quite make it. I jerk in his grip, but he’s stronger than he looks.

“No, I listened, now you listen. You need to give me a CHANCE, Veronica. You HAVE to…look, I wanted to wait for a better time to say this, but I’m fully prepared to be serious with you right away. Like I’m willing to make a commitment NOW, a stronger one than that jackhole you’re dating, if you’re worried about being single or whatever. Like we could go to my room and talk this MINUTE, if you want, and get things straight; Wallace won’t be around all weekend, he’s studying at a hotel. And we can just…see where things go. Because you’re playing coy, but I KNOW you like me, Veronica. And I know if you’re just AWAY from that guy for a while, you’ll give me the chance I deserve.”

“You think manhandling me will make me inclined to DATE you?” I demand, losing my temper, because needs must. If this guy’s planning to drag me off to his lair, I’m going down fighting—it’s safer for Peanut than the alternative.

He gets a shocked, panicked look on his face, grip tightening, and then a high, clear voice calls, “Veronica? THERE you are!”

Piz and I both turn as Parker approaches, pink and bouncy as always, determined smile firmly in place. “You were supposed to meet me ten minutes ago! I was worried; you know, there’ve been rapes on this campus at night. And even though they CAUGHT Mercer Hayes, the rumor is he had at least one accomplice. Thank God you’re just hanging out with Piz, and not some guy who’d risk JAIL by mistreating girls.”
“Yeah, good thing,” Piz says, letting go like my arm burns. “I’ll see you around, Veronica.”

He turns and takes off at a sprint, and I say, “THANK you. He wouldn’t let GO.”

Weevil emerges from behind the outdoor bulletin board, and says, “You did great, Parker. Played it just like we talked about. I thought I was gonna have to blow my cover for a second there, ruin our case before we could get the guy arrested. Maybe we should give this unexpectedly good actress here a job, V.”

“He was trying to lure me to his ROOM,” I say, rubbing absently at the bruise Piz left. Because this is all just so hard to BELIEVE. “He wanted to get me ALONE.”

Weevil raises his brows. “That right there’s a guy who goes down with one punch,” he says. “He doesn’t strike me as ruthless, or even aggressive. It’s OFF he’s being so persistent, you know what I mean?”

“Yeah,” I say, pondering. “Definitely bizarre…unless…”

Unless he wanted to visit his room to ‘talk’ because he thought he could get something consensual going. And knew there was a video camera planted.

Shit, I was right the first time! Piz WASN’T innocent in the whole sex-tape scheme. Far from being another victim of Sorokin’s machinations, Piz KNEW the camera was there. He was a willing accomplice.

“Weevil,” I say, “I need you to go to Wallace’s dorm room—it’s one-forty-two in Benes—and check behind the mirror above Piz’s bureau for a camera. Scan all the light fixtures, too, you know the drill. I think he was trying to get me on tape, cheating on Logan. He must be more trapped in Sorokin’s web than we initially thought.”

“Man, something about the air in the suburbs makes people DUMB,” he says, shaking his head. “You got it, V. But I’m walking you and Parker to the Union, first. And I want you to stay together and call Campos—have him send one of his boys to take you home. Got me?”

I salute, and he gestures for us to go ahead, muttering something about rich pieces of shit. “Hey, I’m sorry to run off like this, Parker. Raincheck on the dinner?”

Surprised, I turn, but Parker seems unconcerned. “Work comes first,” she says, cheerfully, resting a palm on his arm. “That was our deal. Besides, I like you guys BECAUSE you came to my rescue, when that Fitzpatrick jerk threatened me. I’d never expect you to shrug and turn away from this.”

I lift my brows because…has Weevs, king of the meaningless cute co-ed hook-up, got an actual GIRLFRIEND? They don’t kiss in front of me, because that’s not Weevil’s style. But he accepts a hug from her before he goes, and gives a little head shake when I turn the lifted brows pointedly on him.

“Well, that was exciting,” Parker says, as we close the distance to the Union, oblivious to my curiosity. Then, realizing her poor choice of words, grimaces. “Maybe not so much for you. It makes sense though, to me, even if it doesn’t to Eli. That Piz would be so desperate, you know?”

“Makes sense how?” I ask, confused, pushing open the cafeteria door. Lead the way to an empty table by the potted plants, gesture for her to sit. “Clearly he’s broke and in thrall to the Fitzpatricks, but the WHY, I haven’t figured out.”

“My friend Cheryl waitresses at a club downtown, and she’s seen Piz there every week since
before school started,” Parker tells me, pleased with her scoop. “It’s the reason we texted you; there’s a room in back where a bookie works. Seems pretty obvious PIZ has a gambling problem.”

Finally some proof, I think, as the slipstream yanks at me, and I thrust it absently away. It’s always the ones who seem the bloddest that turn out to be most rotten.

“You know, I met Mercer Hayes, once,” she continues, pre-empting my abstraction. “At a nightclub downtown. He kept trying to buy me drinks, but I only wanted to dance. It still creeps me out to imagine what might have happened. And he didn’t even TOUCH me, not like Piz just did you.”

“I’m glad for that,” I say, studying her cheerful, unfazed face as she sets her purse on the table and fishes inside. Remember her screaming at me while sobbing, head freshly shaved. Yet she visited the hospital after Moe drugged me—brought a teddy bear—and I didn’t find out until the trial that SHE chased Mercer away. “ALWAYS say no to drinks from strangers. A little free advice, even though we’re not really friends.”

“Only because you and Logan are shut-ins.” Parker offers mints…shrugs and eats five when I shake my head. “Seriously, do you do ANYTHING but work? Live a little!”

I sigh, because honestly I’d prefer to live LESS. But Parker’s heart’s in the right place; and it’s not like she’s turned out to be fixated on Logan. In this reality, looks like WEVIL is her Big College Adventure. “Maybe after this case wraps,” I say, which earns me a bright smile. “I promised Mac a Karaoke night at one point, and never delivered. Crap, I forgot to phone Danny to come fetch us. I hope I have his number.”

A quick page through my contacts yields fruit, thank God; Danny answers quickly, his voice as cheerful as Parker’s. “Veronica Mars! Man, I’m in demand tonight, your boyfriend just called, too. Apparently Dick needs his head shrunk and his ass kicked, and I’m the guy on the white horse. Tell you what, I’m about a mile from Hearst as we speak. You want me to swing by and pick you up, we can save the day together?”

“Perfect.” I thumbs-up at Parker. “We’re in the Student Union. You’ll have to drop my friend at her dorm on the way, though. Her BOYFRIEND doesn’t want her walking home alone.”

“Long as it’s quick,” he says, while Parker wrinkles her nose. “Pretty sure there’s a goatf… situation developing, we should move like we mean it.”

“Pull up under the lamp-post across from Whataburger,” I say. “If we stand in the lobby of the Union, we’ll see your car through the doors.”

I hang up, gesture with my head at Parker to follow. Just as we make it to the exit, Weevil pushes through on a gust of wind, collar up against the chill. He looks peeved.

“Found it, just like you said,” he tells me, grimly. “Downloaded the contents onto my work laptop, put the thing back. I figure we don’t want to tip the Russian off, before we hit him where it hurts.”

“Good plan,” I say, leading him back out the door. “Maybe there’s something on that video we can take to the DEA. A little bird tells me Van Lowe won’t care, as long as he doesn’t get BLAMED for Sorokin’s nose dive.”

“Man, that little bird’s been busy,” Weevil says, as a blue Delta ’88 pulls up under the streetlamp and honks. “Mind telling me where we’re going?”
“That’s Danny.” I point at the car, which Weevil surveys with an appreciative whistle. “He’s taking me to Logan, apparently Dick’s got himself in a pickle. Since you’re back, all muscle-y and overprotective, feel free to walk your special lady friend home.”

“What did that moron do now?” Weevil asks, instead of complying, and I shrug. Danny rolls the window down, beckoning impatiently.

“Something that requires we both kick and save his ass?” I kick my pace up to a jog. “Details weren’t forthcoming. How about I call you later? I’m sure the story will be sordid!”

“You mind tagging along?” Weevil asks Parker. “I always feel guilty when I let Dick whine himself into a situation. This is what comes from hanging out with Veronica.”

“Awww, next you’ll be rescuing kittens from trees.” I circle the Delta to hop in the front seat. “Change of plans,” I tell Danny, buckling up as the odd couple climbs in back. “They’re coming along. But they promise to bring popcorn!”

Danny snorts, peeling away from the curb and executing a truly admirable three-point turn. “OK, but leave the pipe in the foot-well this time, junior. I’m not taking an all-expenses-paid vacation to lockup, just because Dickie got frisky with strippers.”

“Hey, I quit fighting with the pipe in eighth grade,” Weevil protests mildly, cracking his knuckles for emphasis. “That was my short-person accessory. And what do you mean, frisky with strippers?”

“All I know is, Echolls called from the Seventh Veil.” Danny pulls a California rolling stop, then accelerates through a right on red. “Got a text from what’s-his-name—the airline heir, Johnny— that Dick was drunk-harassing dancers. Logan’s fending off demands from management about damages, but he said the situation’s…escalating.”

“I’m beginning to wish I’d never asked you that favor,” Weevil tells me pointedly, grimacing. “We need to get Dick’s dumb blonde ass into rehab.”

“There’s always unintended consequences, Dr. Faust,” I say, which makes Danny flash a grin. “Comfort yourself that your protection’s DESPERATELY needed.”

Parker snorts with laughter—I guess she’s met Dick—and Danny pulls another neat double turn, then parks in the Veil’s back lot. We can hear voices raised in altercation from all the way around the building.

The first sign of trouble, as we approach the corner, is Enbom, hovering uncertainly just in view; his hands are lifted like he wants to help, but then again, doesn’t. His spiky brown hair is gelled stiff, an attempt to mimic Logan’s natural dishevelment, and he’s wearing a tan Izod with brown stripes. Apparently he’s still dressed by his mom.

“Yo, John!” Danny calls, which makes him turn, palpable relief spreading across his face. “Where’s the fire?”

Enbom points, presumably towards the source of screaming. “Bro, I TOLD him not to get on stage, but he wanted to audition. Said the place needed some Dick to class it up. That dancer kept bitching about harassment, which is bullshit—she started shit, he didn’t touch her! Why would he even? He could just pay her money, and she’d lap dance all night!”

Weevil rolls his eyes so hard it’s almost audible; Parker says, dubiously, “He’s kidding, right?” We round the building, where it becomes immediately apparent she’s hoped in vain.
Logan’s got Dick in a headlock, muscles flexed to their limit as he restrains his shouting, thrashing friend. A few feet away, a burly bouncer with a crew cut is performing a similar maneuver on Loretta Cancun, who seems to have completely lost it. He’s lifted her off the ground; her platform-heeled feet cycle as she does her damnedest to fight free.

“You come to MY HOUSE, motherfucker?” she screams, pointing at him like she wishes her finger could stab. She’s dressed as a naughty nurse, which seems singularly inappropriate. “Nobody interrupts Loretta’s act without Loretta’s SAY SO. Unless they want their nuts shoved down their throat, which I’m ABOUT to do to you!”

“You smashed a glass against my head, you crazy bitch!” Dick shouts back, which is when I notice his hair is, in fact, matted with blood on one side. “I’m gonna beat the shit out of your dumb friend there for throwing me through the door, and you I’m going to SUE!”

Cliff, who’s leaning against a parked car, sipping a cocktail in direct violation of local liquor laws, toasts me when I move into view. Then rubs his fingers together in the universal sign for ‘money’.

Danny shakes his head and takes over the Dick-immobilizing, to Logan’s obvious relief. “Thank GOD,” he says, when he’s able to let go, and leans down to brace hands on knees. “They trashed the place, fighting with bouncers, and it was hand over my Amex or jail.”

“Dude, those guys started it!” Enbom protests, elaborating on his theme, and scratches a bruise blossoming along his cheekbone. “That one asshole tossed Dick right off the stage! What kind of friend would I be if I let ‘em get away with it?”

“The kind with BRAINS?” Logan asks sarcastically, as Danny wrestles Dick to the ground, and Weevil wanders over to talk down Loretta. This reduces Enbom to surly silence. He’s your typical blandly-handsome rich kid--the no-filter follower found in every mob--but he recognizes the voice of command. “Next time I won’t rescue you assholes from your own idiotic choices, and that dancer will get you for sure.”

I sidle over to Cliff, beckoning a stunned Parker to follow. He sips and keeps watching, free hand in pocket. “Veronica,” he says, in greeting. “Why am I not surprised these potential legal goldmines are Logan’s friends?”

“Like I care if that asshole’s loaded!” Loretta shrieks at Weevil, taking a furious-eyed swipe that makes him step judiciously back. “I had a whole rhythm going when he climbed his skinny ass onstage. I almost fell off the POLE!”

“We amassed quite the audience earlier,” Cliff observes, deadpan, “but everyone fled when Loretta went berserk.”

“Clearly they’ve MET Nurse Ratched,” Logan adds, moving up sweatily beside me and pulling me against his ribs. “Even the other bouncer went ‘fuck this’ and ran inside.”

I glance back at Danny, who’s planted a knee on Dick’s spine to better talk him down. Dick, face flat on the cement, keeps heaving impotently, unreceptive. “Worry not, sugar lumps,” I tell Logan, kissing his cheek. “I’ve got this handled. Cliffy, I apologize in advance for thwarting your ambulance-chasing profit.”

“Don’t sweat it, V.” He polishes off his drink. “This was worth my time in entertainment value alone.”

I pat his arm and cross to where Loretta’s fighting the power. The bouncer holding her is
sweating profusely, but looks resigned. “You need to get your friends the hell out of here,” he informs me, jerking his face back as her hair whips his eyes. “I can only hold her so long.”

“Hey Loretta,” I say, ignoring this, because like we were planning to throw a block party? “I’ve got money, a detective license, and many influential friends. What can I do to make this problem go away?”

She pauses her struggles to look down at me, checking hat placement with one hand. “You want me to QUIT? You’d better be capable of something pretty fucking good.”

“If you’re still having problems with Mickey,” Cliff calls helpfully, from the car, “Veronica can track him down. Bet you fifty she could make him cough up alimony.”

“Like I don’t know where Mickey is,” Loretta scoffs. Pins the bouncer with a look that convinces him to set her free. “Hiding in some skank-ass apartment with that used-up Tamara. But I’m listening to the part where you say she can get my money.”

“Oh, I’ll make him squirm.” I watch with a frown as Danny releases Dick, pats him on the back as he struggles to sitting. Both combatants loose seems like tempting fate. “Just tell me where his bodies are buried.”

“Like literally?” she asks. “Because he’s not that kind of moron. But I could make a list of all the dumbass things he HAS done.”

“Yeah, and item one on that list would be dating YOU!” Dick yells, apparently not repentant. “You’re the kind of whack job even Jerry Springer wouldn’t book!”

“Oh, that is IT, motherfucker,” she growls, ripping the hat free and tossing it on the ground. “You can’t shut up, I’m gonna MAKE you!”

She takes off towards him with a speed that catches me by surprise. The bouncer makes a grab for her, misses; Weevil, Parker and Logan, sitting in a row on the hood of Cliff’s car, can’t get up in time. Danny manages to catch her hand while she’s punching Dick with the other, but isn’t willing to treat her roughly. She uses that to her advantage with a vengeance, while Dick squawks and retreats.

Enbom chooses this, of all moments, to finally get involved–intercepts Loretta’s punching arm, halting her assault. She shrieks rage, still swinging, entangling the three of them in a writhing knot. Dick staggers back a few paces, as Logan moves to help, fumbling at the small of his back. Pulls a gun from the waistband of his shorts, which makes all of us freeze.

“You want to shut me up?” he yells at Loretta, who may be pissed but isn’t stupid. She backs slowly away as his arm flails, gun pointing in myriad directions. “What, you’re tired of hearing the truth? How about I beat you to the punch and shut MYSELF up? Do the world a fucking favor!”

The bouncer takes off inside, abandoning heroism, and Cliff tries to yank me after, pulling out his phone to call nine-one-one. I shake free of his grip, and he ducks through the door with a grimace.

Danny and Logan triangulate around the threat, looking for an opening; Weevil grabs Parker and pulls her down behind Cliff’s car. “Campos, do your fucking job!” Logan hisses, hands up in his look-I’m-not-hitting gesture as he focuses on Dick. “Get everybody out of here before Veronica’s hurt!”

“There’s no way Dick’s going to shoot me,” I say, my voice cold and implacable although internally I’m freaking. “For one thing, he’d have to rent his own hotel room.”
“Are none of you even listening?” Dick screams, and how did I not realize he’s stumbling drunk? All his words are slurred, and that’s not good, because Wasted Dick has no filter. “I said I’m gonna kill MYSELF. Everybody in my family’s a fucking criminal or psycho, it’s not like my chances are good. Enbom knows. I told him earlier I’m a waste of skin, right, dude?”

He turns towards where Enbom was, but isn’t; as soon as the gun appeared, he took off like a bat out of hell. “See?” He spins back and levels the weapon, right before Danny pounces. “Nobody gives a shit whether I live, anyway. It’s not like you guys will miss me.”

Okay, I’m flashing back now to the night Trina jumped off the bridge, when no one could get close, and I knew I wouldn’t stop her. Then Logan moves directly between the threat and me, deliberately calm, and my fear quadruples, heart hammering out a staccato rhythm of NONONONONO. After all this love and pain, all these struggles and triumphs? Improved Past Logan had BETTER NOT get shot by DICK.

“Dude, put the gun down,” he murmurs, voice gentle, back rigid with tension. “Ronica’s pregnant, here. And none of us want you to die.”

“Carrie does,” Dick says, and fucking great. Why is she such a BITCH? “I called her last night and she was all, ‘Just leave me alone, Dick. The world would be a better place if you weren’t in it’.”

“Carrie strikes without mercy when people are at their lowest, which is WHY we don’t TALK to her,” Logan snaps. “This DANCER holds your best interests dearer to heart. At least she came at you head-on, instead of crushing your self-esteem.”

“You leave me out of this,” Loretta calls, from her position crouched behind a cement planter. “I got nothing to say to crazy-ass rich boys waving firepower.”

“See?” Logan murmurs. I can tell by the way Dick’s staring at him, unblinking, he’s employed intense, hypnotizing eye contact. “She’s NOT kicking while you’re down. Because no decent person WOULD.”

Danny, who’s used these moments of distraction to creep up unnoticed, strikes. In three seconds Dick’s disarmed, back under Danny’s knee, and the gun’s in several pieces.

Logan sags with relief, sinking to the ground and covering his face with both hands. Mutters, as if to himself, “I can’t handle this shit anymore.”

I put a hand on his shoulder, and he takes it in his, glancing up with a parody of a smile. I realize I still haven’t told him I’m ME, yet his behavior’s pretty much the same. Logan’s not sick of the SLIPSTREAM, or my shenanigans—he’s exhausted by his entire LIFE.

Weevil emerges slowly from behind the car, Parker popping up after. Danny tells Dick, “Man, you keep getting blackout-wasted, things are only gonna head downhill. You need to dry your ass out, and find a shrink that specializes in coping with shitty parents.”

“My parents aren’t the problem. I am,” Dick says. Danny removes the knee, but he doesn’t get up. “I don’t fucking think, ever, I just do what might feel good. The whole harassing-my-brother thing was about looking boss, and I’ve been carrying a gun all week without wondering why. I just went, hey, let’s pack even more heat than normal! That’s badass, right? Always seems like it’ll be fun, all this meaningless shit I do. But you know? It never is.”

“Because you got no consequences,” Weevil says, approaching. Crouches down next to Dick like he’d rather not, but feels duty-bound. “All you have is Echolls here, telling you what to do. And no
offense, but Echolls only understands limits because Veronica explained them.”

“That’s…actually true.” Logan leans back against my knees, managing a smirk. “OFFENSIVE as fuck, but what else would you expect from Weevs?”

“So what makes you the expert?” Dick rolls onto his back, looking up at Weevil blearily. “You did whatever crimes you wanted, before Veronica gave you a job. It’s not like you were some shining example of self-control.”

Danny snorts, softly—I keep forgetting he knew Weevil as a kid. Weevil shoots him a silencing look, and says, “In my hood, there’s too MANY consequences. We spend half our time trying to stay out of jail, and sometimes, people…get unlucky enough, they quit trying. I got caught once, yeah, but I DO want a better life. So I straightened my ass out. And if I can get it together, work for a living…so can a shithead like you.”

“I work for a living,” Dick protests, sitting up. “I’m the creative genius behind Casabunga!, in case you didn’t notice.”

“So wake up in the morning, and go to the office, and fucking make yourself USEFUL,” Weevil says. “I’m in V’s agency every day, whether I drank too much the night before or not. And Echolls and Mackenzie, they could use the help. It’s not like you’re actually going to college anymore, so you got plenty of free time.”

“He’s right,” Logan says, shrewdly. “Mac’s snowed under, badly--she’d be ECSTATIC if you lent a hand.”

Dick scowls at this obvious ploy, transfers his gaze to his hands. “Sure you want me back after I waved a gun at Rons?” he asks. “Guess you’re extra glad now our parents DIDN’T tie the knot, huh?”

“Dick,” I say, cutting off Logan before he can answer. “Considering how much you annoy me, you might as WELL be my brother. I’ve made peace with the fact that I’m never getting rid of you.”

He laughs, perversely cheered. “Nice one, Ronnie. I love you too. Hey Enbom took off, right?”

“Like a scared rabbit,” Parker confirms, stepping forward. “So did that stripper--I guess Veronica doesn’t have to track down ‘Mickey’ after all. You need a ride?”

“He can stay with me,” Weevil says, which makes Dick look at him, surprised. “Until he finds a place of his own. I’ll get his ass up in the morning and drive him to work. Echolls can send over some of the good coffee.”

Logan nods, grateful; no way is Dick sleeping in Mr. Overprotective’s suite ever again, after THIS stunt. I smile at Weevil, above his head, and Weevil gives the briefest, faintest, embarrassed grimace back. Like I’ve always secretly believed…guy’s got a soft spot for the underdog.

The slipstream surges, high and hard, sweeping me up on its crest. Faintly, in the distance, I hear sirens.

Then I whirl, upended, lost in the great, black beyond. And commence thrashing and fighting my way back to shore.
I'm Your Messiah, and You're the Reason Why

Chapter Notes

This chapter's one of the most important in the story, in terms of mythology. Hope everyone enjoys it!!

Trigger warning for gun violence, fistfights and situations of mortal peril. :-)

THREAD FORTY SIX

“I know it was a rotten trick,” Alicia says apologetically, as the spins settle. I’m on the couch at Dad’s Hearst Reality bungalow—albeit a better-decorated version than the one where he lived solo. She sits beside me, Peanut on her lap…and ranged around us is the rest of the Mars-Fennel clan.

There’s also a banner, which reads “WELCOME, BABY”. I’m getting a bad feeling about what’s going on, here.

“It’s just, we knew you’d show up, if you thought this was a wedding-planning session for your father and me,” she continues, smiling at Dad. He indicates via facial expression he’s not to be blamed; Bryson rampages past in a Power Rangers costume, which everyone ignores. “But we were afraid, if you realized it was a baby shower, you might…not.”

“The thing is, Alicia,” Logan says, from his position guarding Dad’s queso, perhaps because he’s noted my desperation, “and I realize it’s tacky to actually MENTION this--I’m OBSCENELY rich. We don’t NEED help buying things for the baby.”

“Like that’s the point,” Wallace chides, handing him a party hat…gesturing, imperative, at his head. Logan gazes at it, appalled, for a beat, which makes Jessica snicker. “Your loved ones have gathered here to celebrate the birth of your child. You’re supposed to feel GRATEFUL.”

Peanut snuffles awake, roots along Alicia’s collarbone, whimpering. Alicia makes to hand her over, and I flinch involuntarily back; her hungry-baby-shark routine HURTS. “Do we have a bottle?” I ask, trying not to sound plaintive.

Alicia sniffs, discreet, makes a face. “I don’t think it’s hunger,” she pronounces, depositing the baby in my arms, where I’m able to smell for myself she’s right. “Come on, I made a changing station on the guest room dresser. I’ll show you where everything is.”

I follow, reluctant--while I love Peanut, her loaded diapers are another matter. Distract myself from the unpleasantness to come by wondering how they conned Other V. Did hormones inhibit her usual sneaky-ass paranoia? Because normalcy-seeking fetish aside, succumbing to THIS trick means she’s off her game.

The guest room’s still gold-toned, but fancier than on my last visit, when I was newly-knocked-up and pukey, and Logan had joined the Navy. The bass-fishing plaques are notably absent, as is the Christmas Story lamp; they’ve been replaced by neutral-toned fixtures, and soothing pictures of sand. A caramel-brown dresser against one wall has a pad on top, plus a box of wipes and mysterious potions. Alicia points towards it like I should knock myself out.
I wish. If only that hammer was handy.

I set Peanut on the table, undoing her fuzzy yellow pajamas, and she smiles up at me, a gummy, charming grin I’ve never seen. Wait, isn’t she too young for facial expressions? And wasn’t she a lot smaller, last time I was here?

Come to think of it, I’m not in pain anymore, either. Exactly how many days have passed?

“Shit, I think I have a client meeting,” I say, managing to get the pajamas off one shoulder, only to discover an inscrutably-fastened layer beneath. “I’m so frazzled I forgot the date.”

“July 23rd,” Alicia informs me, with a look of mild reproof. Nudges me aside to slip the sleeve back on–then opens the outfit from the bottom, with a heretofore-unnoticed set of snaps. “Veronica, tell the truth. You’re having a hard time adjusting to motherhood, aren’t you?”

Almost a month since last visit, I think. The time slippage has increased yet again. I’ve been sleeping more lately, too, and I still don’t understand WHY. I haven’t done ANYTHING to drastically change fate, as far as I know.

But maybe someone else has?

“Is it that obvious?” I ask, scrambling to turn the conversation towards urgent issues. “I just don’t know squat about babies…and then there’s the crisis with Beaver…”

“You’ve got a lot on your plate.” She deftly re-diapers my happy, wiggling kid, then disappears the waste into some weird self-sealing trash-can. I pick up Peanut, who chortles and pats my face; Alicia visits the john where I once heaved to wash her hands. “The FBI will catch them, though, Veronica…Duncan and Cassidy. In the meantime, Logan’s got you and the baby well-protected. And as far as THIS little bundle of sunshine goes…” she pauses beside me to tickle Peanut’s stomach; the baby grins, making Alicia smile involuntarily back. “Well she’s my area of expertise. I’ve raised two, I’ve got two more in progress…and Dick Casablancas seems determined to wedge his unwieldy self under my wing.”

“And here I thought you were in software,” I say, which makes her laugh. Peanut looks back and forth between us, absorbed, because I guess nosiness is genetic.

“Come on, let’s get some fresh air.” Alicia takes pity on me, heads towards the porch instead of the gathering. Leads me through the screen door, seats herself on the swing, and beckons us to join her. “We can skip the party games, if that’s what’s got you flustered.”

I produce a shudder, because oh my GOD, and settle beside her. Peanut waves her arms, fixated on a bird feeder swinging in the breeze. “I’ve told you I got pregnant unexpectedly around your age,” she says, turning her face up to the sun. “And subsequently found myself a single mom. I made EVERY mistake in the book…you’re a pro by comparison. But I loved Wallace, so I fought my way through, and he turned out just fine. Leilani will, too; so cut yourself some slack.”

I nod, although her speech seems less inspiring than last time I heard it…I’m constantly losing slipstream ground, and my failure rate is high. But maybe the secret is to keep trying, regardless? In those cases where I don’t face-plant, continued effort might help?

I’m pondering this concept, fatalistic, when Dick’s yellow Jeep parks crooked and he hops out, professionally-wrapped gift in hand. Because of course Dick outsourced shopping. “Hey Rons,” he calls, bounding across the lawn with what looks like…healthy energy? “Mae’s trying to get ahold of you, is your phone off or something? I was texting her directions to the party, and she said she’d be
late. I guess the alarm at your agency went off again?”

I dig around in my pocket, find my phone. Sure enough, it’s silenced, but there’s a message from Mac. **ALARM TRIGGERED AT M.I., LOOKS LIKE ANOTHER BREAK-IN. COPS ON THE WAY. YOU MIGHT WANT TO COME DOWN.**

**ANOTHER** break-in, I think? How many have there **BEEN?** “Emergency,” I tell Alicia, handing Peanut over. I cast around unsuccessfully for my car—note Bruce lurking by the flower bed, looking supremely bored. Call out, “Hey! I need to run to the office, there’s been a break-in. Can you tag along?”

He nods, straightening, and Alicia says, “Veronica, you can’t just leave! This is YOUR party!”

“Sorry,” I say, although I’m **SO** not. “But you **SAID** we could skip the shower games. Don’t worry, I’m taking a bodyguard with me, I’ll be fine!”

Alicia gives me an exasperated Why-can’t-the-cops-handle-this? look. Dick says, “Hey, hold up, I’m coming with. Mackie’s not replying to my texts, and that’s something she **ALWAYS** does.”

“Fine,” I say, making for the Jeep. I’ve got no idea how much the gun-waving, strip-club-trashing fiasco changed Dick—but at least he’s not wasted, and he brought a car. “You’re driving, I don’t have my keys.”

I claim shotgun, Bruce hops in back. Dick spirits us away as Alicia and Peanut head inside to break the bad news.

“I can’t believe you left that kid behind.” Dick makes a careless right while I try texting Mac. “You’ve barely set her DOWN since she was born, and suddenly you’re all ‘Oh, hey, feed her or whatever, I’m out’?”

“Alicia’s more qualified than I am to take care of her.” I frown when Mac doesn’t respond. “And no way am I oohing over bottle warmers while someone robs my place of business.”

“All I know is, you better call Logan ASAP and tell him what’s up,” he says, speeding past a yellow light. “Or I’ll be out a best friend, and you’ll enjoy weeks of manly brooding.”

We pull up to the curb by a non-descript office building, in the barely-respectable part of town. It’s twilight, the street deserted and still; there are no cop cars to be seen. “How long ago did she **SEND** these texts?” I muse. “The Sheriff sure is taking his time.”

“Doesn’t he always?” Dick asks, as I dial Logan. Bruce exits the car and stands beside it, gazing up at the building, arms crossed. “Van Lowe won’t roll out of bed in the morning for less than a grand.”

Bruce says, “Think I ought to go first up the stairs,” and starts in, un-holstering, then checking, his gun. Dick follows, and I bring up the rear, listening to my phone ring.

Logan finally picks up, winded, with a, “KNEW I shouldn’t have let you out of my sight!” and I smile.

“Yeah, Mac, texted, said there was another office break-in. We just got here, but the cops haven’t shown.”

“And there’s a reason for that,” he says, serious. “Mac arrived at the party right after you left, while Alicia was giving you up. She says she didn’t send any texts, Veronica. You need to stay out
of the building. We’re about five minutes behind you, just turned off Alameda--and your dad called
the cops, so they should be there soon.”

Shit, I think, the security company didn’t leave a message, either. And isn’t that standard
operating procedure, when a burglar alarm goes off?

“Bruce, stop!” I yell, as he pockets a set of keys and swings the office door open. “Mac didn’t
send those texts!”

He turns to look at me, frowning; then there’s a loud report and he keels slowly over sideways,
blood spilling down his cheek and chin. His gun discharges into the floor as he shudders and falls
still, and Dick stands frozen, staring at the carnage.

“Dick, RUN!” I yell, over the shouting from my phone’s speaker, and he turns to do so-- but a
figure appears in the doorway, and something strikes him in the back. He stumbles a few steps, then
goes down the rest face first.

I turn to flee, screaming, “LOGAN, SOMEONE IN THE OFFICE SHOT BRUCE,” only to be
grabbed from behind and lifted off my feet. My assailant’s smallish, wiry--the phone goes skidding
across the floor as I fight to get free. This is NOT happening again. Nobody’s taking me
ANYWHERE. I kick backwards, hear a shriek, and the guy’s grip loosens.

Then there’s a sharp prick between my shoulder blades. I swoon, and everything goes black.

XXXXX

I surface slowly.

I’m seated in a car, in the dark, wrists taped together; a seatbelt’s threaded between my arms. My
lids are heavy, but I can make out shadowy arcade shapes beyond the window. Amusement park?
Carnival?

Skate Town. The extreme sports center that just opened, at the base of the Coronado Bridge.

The engine starts as I stir, revs--the vehicle begins to move. It feels like no time has passed, since I
went down in the stairwell of my office building, but the absence of light says it’s past midnight.

“Taking a ride with an old friend,” a guy’s voice says beside me. I rouse and turn, and there’s
Beaver, bleached-blonde hair dirty and showing roots, illuminated by neon through the window. “A
one-way trip, in your case. So enjoy the scenery.”

I look down at myself. I’m in the same red t-shirt and jeans I wore to the Ideal Reality baby
shower, which means I haven’t slipped, despite unconsciousness. Does this mean rules are
WARPING here, because we’ve got two slipstreamers in the same place? Is this moment so focal, it
keeps me captive when I ought to leave?

Screw it, that’s a question for later. I have more immediate problems.

“Where are Dick and Bruce?” I ask, to buy time; tug discreetly at my bonds, which don’t budge.
Somebody knows his way around a roll of duct tape—unsurprising, considering his passed-out
victim fetish.

“Is Bruce the big, bearded commando?” he asks, pleasantly. “Because in that case, he’s dead, and
he was a TERRIBLE bodyguard. Aren’t they supposed to pay ATTENTION to their surroundings,
while clearing dangerous buildings?"

I squint out the window, note the bridge ahead. He continues, “Dick, I shot full of GHB and left behind. I kind of wanted to off him—he was a mythically awful brother. But someone had to tell Logan where we went, since you managed to smash your phone.”

“You WANT Logan to realize you kidnapped me?” I ask, genuinely surprised. Secrecy and erasing evidence are Beaver’s favorite things.

“Of COURSE,” he says, an edge of bitterness creeping in. “AND to have no way of knowing where we’ve gone, and to run all over the city, frantically searching. Then, ultimately, arrive too late to save you, because poetic justice, Veronica. He’s been a constant headache, over the years. The suffering ought to fit the crime, before I ultimately off him.”

“How’d you fake those texts from Mac?” I ask, as he drives past the suicide cameras at the base of the bridge. He seems unconcerned about leaving behind proof—I guess that’s what a life sentence with no hope of parole buys you.

“I cloned her cell,” he says, with a ‘duh’ inflection. “Wow, you’re slipping. I thought you’d suss that out faster, considering I did it to your dad’s phone once. Much like that bodyguard, though, you’d be better served focusing on your surroundings. Or don’t you WANT to appreciate the brilliance of my revenge?”

“We’re crossing a bridge,” I say, snide. “Not visiting some haunted castle with a dungeon, where you can lock me forever in the oubliette.”

He scowls, turning towards me, and I see half his face is pink, shiny and slightly disfigured, eyelid at a weird slant. The bucket of hot mop water, I realize. Victor burned him, when last we met.

“The bridge where Logan’s sister jumped to her death,” he clarifies, with a nasty smile. “That should do a number on him, when they find your wallet in this car.”

I remain silent, thinking someone should tear this thing down. It’s like the anti-Howl’s, a locus for disaster.

“Are you going to ask me how I escaped?” Beaver demands, apparently unsatisfied with my silence. “Or more likely, TELL me, since that seems to be your MO? Don’t you want to know why I faked my death? Or what I had planned for Duncan, before you somehow made him disappear?”

“No,” I say, since I don’t have anything to lose, really, by pissing this guy off. “The asylum will close any loopholes before you go back. And you clued me in to the faking-death thing yourself, by reading ‘And Then There Were None’ at the car wash. As far as Duncan goes, I’m betting that was just you pulling the wings off bugs. Brainwashing the poor guy so he’d what…murder me, his doomed first love?”

Beaver’s expression goes thunderous, which gives me some satisfaction. “The thing I DON’T get, though,” I continue, “is why you think you have any secrets left. I mean, the details of your life made the PAPERS. If you’re trying to put THAT cat back in the bag, via this theatrical mind game, you’re even crazier than the judge thought.”

“I was hushing it all up fine before you got involved,” he says, and his tone is no longer mild. “Much like the character in that book, I’ve never had a problem, killing things. And it’s not as if my so-called victims didn’t deserve it. Those assholes KNEW what was happening to me, what he DID, and they never lifted a finger. The least they owed me was to shut up about it forever…not LAUGH.
Not call me NAMES. Yet I'M the one convicted, for taking steps. Life, Veronica, is fundamentally unfair."

“Lucky didn’t mock you,” I point out, thinking SERIOUSLY? “He used to be your friend. And he was even more messed up than you are, which is saying something.”

“Lucky would have made a good patsy,” he muses, unmoved. “Duncan, too. But you and your friends kept foiling my plans. And casting so much suspicion on me in the process, even DYING failed to shake it. It’s a shame I have to end you, really—I’d love to put the screws to you until you finally break. But your weird…prescience…has made staying in Neptune too dangerous.”

We’re about halfway up the bridge. He’s working himself into a state, which can’t bode well, but I doubt talking him down is an option. “I wish you’d explain that, before you die,” he tells me, with thinly-disguised rancor. “How did you guess, right away, that Peter’s death wasn’t an accident? How’d you know I drugged you BEFORE you drank? Because I was so careful, METICULOUSLY careful. If I wasn’t twice as smart as the rest of humanity, you might have CAUGHT me.”

“Seriously?” I scoff. “We’re playing this game NOW, when you’re about to murder me? Come on, Beav, I know you know about the slipstream. I know you told Duncan about the other realities and what happens there. And I’m SURE that’s how YOU’VE stayed one step ahead…because you have foreknowledge from the future, just like I do. You think, after all this time, I don’t recognize the signs? Do me the courtesy, at least, of not pretending.”

He stares at me for a long moment, and then, unexpectedly, laughs; it’s ghoulish in the dim light, humor twisting his already-warped face. “Oh, my god, this is AMAZING! Carrie Bishop was right all along, you’re INSANE! You think you’re PSYCHIC? You see the FUTURE? Oh, wow, I wish I didn’t have to kill you now, because I could use this information to RUIN you. But I spotted a surveillance setup in the house across the street this morning, which means I’m out of time.”

I blink, nonplussed. I’ve been so convinced for a week that Beaver’s riding the slipstream, it takes me a minute to comprehend my error. He’s CLUELESS about time travel; and he wants me dead solely because he has to be the smartest. The monster I’ve built up in my mind, the adversary playing MY game better, is just a psychopathic kid. And he’s striking back ONLY because I interfered with his pathology.

In other words, this miscalculation’s BIG. And Peanut’s about to lose a mother, unless I manage to escape.

Beaver pulls the car over, yanking up the brake with a jerk; claps his hands. “Wow. Well, this trip down memory lane, and into the disturbed corners of your mind, has been educational, Veronica…but all good things must end. Time for me to make like the Pirate I am…and GUESS who gets to walk the plank?”

He rounds the car, illuminated briefly, and hauls me out over his shoulder; struggles under my weight, but manages to stay upright. I writhe, but can’t do much bound hand and foot. He’s limped halfway around the front bumper, favoring the knee I kicked, when brights beam up the hill and pin us.

Another car’s approaching, a witness. Who’s caught him red-handed, trying to toss me over the rail.

“Well this is inconvenient,” Beaver mutters, dropping me onto the hood. Fishes a gun out of his pocket and thumbs off the safety. “What’s this idiot doing on a bridge at two in the morning? Never
mind, I’ll shoot out a tire, then push his body over, too.”

He aims, focusing and executing, but the car slows of its own accord. Pulls to one side, about ten feet away.

And Victor gets out.

He’s got a gun too, looks like, and there’s a Pulp Fiction moment as he lifts it; shadowy figure in a denim jacket, light from the bridge-lamps glowing through his white hair. “Get away from her, Beav,” he shouts, in his gravelly voice. “‘Right. The. Fuck. Now.”

Beaver stares down the length of his arm, wind lashing hair into his eyes, frowning as he places his assailant. “You were at the mental hospital, with Duncan,” he says slowly, confused. “You were a PATIENT. Who ARE you?”

Victor GRINS…actually SMILES…and I use the distraction to tackle Beaver from behind, throwing the whole weight of my body onto his back. We tussle for a moment, him disoriented from the pain of going face-down into the pavement; his dislocation makes it possible for me to grab the gun, even though I’m bound.

“Don’t you worry about him,” I say, as Beaver levers himself painfully off the cement. “You worry about ME! Because I’ve got your stupid sidearm now, you piece of SHIT! And I’m going to blow you away, for being a BLOT ON THIS EARTH!”

Victor moves into the streetlamp’s circle of light, shadow to lurid neon, and my heart pounds sharp, staccato relief—because even though he’s a lying, untrustworthy con artist, he’s HERE.

“Veronica,” he says, coaxing, and his grin grows somehow tender, wild white hair flying up around his face in a nimbus. “While I agree that this guy’s better off dead, I’ve got him covered. Put down the gun.”

“I’m not letting him get away with what he’s DONE,” I say, turning my eyes and weapon back towards Beaver, who’s creeping slyly sideways. “You don’t have any idea how much he’s guilty of, but I DO. I’d have ZERO qualms putting a bullet in him.”

Victor’s voice gets, if possible, even softer, and I can hear the smile in it clearly. “How many times do I have to tell you this, Veronica?” he asks. “You’re not a killer, you should know that by now. He won’t get away with squat on my watch. Put down the gun.”

And that’s when it hits. Why Victor sounds familiar. Why I trusted him, right from the beginning, even though everyone else was skeptical. Why he looks so much like Logan’s grandfather, and knows so much about his family. Why he cares.

Who he IS.

I take a deep shuddering breath, lower the gun. He steps, old and bony but still so graceful, between.

“Me, though?” he says, as if musing, but really he’s performing for Beaver. “Well, like Dick said back at Nepenthe. My life has been…colorful. And I’m old, which makes me reckless, plus it’s not like I’ll suffer CONSEQUENCES for what I do here. So Beav, I’m going to lay this out in terms any waste of flesh can understand. I’ll let you jump, right now, like Veronica wants, so you never go back to that hospital you hate. But if you try to grab one of us, the way I’d guess you’re planning? You should know, I’ve got a military background. I can shoot, for example, to incapacitate OR kill. I could make sure you live, and enjoy jail for DECADES. Make sure EVERYONE hears EVERY
DETAIL about the things you’ve done.”

“Who ARE you?” Beaver asks again, lip curling in that sneer he never lets people see. “And why do you even care about Veronica Mars?”

“I’m the Ghost of Christmas Future, of course,” Victor says, with a smirk. “And believe me. I’ve seen the movie of this confrontation several times. There’s only one way it ends--with your curtain call.”

Beaver turns to me, and I raise the gun again. “You can’t MAKE me jump,” he says, sneering disdain. “Nobody makes me do ANYTHING, anymore. I’m not a victim. I CHOOSE!”

Victor sighs. “Yeah, I choose, too,” he says, resigned. “And the person I choose will always be Veronica.”

He shoots, calmly, with attention and focus, report deafening in the still, klieg-lit dark. Beaver looks down at his chest in surprise, as a Rorschach blot of blood fountains, spreads. Slumps backwards against the rail, hand covering the wound.

Goes soundlessly over, a neat parabola, spinning as he falls. The splash is almost too faint to hear.

Victor tucks the gun away in his jeans; smiles down at me, just a little, because I’m trussed up on the sidewalk holding a weapon. He kneels at my feet, pulls a small switchblade out of his pocket…the kind he used to cut apples with, and has carried since he was a tween. He takes my hands gently between his, saws through the bonds.

“We’re about to have company,” he warns, squinting against the darkness in the direction from whence I came. Bends to un-bind my legs. “I called the kid on my way over here, told him where you were. Based on his reaction, I’d guess he suspects me of foul play--so I’d like to avoid a meeting.”

I surge up and wrap my arms around his neck. He goes staggering back onto his butt, yet holds tight, sitting criss-cross on the asphalt where PCH’ers once kicked him half to death. “Hey, it’s OK,” he says, while I cry tears of reaction. “You’re all right. Relax, Veronica. The bad guy lost, in case you didn’t notice. We won.”

“Thank you,” I say, very softly. “I thought I was going to die.”

“Not on my watch,” he tells me, and the surety in his voice is absolute. “Look, there’s a shitty dive bar called the Road Hog at the end of the bridge, just past the barrio. I’m guessing you’re familiar? How about you meet me there, when the legal repercussions of this are done? I’ll hang out until morning, and answer your questions…providing, that is, you come alone. Because I’m NOT prepared to answer HIS.”

I nod, and he kisses my scalp, gentle press of lips. Gets up, dusts the back of his jeans, and creakily lopes back to the car. Waves out the window as he hooks a U, then drives away.

Chafing my wrists, I scoot up onto the sidewalk, my back against the wall, overcome with shakes. Stare up into the dark sky, letting belated tears fall until there aren’t any left.

Wait for Ideal Logan to find me; because I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, he will.

In about ten minutes a car comes barreling up the road, hell-for-leather, screeches to a halt behind Beaver’s ride. Logan and Dick pile out--Dick staggers, then stands weaving as he stare, uncomprehending. I guess whatever dose he got wasn’t enough to knock him out.
Logan has no such handicap—he runs up full-speed and grabs me. Yanks me tight against him for a second, then holds me at arm’s length to check for injuries. “Oh God,” he says, pulling me close again, running a palm over my hair. “Oh God, oh God, oh God, I thought you’d be DEAD. I thought he’d throw you over the side, and I wouldn’t get here in time.”

“Victor saved me,” I say, into his chest. He clings tighter, breathing hard.

“I love you Veronica,” Logan mutters, like he’s talking to himself. “I love you so much. I don’t ever want to imagine a life again without you in it.”

“Believe me,” I say. “After the events of this evening, we’re on the same page.”

Over his shoulder, I watch Dick grow aware of his surroundings. Notice the smear of blood against the railing. He moves past us, while Logan clings and murmurs, to examine the stain.

Then he looks down, through the dark, across the huge distance, to the black and thrashing waves. And his expression shows guilty relief.

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The Road Hog’s even more Sweet Home Alabama than its name implies—wall-to-wall Confederate flags, thrashed pool tables, and dusty bottles of booze, underlaid by the faint scent of BO. Victor’s at the bar, hunched over a glass of what looks like Scotch; even though he’s old and thin, the other patrons know to steer clear.

I approach, sit beside him. Wave at the bartender, and order Sunkist in a bottle. “Hi there,” I say, studying it instead of him as I twist off the cap—I’m suddenly, weirdly shy. I can feel his eyes on my face.

“Hey.” I can TELL he’s smiling, even though I don’t look. “I was starting to think you wouldn’t make it. Figured the cavalry refused to let you out of their sight.”

“Logan and Dad are still dealing with cops,” I explain. “And Dick’s recovering in the ER. No clue why he brought his roofied friend along, instead of sticking him in an ambulance in the first place.”

“Probably figured Dick needed closure.” Victor tips the glass to his lips, sighing his silent pleasure. “In my experience, the poor bastard flails when he doesn’t get any.”

“So I have questions,” I say, instead of pursuing this angle, because he couldn’t be more right. He laughs, full-throated and appreciative.

“Imagine my surprise,” he says, and yeah. When I finally meet his eyes, his smirking focus is total. “Do your worst, Veronica. I’m an open book, now that my cunning disguise has been blown. Maybe we should play ‘never have I ever’, to make this more fun?”

“Why THIS reality?” I fold my arms, ignoring his nonsense, because no WAY is he escaping a grilling. “Why show up to save the day HERE?”

“Because here’s where YOU mostly are?” he winks at my expression, smile broadening. “You know I love a good caper, peaches. And SOMEBODY had to help, before you permanently screwed up your happy ending. In which I’m kind of invested, as it happens.”

“Which means, you’re the Logan waiting at the end of the slipstream line,” I guess. “Of COURSE you are. Names always have symbolism. You’re the VICTOR!”
“I promise I’ll make it worth your while.” He drinks another swallow with an appreciative lip-smack. “Or at least, I’ll do my damndest.”

“But which reality are you FROM?” I ask, plaintive. Because that’s the real question, isn’t it? “Mine, or a different one? And what choices do I have to make, in order to end up there?”

“Veronica, every probability thread I know of has the same elements, at base,” he says, gently. “Like they all feature a confrontation with Beaver, in which he dies while we watch. Right now, from your perspective? The grand finale’s likely not clear.”

“There IS a finale, though?” I ask, seizing on his phrasing. “There’s a purpose to all this, and a structure?”

His expression softens, compassionate. “You’re floating along ripples in the time-stream,” he says, tracing a circle on the dingy bar with one forefinger. “It’s complicated. Probably you need a physicist to explain this fully, which, unfortunately, I am not.”

“Color me shocked,” I say, frustrated by his non-response. “Considering you FLUNKED physics. At least your hellion qualities remained intact, over the years.”

He smiles, his admiration patent. “Here’s something I’D love to know,” he says. “While you gear up for the next round. How’d you figure out ‘Victor’ was a fake? Or is Keith the one who sussed me out? Because I didn’t even TRY to disguise myself, yet you spent most of this adventure… shockingly oblivious.”

“Lynn Lester grew up poor,” I inform him. “She mentioned it at the debutante ball. Plus Victor was six inches shorter than you…and had green eyes, per IMDB.”

He cracks a laugh. “Veronica Mars, girl detective. I never HAVE managed to trick you for long.”

“Wish you’d quit trying,” I say dryly, and he snorts.

“Sure you do,” he counters, smug. “How would that be any fun?”

I consider how many hoops he must have jumped through, to get himself locked in that sanitarium, and can’t contain a laugh. I’ll bet he DELIGHTED in the scheme, and all the lies he got to tell. “Fake Grandpa,” I say. “I can’t believe it took me so long to guess. You even diverted Charlie Stone’s money to pay the asylum bill.”

“Good old Charlie,” he says, with a chuckle. “Always was grateful you introduced us. My first proof the Echolls male line wasn’t doomed.”

“Doomed to be drama queens, maybe,” I mutter, into my drink. “Who can’t give a straight answer about ANYTHING.”

“Look who’s talking.” He bobs his brows. “Bet you were PISSED when ‘Victor’ disappeared. Bet you tried tirelessly to track me down. Make me pay.” A reminiscent smile curls the corners of his mouth.

“Nail you to the wall is how I think I phrased it,” I inform him, which makes him burst into laughter. Then quickly don an innocent face, when I scowl.

“What?” he asks, butter-wouldn’t-melt. “I didn’t say a WORD. Get your mind out of the gutter, Mars, I’m WAY too old for you.”
I want to ask him how long our life together lasts. If his version of me died, before he came here—the wife he talks about with such admiration, in the past tense. But I’m afraid. Because if I’m going to bite it in the future, before he does…I REALLY don’t want to know.

“So at some point, down the line, time travel of physical bodies becomes possible,” I say, instead.

“Oh, sure.” He shrugs, cynical. “After a long development phase, during which a lot of people died. Only available to the very, very rich, of course…which, as luck would have it, I AM. It’s the ultimate privileged idiot tourist indulgence—no matter what you fuck up, at worst you’ll create an alarming pocket universe. You can always return to your own life, unscathed. Or rather, you can assuming you don’t get shot.”

“But why take that risk?” I ask, startled. “Have you NEVER learned to… mind the danger?”

“Well my PRIMARY reason for coming was to protect you from unpleasant consequences,” he says, which probably means ‘no’. “You AND twenty-year-old me, who isn’t quite as spit-shined as you seem to believe. You’ll grow more comfortable with moral compromise as you age, Veronica, and also with your own darkness. But right now, for you and the kid…causing certain deaths would break something, inside. Something neither of you needs broken.”

He gestures to the bartender, accepts a refill with a nod. “My SECONDARY goal….hmmm, here’s the thing. As you get older, you start trying to make sense of your own life. Figure out what it all MEANT, so you can explain to the people you’ll leave behind. All the bullshit that happened when you and I were young…I couldn’t let it go. Those pieces of myself I lost, because no adult cared. I thought, maybe if I could time travel, like you, I could resolve my issues tough-love style, without yet more fucking therapy.”

“So I came back,” he concludes, adding a ‘voila!’ flip of his hands. “Got in one last Fab Four caper, managed to save the people that mattered. Watched my idiot younger self fall in love with luminous co-ed you, not once but several times. Good job straightening out every version of me you came across, by the way. That can’t have been easy, and I doubt they helped.”

“Logan,” I say, not bothering to argue, because it’s time to cut line. “And I want the whole truth here, physics background be damned—do you know how I fell into the slipstream in the first place?”

“Well, yeah,” he drawls, balancing on one elbow to survey me. Managing to look both cagey and sheepish, which is never a good sign. “Ironically enough—or maybe not, since you’ve MET me—that was my fault.”

“YOUR fault.” I echo, flatly. “How stupid of me. Of COURSE it was.”

“Because I’m old,” he elaborates. “And easily distracted. We were supposed to meet at the hospital—place they took you after your blackout at Rooks’ kid’s party. But I spaced during the briefing, missed the bit about crossing time streams. And ended up forcing myself into the moment with the biggest emotional draw—the night you had to decide whether you were done with me forever.”

“You didn’t see me,” he adds, defensive. “You were crashed, snoring, had some…green stuff on your lip. But I got all maudlin and Twilight for a minute, staring. And I guess, when I managed to dive back through the slipstream, I dragged your spirit…essence…whatever, along.”

He takes a meditative sip. “It’s like a frog jumping into a pond, you know? The water ripples, circular, around the spot where it broke the surface. And a leaf that gets stuck in the ripples travels the whirlpool at random, until the frog moves elsewhere, or the water settles down. As my visits to
the slipstream slack off, the ripples will grow farther apart—and when I leave for good, they’ll stop. At that point, emotional gravity will pull you to the place you belong. Which is—and I don’t mean to sound like an arrogant dick here, but—with me.”

“You mean I’ve been eddying in your WAKE?” I ask, not entirely happy with this explanation. “And sometimes, surfing the crests?”

“So the technician tells me,” he says. “First time THAT’S happened, in the history of our relationship. You like to be on TOP.”

“Man, your sense of humor has…not improved.” I make a face.

“Am I wrong?” he asks, brows going up. “Typically, you rush headfirst into danger, and I bring up the rear, trying to keep us both from getting shot.”

“Hold that thought,” I interrupt, raising a finger to silence him, because I’ve just teased free a critical thread. “A while ago, you said we were supposed to meet at the hospital. But you never showed up there! We met the night before, at Nepenthe, instead. Does that mean there was fallout, in the form of changing realities? Because you got your original destination wrong?”

He grins. “You know, Veronica, you have a real talent for sniffing out subtle clues, but failing to grasp the obvious. I’ll leave that conundrum for you to analyze, since it’s your second-favorite activity.”

“In the meantime,” he adds, “I’m gonna shitcan the patchouli I was forced to use as a disguise, and hit Big Sur for one more round of surfing. And thank God, once I’m done being battered by waves, I had the good sense to marry a doctor.”

A DOCTOR? I think, with a sudden rush of fury. Because if Logan Echolls hooked up with some Ivy-league bitch after my death, he should know better than to tell me. I will find a way to go FORWARD in time, and kick her boyfriend-stealing ASS.

And then I remember my OB. Who first appeared at the hospital, the day I passed out, head cocked to one side like a curious bird, like I was talking to an older version of myself. She reminded me I was only human. Asked me to eat right, and seek psychiatric help.

Victor’s wife had a miscarriage at some point, he told me, and took it hard. Hard enough to go to medical school, I wonder? Hard enough to travel through time, once that became possible, and prevent disaster from striking twice?

“Peanut?” I ask softly, hand going to my belly. Which is empty, now, Peanut’s born, but that’s only the case HERE. And she’s so little, and vulnerable right this moment, and I don’t even know how to change her DIAPER.

“Don’t worry about the Peanut,” he says, because this is Logan—he KNOWS me. “OR her brother. They’re fated, in every reality. And so are we.”

He tosses back the rest of his drink, sets it down with a clunk. Takes a deep breath, smiles the boy-in-a-girl’s-bathroom smile, which has lost no charm with age. Kisses my forehead, lingering. “You’re welcome for getting rid of Beaver,” he says, heavy on the snark. Then stands and heads out into the darkness, coat collar shivering with his strides, lapels clutched tight against his chest.

I scramble to follow, shoving open the heavy door that’s swung shut; watch him climb into a beige sedan, passenger side. The driver is short, with grey braids wrapped around her head, but she doesn’t look at me. She puts her palm on his cheek as he leans down to kiss her nose. Then she puts
the car in gear, and drives away.

THREAD FORTY SIX INVERTS

One second I’m watching my happily ever after cruise off into the sunset in a Hyundai: the next, my head and existence spin, and I’m sauntering down the boardwalk near Cape Crescent. Dick and Mac are arguing, ten paces ahead. Logan’s got his arm around me, and I’m holding a chocolate ice cream cone that’s uncharacteristically uneaten.

“Just saying,” Logan’s saying, “You’re over-controlling the HELL out of this pregnancy, and I’m now officially worried. Puking’s normal in the first trimester, which you’d know if you’d read the baby book, but overanalyzing every bite that passes your lips is NOT. This is ICE cream, Veronica. You LOVE ice cream. So quit stressing about which morsels will give you indigestion, and just keep our fetus from starving. Please?”

“Tea,” I say, watching Dick offer a packet of M&M’s to Mac, which she rejects.

“Tea does not have calories, Veronica.” He growls, exasperated. “I mean, I’ll get you some if you want it, although I thought you were off caffeine. But you are working my last nerve right now, just so you know. You need to EAT.”

“You’re missing the point,” I say, shaking my head. “That’s the solution to the nausea, some kind of herbal tea. You give it to me every morning, right when I wake up, in the reality where I never get sick. It’s Christmassy, like ginger and peppermint mixed together? Loaded with sugar, it tastes great.”

“Mrs. R,” he says, with obvious relief. “Thank GOD. Veronica and I have been knives-out all morning, and I was frankly getting scared. Listen, did you by any chance show the other night on campus, after I left to save the strip club from Dick? Veronica had a bruise on her arm when we went to bed, but she still won’t tell me why. And Weevs, predictably, is being an unforthcoming dick. I’m SURE he’s heard more than I have, too, and it’s making me NUTS.”

“Piz grabbed me,” I say, which turns his face instantly thunderous. “Wouldn’t let go when I tried to leave. He kept trying to lure me back to his room, too, which might relate to that videotape I’ve mentioned. I THOUGHT Sorokin was the driving force, he’s the one who planted the bug. But after our unfortunate South Lawn tete-a-tete, I’m not convinced Piz was out of the loop.”

“Are you SERIOUS?” Logan spins away and paces backwards a few steps, then turns to fret in a different direction. “Ronica must be trying to protect me again. Unless she’s protecting HIM. Because she knows I’d never let him put his hands on her. She KNOWS…”

He stops with a huff of exaggeration as Mac approaches, trailed by Dick, and grits, “NO, I don’t want candy, I just had ice cream! I want FOOD! Didn’t you guys say something about Mexican when you dragged me down here, even though I had seventy-five really important things to DO?”

“Veronica vetoed Mexican because she decided it would make her barf,” Dick reminds her, emptying the chocolate into his mouth, and talking through the mess. “Just like she vetoed Thai, Chinese, burgers, Ethiopian and Italian. She’s been seriously fun-impaired since she ended up with baby on board, but I thought I could count on her to be chill about FOOD.”

“You expected VERONICA to be chill?” Mac asks, dry. “Have you MET her?”

“Hey I can chill,” I protest, and take a bite of melting ice cream to prove it. Mmm, so good--I take a bigger one. Logan smiles, like he’s glad SANE Veronica showed up to pig out, and now I’m
wondering how bad their issues ARE. Normally I’M the crazy version.

Dick snorts and says, “Maybe after Logan gets done working you over. Not at any other time I’ve seen.”

Logan smacks the back of his head. “Less discussing my sex life, more shutting up.”

“You wouldn’t let your boyfriend hit me, just because I said you lacked chill, right, Mackie?” Dick asks, unfazed.

“Since I don’t have a boyfriend, and my nerves look enough like chill I’ve got everybody fooled, I guess we’ll never know,” she says. “Note me walking towards the Mexican place, where we will enter and sit down, so I can order lunch. If Veronica gets sick, I’m sure they have a perfectly nice bathroom.”

“I don’t get WHY, though,” Dick persists, and it’s CREEPY, he’s so cheerful. Seems like after last visit’s adventure he should be three sheets to the wind, exposing himself to random passers-by. “You SHOULD have a boyfriend, I mean. Not my brand-new, genetically-related roomie, natch. But you’re way too smokin’ to die alone.”

“Maybe Mr. Right has issues,” she says, deadpan. “Look, the nice ones are boring, and the less-nice ones are complicated. So really, it seems easier to just bide my time.”

“And by Mr. Right…” Dick says slowly, “I KNOW you don’t mean…”

“Oh for Crissakes.” Logan tosses the end of his cone in the trash, and rolls his eyes so hard I’m surprised they don’t strain. “Just ask her out, you asshole! Everybody in this conversation, and probably everybody on this BOARDWALK, knows you’ve got it bad. Man the fuck up.”

“This is you asking me out?” Mac says, disbelieving, which makes me snicker. “All the good-looking girls you’ve dated, and you’ve only got THIS much game?”

“Yeah because I dumped you for Meg,” her erstwhile suitor retorts. “And ever since, you’ve been all about ‘just friends’, wanting zero to do with Dick.”

“I have my reasons,” she says, “which are unrelated to whether I want anything to do with…God, do we REALLY need to have this conversation? I can FEEL my IQ shrinking.”

I cross my arms, because enough. I’m responsible for their ridiculous estrangement, and I need to take charge of ending it. “Just tell him what you did, Mac. Get it all out there, and let him decide for himself how to feel.”

Her face goes slack, astonished—guess she wasn’t aware I know her secret. I glance at Logan, who makes a hurry-up motion with his hand.

“I don’t want to be with someone who cheats and drinks,” Mac says, pauses. Shoots me a frantic I-don’t-do-true-confessions look. I shake my head, not budging, and she bows hers. “Also I may have taken Dick Senior’s money. That nest egg your dad stashed, I mean, which Kendall was using to fund her lifestyle.”

Dick absorbs this in silence for a moment, then scoffs. “But you LIKE me?”

She sighs, closes her eyes. “Of course. Since Junior Year.”

“Then who gives a fuck?” He throws his hands up in exasperation. “I’m just glad that cash is still
around, ‘cause I could USE some. And for the record, I would never cheat on you. You’re AWESOME! Beyond which, you’ve got a bod that will NOT quit.”

Mac crosses her arms. “No way do you get all of that money—fifty percent, max. And remember, it’s not, strictly speaking, legal. So we have to be careful how we move it around.”

“That’s your department,” Dick advises her. “I’m just here for my looks.”

He pulls her into an embrace and I avert my eyes, because EW. Logan, who has no such compunction, enjoys the tender moment, observing acidly, “Thank GOD. Now that you have both savings and a girl willing to put up with your bullshit, maybe you’ll quit freelining off Weevs? I’m sick of him ‘giving you a ride’ every morning, so he can mainline my expensive coffee.”

I snicker at the ground, and then a siren sounds, making me jerk to attention as a cop car pulls up. Vinnie opens the door, stands up behind it, points at me and beckons. Logan tilts his face resignedly to the sky.

Dick says, “Make tracks, it’s the po-po.” Mac casts around for means of escape.

“We’ll just…head on over to that Mexican place, then,” she says brightly, already backing away. “And you can join us when you’re done, and not in jail or…whatever. Anyway, bye!” She grabs Dick by the hand and drags him off. Logan and I look at each other, in cynical accord.

“Sheriff Van Lowe, always a pleasure,” Logan murmurs as we approach, and Vinnie folds his arms along the window frame. “How much cash will this conversation cost me? And since we’re in public, can we keep things polite?”

“Oh you want polite?” Vinnie shoots back, opening the rear door and gesturing us inside. “You should quit commando-ing down the sides of buildings, then, and forcing me to arrest well-connected citizens. Now, how about we quit the theatrics, go for a ride? You can listen to this important piece of information I’ve got, which MIGHT keep you crazy kids out of the morgue.”

“Really, Vinnie?” Logan sighs. “Do we LOOK dumb enough to climb into a Neptune squad car, when we’re not actually under arrest?”

“Do you, or do you not want to hear how Sorokin went nuts last night, and trashed his dorm room? Then vowed to come after you directly, for convincing Kane to cut him loose? Because if so, how about you give your teenage attitude problem a rest, and get under cover before someone SEES?” Vinnie gestures again, exasperated; this time, I do as he asks.

Logan climbs reluctantly after, and Vinnie swings the door pointedly shut. Drives around the corner, scattering cotton-candy-eating pre-teens with a burst of sirens. Then parks behind an abandoned burger joint and turns the engine off.

“Look, I realize we made a deal,” Vinnie says, “and you held up your end big-time, by proving to Kane that Lev Sorokin hired a hitman to off Gory. But I can’t be seen with you two anymore, unless you’re cuffed—things are getting hairy. So run off and hide with your steroid-addled security guard friends. And STAY hidden, or hasta la vista baby, it’s been nice knowing you.”

Where the hell did Other V dig up THAT piece of data? I think, as Logan says, “When the going gets tough, quit? How is it you’re so well-paid by so many people, Vinnie, yet you remain blindingly uncooperative in a crunch?”

“Hey, I resemble that remark! Am I here, or am I here? Now scurry off to your little hidey-hole, and quit giving me lip. Jesus, I pegged it the first week we met. Mouth. You never can shut up, even
when it’s that or get punched in the face.”

He climbs out of the car to open the back door--and a black-clad figure drops down from the roof on top of him, knocking him to the ground. Vinnie makes a strange noise, half-yell, half-squeak, and Logan shouts, “Shit, Veronica! Hand me your fucking taser!”

I dig through my bag, frantic; I really need to stash weaponry somewhere more accessible. Then the door’s yanked open and I’m hauled out, a gun barrel shoved against my temple. Logan, who’s launched himself from the car in pursuit, stumbles back a step, and puts his hands up with a snarl.

It all takes maybe thirty seconds, and then our abductors are arguing in Russian, which is such a bad sign. Vinnie, bound by his own cuffs, is unceremoniously shoved into the back seat. Logan’s kicked face-first onto the pavement, has hands and feet zip-tied, and gets tossed in the trunk like a sack of flour. I’m allowed to stand while confined, since I guess I’m less of a threat. But then I’m force-fed a pill, and shoved right in there with him.

The last thing I see, before the lid slams shut, is a balaclava-clad, blue-eyed face, gazing down.

“We have to stop meeting like this,” Logan murmurs in the dusty, cramped darkness, twisting his lanky frame to curl around me spoon-style. “Are you OK?”

“For the moment,” I say, pressing my palms against his belly, mostly for the reassurance of touch. Because really, how much abduction in one day should a girl have to endure? “But I’m not especially optimistic about the future.”

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I’m lying on corrugated metal when I wake, ridges and edges that gouge my side; my shins are tucked beneath something limp and warm. My head spins as I try to sit. God, I get drugged so often in the slipstream, you’d think I’d be used to it by now.

“Must have followed me,” a voice groans—Vinnie. I pry my eyes open, but it’s all a monochrome blur. “Someone knows how to run an undetectable tail.”

I haul myself upright, shake my head to clear it. I’m in a room that looks like the prison block on the Death Star, only grey. It’s cold here, dim, and vibrating intensely, like I’m inside a washing machine prepping for spin. Logan’s stirring beside me, gingerly feeling the back of his head, which means the body crushing my legs must be Van Lowe. I disengage from him and press at the headache between my eyes, hoping to God whatever they drugged me with didn’t hurt the baby.

A woman’s voice to my left says, “It was just a sedative. You’ll survive.”

I turn, and there’s Kendall Casablancas, in a white pencil skirt suit much the worse for wear; her glorious mane’s dirty and tousled, and she’s missing one shoe. She’s cuffed—and when she’s sure I’m able to focus, turns her back to me, looking expectantly over her shoulder. “Undo these, why don’t you, while you’re struggling for coherence? We’ll deal better with what comes next NOT tied up.”

I raise my brows, because as IF. “Right,” I say, sardonic. “Because I trust you so much, and we’re the best of pals.”

“Your funeral.” She slumps back against the wall, blows a lock of hair bitchily out of one eye. “I’m fully aware of what we’re dealing with, here, whereas you don’t have a clue.”

“Sharing is caring,” I say, matching her flippant tone. Kendall just smirks.
“Sorokin,” Vinnie pronounces, sitting up with a moan. “Like I said, he’s gone full fruitcake. Grabbed us out of my cop car in full daylight, and threw us on a plane.”

“A PLANE?” Logan demands, sitting up. “Going WHERE? And what does he plan to do with us, exactly, when we arrive?”

Kendall shrugs. “Sell us to slavers? Torture us to death? He’s a lunatic…and he doesn’t come from a family with wholesome values, just FYI.”

“You’re the one nailing him. What does that make you?” Logan retorts. She bares her teeth in a smile that’s not friendly.

“Jealous?” is her response, though, dismissive. “Can’t a girl do what she must to get ahead, without everyone getting all judgy?”

“Save it,” I say briefly, tugging at my bonds and finding them sound. “I’m aware you’re Sorokin’s partner, not just his piece of ass. Any shenanigans he’s up to, you’re culpable. Maybe even RESPONSIBLE—the guy’s clearly not the sharpest knife in the block.”

Kendall throws a look that ought to, in fact, kill at Vinnie. He holds up his hands in an ‘It wasn’t me!’ gesture, and she rolls her eyes. “Fine. If you’re so clever, YOU magic us out of this, Veronica Mars. You may be a bony little obstinate piece of social-climbing white-trash–but you’re no slouch in the brains department, either. And you’ve managed to evade at least three clever traps, which is impressive, if I’m being honest.”

“Three TRAPS?” Logan demands, wiggling around until he squeezes through his arms, and gets his hands in front. “And what do you mean she’s his partner, Ronica?”

“Keep up, Logan, Kendall’s the female shooter on the Nautilus,” I say, reaching down to untie my tennis shoes. “When all her cash ran out, she partnered up with Gory Sorokin. They planned the rip off of his family TOGETHER, and used the cash to buy all that heroin we got seized. Cobb gave up the sordid details a few days ago, in a futile attempt to save himself.”

“A partnership entered into AGAINST my advice, I might add,” Vinnie puts in, watching Logan wrestle his bonds with a jaundiced look that says it’s fruitless. “I didn’t trust that guy not to lose his marbles, and I’d like it noted for the record I was right. He managed to piss off his entire family PLUS some Eastern European heroin syndicate. And all he did for the Fitz-P’s was get the gang further in the hole.”

“Hey, the only thing Gory told me was, he knew a guy who had some heroin,” Kendall shoots back. “How was I to realize he’d run afoul of yet another mafia? Besides, you got a law enforcement job in the deal–and a tidy sum besides, for keeping us out of FBI crosshairs. I don’t see why YOU’RE complaining.”

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“Hey, I’m running a business, here,” Kendall says, watching me with interest. “Criminal profits are big, but they come slow and need to be laundered. Accidental death policies are above board, and I can get my hands on the cash right away. Two birds, one stone.”
She tosses her hair and flashes Logan a defiant look, to which he responds with scorn. “For the record, though, if pretty boy here got caught in the crossfire, I wouldn’t have minded. I offered you the PRIVILEGE of a free ride, on the hot bod equivalent of a Maserati…but no, YOU had to get NASTY. I don’t take that kind of thing lying down, like I would have your OTHER assets, babycakes.”

“Kendall told Cobb to keep you off the boat, so she could watch you get emo after your friends were killed,” I add, with vindictive relish. Because honestly, it’s so SATISFYING to have my loathing validated. “A real humanitarian lurks beneath that chemically bleached smile.”

“Veronica,” Logan says, fervent. Frowns as I straighten my legs, putting pressure on the zip tie’s latch. “I have never, ever, EVER been so grateful for your insane jealousy as I am at this moment.”

I blow him a kiss, as the strap pops open with a crack. Vinnie says, exasperated, “Hey, how about we focus less on your love triangle over there, and more on somehow escaping?”

“What do you suggest?” Logan asks, with heavy sarcasm. “We’re locked in the cargo hold of a plane, which appears to be mid-air. Unless you can find three parachutes and a hatch that opens, we’re stuck here until it lands.”

“THREE?” Kendall demands, and Logan quirks a challenging brow at her.

“So the odds aren’t good,” Vinnie says, cutting across her response. “There’s enough brains in this compartment to outwit an overgrown monkey like Sorokin, though, am I right? All we need is a plan.”

“You sold out the Freedom Riders to the DEA, because they were COMPETITION,” Logan muses, abandoning his struggles in favor of connecting dots. I watch him analyze, entertained, while I re-tie my shoes. “YOU framed Veronica for MURDER!”

“Hey, I would have been fine shopping and screwing the pool boy until Cormac got out of jail,” Kendall says, examining a scratch on her knee with a frown. “Except Detective Barbie here sent him up the river permanently, and then that little shit Beaver stole my money. If she went down for killing some uncooperative bikers, while you went down on ME, it would have served her skinny ass right.”

“Like that was EVER going to happen,” Logan scoffs. “I have STANDARDS.”

She shrugs. “Whatever helps you sleep at night, sugar. If I could bag a leery customer like Big Dick, I could seduce ANYONE. Although let me tell you, that nickname of his is a gross misnomer. Beyond which, he had one son who’s the town drunk, and another who’s just nuts.” She grimaces. “Who knew the scrawny one had it in him to leave a trail of bodies, just because Goodman gave him private baseball lessons? Interesting what nerds can get away with, when no one cares enough to look.”

“Aww, does this mean you hooked up with Sorokin for reasons other than love?” I widen my eyes in fake incredulity, as I crawl across the floor towards Logan. “You’ve destroyed my faith in romance for good.”

“Gory had his uses,” she retorts. “And look who’s talking, Miss ‘stepdaddy cut me off, so I bagged the richest guy in my social circle’.”

“WHAT uses?” Logan asks, holding out his wrists so I can work my magic. “You have some psychopath itch that frequently needs scratching?”
“Connections,” I correct, flattening a palm against his chest, and delving into the front pocket of his jeans. “Crime-world movers and shakers. Kendall’s a grifter, Logan; she and Cormac were partners. She even went to prison once, to save him from a third strike. Her real name’s Priscilla, too—Kendall ‘Lacey’ Shiflett was some girl she killed in a car crash, then All About Eve’d.”

“Very GOOD,” Kendall says, watching me switch pockets with a raised brow. “Poor dumb Lacey. We set a nightclub on fire, freebasing, then wrecked the car trying to flee. I figured she owed me a fresh start, since the whole thing was her stupid fault. And I learned a very valuable lesson about drugs—always sell, never consume.”

“Too bad your fourteen classmates didn’t get a chance to do the same,” I say, snide. Triumphantly extract the switchblade Victor reminded me Logan carries. “Not to mention Thumper. Joke’s on you for wasting time framing Weevil twice, by the way. He wasn’t gonna get the gang back together and take you out—he was planning to QUIT.”

“Oh, like Navarro’s some innocent lamb.” She waves a dismissive hand. “HE shot the guy, just not fatally, then handed him over to us for disposal. So I disposed. I don’t see why he gets to complain about the way I did it. Besides, if he wanted to stay on my good side, he shouldn’t have messed with my distribution network—he forced me to seek non-ideal partners. Sorokin’s not placated with arm candy and the occasional blow job like Big Dick was, or overly concerned about my fun level. And of course, this kidnapping puts our coupledom on rocky ground. SURE you don’t want to swap psycho boyfriends, Veronica?”

“Pass,” I say, cutting through the tie on my ankles with careful, contained moves. “Sorokin’s days on this Earth are numbered. And personal loathing aside, no way will I get caught in the crossfire.”

“See, now, that’s what I said,” Kendall tells me, as I cut Logan’s hands free. “Then he hit me over the head with a bottle of bourbon, and I woke up here.”

“Extreme,” I say, passing Logan the knife so he can untie his legs. “But prudent. You’d turn evidence on his and Jake’s activities to the FBI in a hot second, in order to cut a deal and vanish. Too bad you don’t have any…evidence, that is. My dad could help you out, he’s got connections.”

Kendall narrows her eyes, considering. Vinnie makes exasperated duck face and says, “Can we quit with the deal-making, please, Mars, and let me loose? I’ve got a handcuff key on the ring in my pocket.”

“Yeah, enjoy fishing for that,” Kendall mutters, as Logan grimaces and reaches in to search. Produces the Sugars-themed fob with a flourish, releases Vinnie--then pockets it himself, with a smirk.

“You’re not going to uncuff me either?” Kendall asks, incredulous, and Logan laughs.

“Sorry,” I say, deadpan. “You’re an awful human being we trust exactly none.”

“Coincidence!” Kendall says fixing me with a pointed look. “Fine, we don’t have to like each other to be effective. What have you got in mind for a next move?”

“There’s a skeleton key on the ring,” Vinnie says, gesturing at Logan. “I’m not hung up on the macho, kicking-doors-down thing—really, I’m almost a feminist. But I have no idea who’s out there, or how they’re armed, on account of I was unfortunately unconscious throughout the kidnapping.”

“Well, as stated, no hatch or parachutes,” Logan says, completing a prowl of the perimeter. “So that’s a no-go on MY preferred plan. Maybe it’s comforting nobody can shoot us on a plane without
puncturing the hull?"

“That’s only comforting to YOU, because fighting skills,” I say. “I’m five feet tall and unarmed. Gory’s goons immobilized me in three seconds, last time we tangled.”

“Let me go first,” Logan says, fixing me with a steady gaze. “If I can’t knock them out, they’ll probably just punch me a few times, then toss me back in here. And I’ve had plenty of practice taking a beating.”

Vinnie gives a be-my-guest wave, and Logan kisses me, disengaging gently when I cling. Unlocks the door and peers cautiously out, creeps past. He’s gone for maybe a minute, during which we hear zero screaming or fighting-- then reappears, swinging the door wide.

“You’ll never guess,” he says, gleeful, gesturing elaborately for us to emerge. “The plane’s DESERTED. There’s nobody here but a pilot, and the cockpit door is closed.”

“Figures,” Kendall says, sweeping past. “If Gory’s put any thought into this abduction, I’ll eat my one remaining shoe.”

I follow her up a ladder, through a hatch, and into the plane proper. It’s a luxury private jet, looks like, the kind a Russian oligarch would own; decorated in blue leather and walnut, trimmed in gold, with spacious seating for ten. A glance out the window shows we’re headed across the continent, not the Pacific…which is mildly comforting, depending.

I spot my bag on a chair, point--Logan snags it and digs out my taser. Grins and murmurs, “Wish me and all my Krav Maga training luck?”

Grabbing his arm, I hiss, “Logan, THINK. We’re on an AIRPLANE. If you knock out the pilot with your smooth moves, how the hell will we get back home?”

He grins at me like he’s got a Royal Flush, winks. “You’re forgetting one very critical detail, muffin. Which is no surprise, really, busy as you’ve been. It just so HAPPENS I have a pilot’s license.”

Without further ado, he creeps up to the cockpit, stealthily tests the knob, and eases it open. I can only see the side of his face, lit with anticipation; then he slams the door against the wall, and takes off in a blur of motion.

There are two guys in the cockpit; a burly enforcer type, who’s dozing…and Gory, sprawled sideways in his chair with the autopilot engaged, playing Candy Crush on his phone. Logan grabs the latter by the back of his shirt before he recovers from shock, and yanks him, flailing, over the chair. Tases him in the neck with brutal efficiency, then kicks him once he’s down.

Kendall murmurs, “NICE,” as the big guy rouses with a growl. Vinnie scurries backwards as he comes barreling towards Logan, and lands a punch to my boyfriend’s jaw. Logan staggers, dropping the taser, and covers his face with his forearms. The weapon goes skittering across the floor.

I grab it out from under Kendall’s claws, as the big guy draws back to hit again--but Logan’s already in motion. He ducks beneath the strike, gets the guy around the waist, and drags him down to the aisle carpet. Then he rolls on top, lands two explosive punches that make facial bones crunch, hops up and dances away.

The guy groans, moving to rise, and I jump forward to tase his forehead. Because no pity for anyone who tries to hurt my man. He shudders, delicate skin singeing, falls still. Vinnie says, “Holy SHIT, Mars. Remind me never to get on the wrong side of YOU.”
He moves in with swift efficiency, zip ties in hand, to restrain the fallen titan. I look past him to Logan, sitting in the aisle panting, and notice Vinnie’s already immobilized Gory.

“Where’d you get the zips?” I ask—then notice my bag lying, rifled, on a passenger seat. And my phone in the now-uncuffed hands of Kendall, who’s leisurely paging through my contacts.

“Hey!” I yell, yanking it out of her clutches. “PRIVACY!” I start to reassemble the contents as Logan moves past me into the cabin, positioning myself to block her before she gets more bright ideas. On the floor, Gory groans and stirs.

His lids flutter open, and he stares blearily at Kendall, focusing. Then yells, “What the fuck? How did you get out of cold storage? Kolya! Get over here and put this bitch back in the cargo bay!”

“Kolya can’t help you,” Kendall says silkily, and leans closer, taunting. “He’s a little tied up right now.”

Logan, who’s seated himself in the pilot’s chair and donned the headset, says, “Shit, we just squeaked past a passenger jet. This asshole must not have filed a flight plan, HUGE surprise. Ronica, keep that taser live in your HAND while I raise air traffic control. I’m occupied, and there’s NO ONE on this plane you can trust.”

I nod, point it, sparking, in Vinnie’s direction and he says, “Oh yeah, I’M the threat here. EVERYBODY knows I can be bought.”

“Get your hands OFF me!” Gory says to Kendall, who’s searching him for weapons. She digs teasingly into his pocket in response, and comes out with a butterfly knife.

Flipping it open with a smirk, she arches a dubious brow. “Really? THIS is your self-defense tool of choice? What are you, twelve? Do you practice flipping this around at night, so chicks will think you’re AWESOME?”

Logan, who’s apparently reached a live person, says, “No I don’t have a fucking flight plan, we were KIDNAPPED! We need the cops to meet us when we land! Yes I DO have a pilot’s license. Well, this thing’s bigger than I’d normally fly, but I’m a quick learner.”

“I should have stabbed you in the FACE with it, you crazy slut!” Gory yells at Kendall, who’s amusing herself by threatening to cut him. “You’re going to slice me with my own knife? After you already stabbed me with a PENCIL?”

“You backhanded me!” she yells, finally losing her cool. “And I have a delicate, expensive bone structure to maintain! It’s my bread-and-butter!”

“OK, adjusting course,” Logan says, from the cockpit, then starts reeling off coordinates and jargon. I’d like to listen, because competence is hot, but unfortunately the Springer episode in the cabin continues.

“I’ll make you DISAPPEAR!” Gory screams, as Kendall takes a two-handed grip on the knife and aims. “I hope you like SIBERIA!”

She goes to strike, but Vinnie grab her wrists in an unexpected display of bravery, and wrestles away the knife. She makes a wide-eyed, ‘Oh, REALLY?’ face at him, and defiantly kicks Gory in the head. He gurgles, passes out, and Kendall shouts, “HA!” with satisfaction.

The plane judders then, and all of us stagger; Kolya goes sliding down the aisle and conks into the far wall. Logan’s voice comes over the intercom, for once devoid of sarcasm. “Turbulence, sorry.
You guys might want to strap in—it’s unlikely this landing will be smooth.”

We pile into seats and fasten belts as the plane begins a steep descent, shuddering hard through a roller-coaster drop like maaaybe Logan was bluffing. I glance out the window as we nose-dive through clouds, which is actually kind of thrilling as long as it doesn’t result in death. The streets of a city resolve below us, and we veer towards an urban airport.

Beside me Kendall says, “Is he SURE he can fly this?” and Vinnie says, “You think you could do better?” Then the nose jerks up, whiplash-fast, and in three seconds we’ve hit the ground, harder than I’ve ever landed. We stay on the runway, though, barely--skid sideways only slightly as we decelerate and slow. The plane shears, veers, and finally rolls to a shaky stop.

I’m out of my chair the instant we’re still, into the cockpit where Logan sits, face in hands. I throw my arms around him, because that was some Superman shit he just pulled. He squeezes me back so tightly I’m sure he was terrified.

He smiles, though, wavery, when I pull away, and says, “Welcome to Texas.” I return the gesture, and his grin solidifies into a smirk. “What say as soon as the authorities release us, and before we book a flight home, we make time for barbecue and forty-seven beers?”

I nod as a voice yells, “POLICE, OPEN UP!” and the plane door swings wide, flooding the cabin with light.

Then we’re too busy making sure Gory gets his to think about how close we came--yet again--to dying.

XXXXX

Many hours later, we exit the Neptune Airport to find Dad’s battered Honda waiting by the curb. He’s in the passenger seat, Alicia driving; as soon as we emerge through the sliding doors he’s out of the car, pulling us into a bone-crushing hug. It lasts a really long time.

“I can’t leave you alone for a second, Veronica,” he says, when he finally lets go. “Honestly, it’s no wonder I lost my hair.”

“Aw, Dad, that’s genetics, not me.” I climb in beside an out-cold, car-seated Bryson, and a very sleepy Darryl. The latter slumps against me; I put my arm around him, which sends him immediately into dreamland. “Besides, Logan had things under control, with his kung-fu skills and plane-landing acumen. I wasn’t worried for a second.”

Dad shoves Logan affectionately, and Logan manages a tired smile before settling on the other side of Bryson. He slumps backward against the seat like an exhausted noodle, closing his eyes. As we pull into traffic, Dad says, “You kids are coming home with us and spending the night. Alicia made some casseroles while we were waiting for word, there’s plenty to eat.”

“Good news for you, kitten,” Logan tells me wearily, with every indication of sincerity. “It’s IMPOSSIBLE to dislike that potato-chip thing, no matter HOW morning-sick you are.”

I reach across the kids to pat his hair; in the front seat, Alicia threads her fingers through Dad’s. They share a look of affection and relief, and I think yeah, these two are an item. Dad’s finally getting his happy ending, which is one of my best slipstream wins. He sacrifices so much, in every reality, to be there for the ones he loves.

Settling back with a sigh, I watch scenery stream past. Dad’s phone rings, a faint buzzing in the quiet; he checks the number, then answers with a frown. “Keith Mars. Yes. Sure, maybe I….wait, of
course I can. Yes, absolutely, I know just how to help. Tomorrow, three P.M.? Sure, I’ll make the calls. Yes. I look forward to seeing you then.”

He hangs up, and off Alicia’s inquiring look says, “I just got a very unconventional offer. But a lucrative one I think. Gotta make that bank, with two more college educations to finance.”

I recall Kendall, searching through my contact list, and smile. Maybe Jake will pay in Improved Past, too. Maybe Dad can make it happen.

“Hey Ronica?” Logan murmurs, eyes closed—exhausted but smiling, like he’s remembering the day fondly. Which, knowing him, the weirdo, he probably IS. “All our arguments lately have been stupid. I love you, and you’re ride-or-die when it truly counts.”

“I love you, too,” I say, continuing to scratch his scalp in the way that invariably blisses him out. “And ditto. Although just for the record? I’m still right, and you’re still wrong.”

“Of course,” he agrees, faint and cheerful. “You’re the brains, I’m the muscle. And when the chips are down….we make an excellent team.”

I smile, because all the other bullshit fades in comparison to this truth. The slipstream curls around me gently, this time, as we sit in quiet harmony. And carries me off, whisper-soft as dreams.
“Veronica,” Logan whispers into my ear. “Swedish pancakes. IHOP.”

I jerk awake, banging my elbow on the window of a nondescript rental SUV, and he laughs. “That exciting, huh?” He leans across me to unlock my door, kissing my temple in the process. “I feel like my masculinity should be threatened.”

“Ha!” I pucker, inviting, then shove him smilingly back when he swoops in. “Your masculinity and pancakes satisfy two totally different pleasure zones.”

He grins, hopping out of the car, circles the hood to lift me down with a spin. I gaze up at him, and let myself be infatuated. I can’t tell where we are, other than a chain-restaurant parking lot…just some nondescript town branching off an interstate. But I know this is Almost Real Logan, based on musculature and hair shade. And after the last twenty-four hours, I’m so GLAD to chill in the mellow time-stream.

“Wow, you’re still half-asleep,” he says, tucking a bit of hair out of my eyes. “Are you SURE you want to road-trip home from Virginia instead of hopping a plane? Surfing this morning, followed by five hours in the car, seems like it did a number on you.”

“But if we DON’T road-trip,” I say, just slightly coy, “we’ll miss both the Mile-Long Roadside Tire Garden, AND the World’s Largest Ball of Twine!”

“Fair enough.” He tilts me back against the car, flirtatiousness activated, and plants himself flush against me. “As long as you’re having fun. You DID enjoy yourself this morning, right? You seemed to.”

“I had SO much fun,” I say, recalling my last surfing adventure. Twine my arms around his neck. “I used to be scared of the ocean, but now…buy me a board and call me Gidge.”

His grin deepens. “I knew this would happen, if I could get you on the water for an hour. Danger zones are your natural habitat.” He plants a kiss on my cheek, flips us around, and starts walking me backwards towards the building.

“I can’t believe you’re favoring this place with your patronage,” I say turning away from him as he holds the door. He re-embraces, spoon-fashion, then penguin-walks us to the hostess stand. “No exotic game meats, no top-shelf liquor…no velvet settees upon which to lounge.”

“I’m expanding my horizons.” He holds up two fingers for the girl taking names. “I’ve survived my perilous journey through the Lives of the Other Half thus far, and I feel reckless. I even slept at a MOTEL last night, lest you forget.”

“Your sacrifice was one for the ages,” I say, dry, as we’re seated in a booth. Look, drooling, over the carbs and whipped cream, suddenly ravenous.

He picks up his menu, frowns at the luridly-colored photos, and says, “Bacon and eggs it is. Clearly when we move in together, I’ll have to learn to cook. Your fetish for fluorescent food is disturbing.”

“Don’t knock it ‘til you’ve tried it.” I point with my fork to emphasize; reflect that things must
have gone swimmingly since last time I turned up here. Logan seems almost un-deflatably HAPPY, sitting in this run-down roadside restaurant, pondering a menu full of stuff he doesn’t like. Even though this reality’s not much different from the flaming crap pile that’s my normal life? He’s as much of a cat in cream as the slipstream version, simply because we’re together.

A beaming, grey-haired waitress bustles up, asking, “What can I get you kids to drink?” , and my belly lurches, sour, at the thought of coffee. I look down at the betraying organ with a smirk. Curl my palm around, to give Peanut a welcome-to-the-world pat, and order peppermint tea.

Logan puts in his food request, clearly not eager to linger. I add a Swedish Pancake breakfast, cinnamon roll and extra bacon, which makes him laugh at me silently while the waitress walks off. It feels nice, this silent accord; his obvious, though concealed, distaste, when the non-gourmet carafe of java comes. The way he shreds the napkin he’s worrying, then fiddles with my hand instead.

“So I was thinking,” he tells my fingers, with a brief, upwards, under-the-brow glance of the kind well-known to slay me. “I realize we agreed to rent an apartment close to Hearst. And that would be good, since frankly I’m a little sick of buffalo burgers, not to mention rooming with DICK. But what would you say if instead I….bought a place? I mean, the house would be under my name, of course. So things wouldn’t get complicated if you decided…not to stay. And for the record, I’d pay the mortgage, and you could handle utilities. We could contribute the same percentage of income, so it’s maximally fair.”

He watches me, steadily--expecting, I realize, that I’ll say no. Or at least argue every point, like the lawyer I maybe ought to be. Instead I smile, because I’ve danced this dance…and I’m fairly certain how it ends.

“Could this prospective house be on the beach?” I ask, with a lurking, growing smile, rubbing my thumb along his fingers, feeling a little shy. “Sporting a nice view for me, and surfing access for you? Maybe white, with a red tile roof, since I’ve always been partial to Spanish Colonial? And bougainvilleas, planted in the front yard?”

His matching smile picks up steam, then spreads across his face in a rush. The sun comes out, in the form of Emo Logan Echolls. “That could be arranged.”

“Then count me in,” I say, quietly. “I’d never refuse a deal this sweet.”

He stares at me, fingers twining more fully with mine, an overly-intimate level of eye contact that makes it hard to meet his gaze…and at the same time, makes it impossible NOT to. “What?” I ask finally, risking a look.

“You know what,” he chides, softly.

I sigh, because I do know. And I’m sure he won’t say it first, this time. Damaged Logan backs off when his interest isn’t matched--and in this reality, he’s been badly burned. “I love you, too,” I tell his hand. Then meet his eyes, resolute. Because Other Veronica wouldn’t move in with him if she didn’t--she’s too much like me. And he needs to hear the words.

Besides, this is the Logan who recognized he did terrible things...who apologized and changed without expecting a reward. Literally no other 09’er went against the crowd to defend me—not even Meg--but Logan reformed, and chose the harder road. He deserves to know how I feel about the strides he’s made…even when forgiveness is a process.

“I’ll do my best to ensure you never regret it,” he says, lifting my hand and kissing the knuckles. “Even if the task involves foods not found in nature, and lumpy, too-short beds.”
“Spoken like a true gentleman,” I say. We’re still smiling at each other idiotically when the food comes.

“You know, I don’t want to curse us by saying this, but Logan/Veronica 6.0 feels...almost STABLE,” he informs me, halfway through his greasy plate of eggs, taking another wincing sip of coffee. “I mean, sure, there are culinary privations involved. But we managed to hook up with a minimum of death and destruction, this time. Or dangerous, unfinished business hanging over our union.”

“True,” I say, drinking the last of my tea. Which does help--I feel better. “We dispensed with all the psychopaths bloodlessly, this go-round. And I didn’t once have to bail you out of jail.”

He laughs as the slipstream jerks me sideways, so abruptly I drop my fork. That laugh lingers with me, generous and satisfying, even after I’m gone.

THREAD FORTY SEVEN INVERTS

When the spins settle, I’m standing outside Neptune Sheriff Station Cell B, hands draped through the bars, which makes me snort amusement. And Logan’s on the cot inside, forearms balanced on knees, gazing, with wary defiance, back.

“When will I quit beating up people who piss me off?” he asks, like he’s (sarcastically) repeating my question. “Mark me down for NEVER. That piece of shit tried to coerce you into sex and TAPE it! Don’t expect me to start feeling guilty.”

I roll my eyes, and say, “What I EXPECT is that you’ll plan enough to avoid getting CAUGHT. Yet here you sit in jail, looking like the criminal in this scenario, because when you get pissed off you just don’t THINK.”

He opens his mouth to retort, closes it, cocks his head to study me. “How DID you see through his supposedly-harmless facade, if you don’t mind me asking? Since you’ve told me, repeatedly, the guy’s a big, goofy, eager-to-please puppy?”

“Because I’ve had the dubious privilege of WATCHING said tape, in another reality,” I say. “It actually made me puke. Although come to think of it, that might have been partially morning sickness. Oh, and also because I witnessed Piz, with my own eyes, dealing drugs for Sorokin in the liberal arts library. I guess it’s safe to dish dirt now, since Gorya the Nut is disowned and locked up.”

"So THAT’S why she wouldn’t quit her stupid job." He sighs, tilting forward to rest his forehead on his arms. The fight seems to go out of him. “She doesn’t trust me, Veronica. After all this time, and everything we’ve been through. She didn’t even tell me Piz grabbed her, much less that he’s a lowlife--and when I asked about the bruise, she LIED. Right before you showed, just now? She was reading me the riot act because I’m not behaving like an adult--saying marriage will never work, if we don’t both try harder. I’m not sure she gets that I CAN’T try harder. And that if she keeps making impossible demands, I’m just…done.”

I look down at my hands. I recognize this relationship moment; and I’m not sure there’s a good solution, unless Veronica opens up. “Having been her, I can make an educated guess. This fight isn’t about punching, sugar pants. It’s about Carrie, and your lack of honesty.”

He lifts his head to gaze at me and I add, “I asked you what happened with her, and you tapped danced around it. You NEVER want to discuss things you’ve done, if they might be construed as bad. I couldn’t handle that, the first time I lived through this year, and it sounds like she can’t, either. I need to know the truth—it’s my main thing.”
His gaze goes sad, fatalistic, and his mouth curls into a humorless smirk. “Veronica, I’ve turned my life inside-out for you, pursuing what’s probably a doomed cause…and you’re saying YOU don’t trust me either? Just because sometimes I fly off the handle, or don’t want to talk? Well, gee, sorry I’m such a disappointment. And won’t stand on the sidelines, yawning, while someone threatens my fiancee. But since we’re being honest here? There’s something I don’t get, too. How can you forgive YOUR Logan for SCREWING every girl who shows an interest…but I’m constantly on probation, even though I HAVEN’T?”

“I didn’t say I don’t trust you. I said you’re not always forthcoming, and I can’t handle lying,” I protest. My fingers curl, involuntary, around the bars.

“Oh, sure, let’s split hairs. You know, I’ve been hanging in there through this rough patch because the OB said you’d be irrational for a while, what with all the hormones coursing through your veins. And she said lack of therapy was screwing us both up more than we realized. I thought she was full of shit-- it’s not like some shrink can make it so Aaron never beat me. But maybe in your case, she was on to something.”

“Oh, the OB said?” I ask, sardonic, because damn it, Old Veronica, quit playing games. “Well I guess if anyone would know, SHE would. She may have neglected, however, to consider my viewpoint that therapy is BULLSHIT.”

“You know,” he tells me, with dry emphasis, “You talk a good game about how different you are from my Veronica, and how much your slipstream epiphany changed you. But to be brutally honest, since you love that so much? I have a REALLY hard time telling the two of you apart.”

“Says the guy who always ends up locked in this cell,” I shoot back. “Maybe we BOTH ought to climb off that high horse?”

“Can you find out if Veronica’s paid my bail?” he asks tiredly, looking away. “Or if she held off, so I’d be a captive audience while she lectured? Because as much as I adore the ambience in here, it’s getting a little same-y.”

“If I quit pushing for details about the shit you hide,” I ask. “It’s not going to blow up in my face, right?”

“You can trust that I love you,” he says, meeting my eyes. “And for as long as our relationship lasts, I’m not going to sleep with someone else and jeopardize it.”

“OK.” I smack the crossbar with my palms. “OK. Then I’ll try to stop asking, although it strains every fiber of my being.”

“And I’ll count to ten, like Alicia always insists,” he says, with a faint smile. “But when it comes to that Piz asshole, I doubt mental CALCULUS would have made a difference.”

“Logan Echolls and his fists of fury,” I say, amused.

“Nobody messes with my girl,” he shoots back, and he’s deadly serious. It’s written on every line of his face.

“Which is how you always end up in this cell,” I remind him. But gently, because I’m grateful.

“And right here’s where you’d be staying,” Weevil interjects, turning the corner, with the wary posture of a guy braving the enemy’s den. “Since Piznarski needs reconstructive surgery on his right eye socket. Only Parker found a witness who’d say in court Piz owes the Russians fifty grand. And some recordings from the bug I forgot in his cell phone, after we dropped...a certain case? Prove Piz
agreed to make a video for Sorokin he could use to blackmail Kane. I just brought the tape to my cousin, the deputy—and Piznarski folded like a bitch when questioned. I’ve got a copy for you, too. But Echolls needs to stay locked up, while you listen, so he doesn’t rack up more charges.”

He hands me a mini-disk player, with a significant brow lift. Logan flashes him a dirty look, but approaches the bars to better hear.

I press the button, and Gory Sorokin’s flat, drawling voice crackles out through the hall. “What’s the big deal? You’re into her anyway. Pretty blonde like that, makes eyes at you at work. She loves the nice, clean, upper-crust boys; should be no problem to sweet-talk her, a popular musician like yourself. Just make sure it’s dirty, whatever gets filmed…and no one’s back is to the camera. Once I’ve got the tape, I have all the leverage I need, and YOU get to walk away with your limbs attached.”

“I think you’re forgetting something,” Piz corrects, because I guess he even acts snotty with criminals. “She has a boyfriend. They LIVE together.”

“Then convince her to cheat.” Sorokin sounds amused. “Or drug her. Do what you have to. I need a video a rich guy concerned with image will bury, not some middle-class whine-rant about morality.”

“This is bullshit!” Piz says, like he wants to seem tough, but is clearly scared shitless. “I shouldn’t have to PROSTITUTE myself because of a few bad bets! Maybe the COPS would like to hear about the stuff you make me do. Or maybe I should just tell my dad!”

“It’s not prostitution when you both want to get busy,” Sorokin tells him, voice hard. “And if you think the cops in this town care about your pathetic little problems, you should realize, you’re not in Kansas anymore—the chief of police here does what he’s told. You’ll take this deal, because you’ll like the alternative less. Be a shame if you ended up in jail or dead, all because you were dumb.”

“I can GET you the money eventually,” Piz protests. “It’s just gonna take some time.”

“Oh, this isn’t about money,” Sorokin tells him. “It’s about payback. That bitch cost me millions, and she embarrassed and endangered me; and I can’t make her sorry, because she’s got powerful friends. So you’re gonna do it for me. You’ll be my instrument.”

“Fine. I’ll film the video,” Piz mutters, in the world’s most infuriating sad-panda voice. “But no actual sex, I don’t know where that Echolls guy’s been. And this means we’re even.”

“Sure it does, Piznarski,” Sorokin drawls, with no attempt at sincerity. “Do me this one favor, and everything will be fine.”

Logan tilts his head towards the ceiling, clenching and unclenching his fists. Weevil takes the recorder back, switches it off, and says, “Yeah. That’s how I felt when I heard it, too.”

“Forget everything I said,” I tell Logan; he turns his face sideways to smile at me wryly. “I’m glad you smashed his eye socket. If you want to make it a matching set, I’m FULLY in favor.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” He rubs his forehead, relaxing a smidge. “You can express your admiration by getting me out of here sometime today.”

“How about I let Weevil entertain you while I check on your paperwork?” I suggest, which makes them both cringe. “Play nice, boys! Back in flash!”

I head down the hall, emerge into the station proper. It’s bustling—Neptune never lacks criminal
activity. Find Vinnie in Dad’s old office, exasperatedly filling out paperwork, while Sacks lingers nearby, awaiting instruction.

“Has Logan’s bail been processed?” I ask, poking my head in. They both turn to look at me. “Any chance we’ll be home for dinner?”

“There’s no bail,” Vinnie says tiredly, shoving one paper towards Sacks and starting on another. “Piznarski’s been persuaded not to press charges by some tall gentleman in a trench coat, who showed up just long enough to buy him a cup of coffee. Word on the street is, the kid’s got ties to that asshole who kidnapped us last month, too--and I’ve got to admit, I hold a grudge.”

“Where is our would-be filmmaker, anyway?” I ask, and Sacks points to a bench along one wall, where Piz slumps glumly, cuffed to the arm. “Are you serious? Why is LOGAN in a cell, while he’s out here sobbing all by his lonesome?”

“Well, A) because we GOT no more cells, and B) because Echolls is dangerous and in a mood; whereas this guy, not so much. Sacks, go make Xeroxes of these and file ‘em, so it all looks aboveboard. Then tell Echolls’ lawyer he’s off the hook. Stand back when you let the kid loose… he’s punchy today.”

“I talked Logan down,” I tell Sacks, who looks relieved. “Your face is safe.”

“Thanks, Veronica,” he says, taking the papers. “And thanks for the donuts. Even though you didn’t bring any jelly, AGAIN.”

I salute, and he goes off about his business. Vinnie bends back to the papers with an exasperated sigh—I guess the figurehead job’s less fun, now that his meal ticket’s gone. I reflect that Kendall’s probably bored out of her mind, too, play-acting Reno housewife in Witness Protection, hoping to God Clarence Wiedman never finds her. Decide the torments of the mundane are fitting punishment for them both, until they inevitably come by their just desserts.

Wandering out of the office, I contemplate coffee to kill time. Notice nobody’s watching, and decide instead to have a word with Piz.

He’s got his head in his hands when I approach; probably, knowing him, he’s most worried about his DAD’S reaction. I position myself against the opposite wall, arms folded, and quip, “Guess that’s it for your radio station gig, huh? Doesn’t it SUCK, when crime fails to pay? Especially when the Mafioso heir who might have saved you is already in jail, for kidnapping your intended victim?”

“It was all just talk, Veronica.” He lifts his head blearily to survey me. His face looks like shit, stitched, swollen and purple; but he’s pissy rather than remorseful, which validates my hate-on. “I didn’t ACTUALLY film you.”

“Only because Parker Lee intervened,” I say. “And just FYI? Gory never planned to let you off the hook. I did you a favor, getting him locked up.”

“But it was HIS idea,” he continues, pleading. “It’s not like I WANTED to help him!”

“You know, Piz?” I tell him, losing it. “Nobody’s watching, right this minute, and we HAPPEN to be around the corner from the one functioning security camera. So maybe I should explain how the “I didn’t actually DO it” excuse works. You only get to use that one if you NEVER TRIED TO COMMIT THE CRIME IN QUESTION.”

He frowns, then opens his mouth, probably to correct me; but he’s cut short when my fist meets his face. It’s a nice punch, sharp and clean… the bones in his nose crack on impact in a truly
satisfying way.

“Oh my GOD, you BROKE it!” he yells, clutching the bleeding orifice with both hands, and I smile.

Honestly, I don’t miss life before the slipstream, when I used to try to be good. Really decking bad guys feels so SATISFYING.

I walk back around the corner, absently wiping my bloody knuckles on my shirt… run smack into Logan, who’s just emerged from the hall, trailed by Sacks and Weevil.

“Where’ve you been?” he asks, steadying me, brows lifting as he takes in the rusty smear mid-abdomen. “Wait, do I even want to know? Should I bring the lawyer back?”

“Just had to clean up one last loose end,” I tell him, smiling. “It’s all good, now. Let’s go home.”
FYI, everybody, I'm posting the last three chapters all at once, because there's a big cliffhanger amongst them and I don't want to make you wait. So start here, and you should be able to read 49 and 50 within the next few hours. Hope you all enjoy the big finish!! :-)

THREAD FORTY EIGHT

One minute, I’m exiting the Neptune Sheriff’s station, as Sacks calls behind me, “Veronica, did you make the prisoner cry again?” The next, I’m waking slowly in my big, soft Ideal Reality bed, which I love more passionately than I’ve ever loved a mattress. It’s warm and dark, surf crashing outside the window, and I feel peaceful in this moment, completely safe.

Turning, drowsing, I roll into Logan’s warmth. He settles the comforter over me more securely, which is how I realize he’s awake. And watching me.

I blink up at him, smiling sleepily, and he smiles back. “How you doing, there, angel face?”

“Mmmm.” I cuddle close. “This is a nice way to wake up, right after punching Stosh Piznarski’s face. I love knowing you and I fought, but we’re still together.”

He grins. “Is that what you’ve been doing, in your dreams?”

“I have a mean right hook,” I inform him. “It’s weird, my knuckles SHOULDN’T hurt, right now, logically. And yet, they kind of DO.”

He kisses them gently, sets my hand down on the blanket. “I can’t sleep,” he says. “I’m gonna make coffee. You want something?”

“Cocoa?” I ask, sighing a soft protest as he disengages and climbs out. “Extra marshmallows?”

He taps me on the nose, crosses the room to rummage through the dresser. Sets something on the chair, then pauses in the doorway, outlined in light from the hall. “Put that on when you get out of bed,” he tells me. “The windows are open in the living room, it’s cold.”

I get up as he leaves, feet soundless on the thick rug, and collect the item in question. It’s a red satin robe splashed with green flowers, long and silky; I remember I asked him to buy one. I caress it, don it, and reflect that Logan’s Hawaiian shirt fetish is probably fate.

The crib’s still next to the bed, and in it, Peanut’s asleep, sprawled across the whole mattress on her back, just like her father. I touch her hair, tufting out from her head troll-doll-style—think God, she’s bigger AGAIN. Time keeps on slipping, to quote that old song Dad loves. Into the future.

When I enter the living room, Logan’s coming out of the kitchen, holding two mugs. He sets one on the table, with a gesture of his head and bob of brows, and carries the other to the window seat. Throws himself down, sploshing tea in a way that no doubt drives Other V crazy. Picks up something lying there, and begins to fiddle.
I approach, sipping cocoa, and see it’s a bit of paper, which he’s bending, folding, scrutinizing: he’s doing origami. He looks up at me, grins, and tosses his creation on the ground.

I bend, careful not to spill, pick it up. It’s a little mouse, all angles, with a pointy tail. “Man of many talents,” I say, smiling.

He tosses another, too low for me to catch. I bend again. “A bird?”

“I’m laying them at your feet,” he says, patiently. “Jesus, Veronica, keep up. I thought you were a detective.”

I tighten the silky red robe reflexively, and it hits me. Red satin. Victims at my feet. My eyes widen.

“You KNEW!” I accuse, bolting upright and pointing the little bird at him. “All this time, you knew exactly who I was, and you didn’t say a WORD! No, that’s wrong. You DELIBERATELY MISLED me, even when I begged you to come clean!”

He shrugs, corner of his mouth curling into a smirk. “I gave you hints,” he defends, bending up one knee, resting his elbow on it. “I referenced something only you or I would know pretty much every day. And I can’t even COUNT the times you were on the total wrong track, and I had to steer you in the right direction without being obvious.”

“So you’ve been MANIPULATING me,” I realize, setting the cocoa on a side table so I can cross my arms. “Wait a minute. Is that why this reality seemed so fabulous and effortless in the beginning, compared to all the others? Because you were deliberately smoothing my way?”

He makes a see-saw motion with the dangling hand. “I prefer to call it optimizing your experience,” he says, eyes crinkling with both mischief and tenderness. “Making sure you enjoyed every minute, so this life would…always seem Ideal.”

My eyes narrow, as the pieces come together. “In other words, you’ve been LYING to me, again. Shielding me from dark and dirty truths.”

Yep, he’s definitely smirking now. “Define lying.”

“Well, at one point you told me I kicked Piz in the nuts three times when he hit on me in the library, then tased him and made him cry. And I now know for a fact that’s not what happened.”

He spreads his arms wide, an elaborately unconcerned shrug. “Hey, you JUST walked up to the guy chained to a police bench, and smashed the bridge of his nose. I’d say I wasn’t so much lying as…predicting your future?”

“Did Other Veronica demand you stop acknowledging me?” I ask, more softly. “Was that her condition for not leaving you?”

He shakes his head. “We made a commitment to each other, V and I,” he says. “She promised to quit terrifying me with recklessness, and to never run again. And I promised to treat her EXACTLY the same way I treat you—as if you’re equally precious. Because you are. Although to be fair, by this point, she basically IS you…just slightly less in harmony with her wild side. She’ll get there. You’re proof she has it in her.”

“You LOVE her,” I say, and bizarrely, I don’t feel jealous. I feel HAPPY. “As much as you love me.”
“I love every Veronica I’ve ever met.” He picks up another folded piece of paper and smiles down, turning it over in his hands. “You said basically the same thing to me once, remember? At the time, I thought you were delusional—your Logan sounded like a dirtbag who didn’t deserve you. But I get it, now. She’s you, and he’s me. And we love each other always, no matter what.”

“So if I adore him enough, he becomes you?” I ask, and Logan grins his boy-in-a-girl’s-bathroom grin. I climb onto him and kiss him then, because I seriously can’t help it.

“See, you ARE a detective!” He settles me on his lap. “Ronica, you gave me everything I most needed, when my version couldn’t, always. You told me, in Fiji, that I’m your favorite Logan—it’s because you showed me I COULD be. You proved to me what SHE could be, if I showered her with the right kind of love. And most important, you explained, in detail, what both of you want. So I never gave up, even when I missed you badly, even when I was afraid it was hopeless. Your Logan has it in him to be me, and my Veronica has it in her to be you. And you and I, we’re…”

“Wolves,” I say. “We mate for life.”

“Exactly!” He pulls me down for a kiss. “Mmmm, what big teeth you have.”

“I completely adore you,” I tell him, pressing kisses along his jaw. “Every version, you sneaky, manipulative, corkscrew-hearted bastard.”

“I know,” he says complacently, securing my legs around his waist. Lifting me up. “Come on, I’ve been imagining peeling this robe off you all day. Let me express my complete and total worship by fucking your brains out five or six times.”

“Oooh, good plan.” I make a soft noise as he bites the base of my throat. “Provided it’s OK to do so, this soon after giving birth?”

“Veronica, the last time you showed up here was nine weeks ago,” he says. “You’ve been cleared by the doctor for months. But if it helps, I promise to be VERY gentle.”

“Mmmm, this offer just keeps getting better. The only thing that could maybe enhance it is ice cream, after?”

“If you’re really, really nice to me,” he murmurs, shouldering the guest room door open, “Maybe ice cream DURING.”

“Soulmates,” I say, on a sigh. He laughs, sets me carefully onto the bed, and climbs up, too.

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Hours later, sweat-salty and sated, we drift just on the edge of consciousness. I lift up, half-dreaming, gaze at his peaceful face. Kiss the tip of his nose, stealing his move. “So why now?” I ask. “Why tell me today you recognize me, when you’ve kept it secret this whole time?”

“Mmmm,” he says, musing, lids half-mast. “Because I’ve kept a list of your visits since Fiji, so I wouldn’t forget. And before the next twist of fate happens….I thought you should be reminded. That I love you, I mean. That I’m grateful to you and Peanut, even though I was terrified at first--because the two of you together taught me how to be a man. I stopped acting like a self-destructive asshole for US, sugar muffin. Because you, Veronica Mars, are my One.”

“Logan Echolls,” I say, breath whispering against the corner of his smile. “Ditto. It’s always been you.”
“We’re fate,” he agrees, curving a hand around my belly. He’s already drifting towards dreamland, and I’m not far behind. “Always.”

THREAD FORTY EIGHT INVERTS

We sleep peacefully, post-coital, for what seems like a long time; then, abruptly, I’m skiing down a frozen-solid hill, bundled up to my nose.

I skid sideways, because I’m indifferent on the slopes at the best of times—a middle-class California upbringing being non-conducive. Stumble over a rock, fall painfully... and sit, examining my broken ski.

It’s almost completely silent up here, barring the faint whistle of icy wind, the distant chatter of tourists. But I can see the lodge from where I’m slumped, so I won’t require snowmobile rescue. I’m gearing up to make the hike when, with a hiss and crack, Logan skis up beside me and swishes to a dramatic stop. He pulls off his goggles to survey me with a red-faced grin.

“What are you doing here?” he asks--in a mocking tone, he knows I’m not. “Should I summon the rescue dogs?”

“No such luck. We’re like the Donner Expedition up here.” I study him in turn—he’s decked out head-to-toe in virulent orange. “Of course, rescuers could easily spot you from SPACE. What the hell are you wearing?”

He checks out his neon-tangerine puffer jacket, his saggy-crotch padded pants, with lifted brows. “You don’t like it? This is top-of-the-line gear!”

“You look like a traffic cone,” I say.

“Hey, I ski black diamond,” he rebuts, because of course he fucking does. “This way, people see me coming.”

Distantly, ‘Here Comes Santa Claus’ begins blaring on a loudspeaker; and even though I’ve never been privileged to vacation with the Other Half, I suddenly realize where I am. Christmas in Aspen. Crux of all the conflict in my own reality; and the event, I’m abruptly aware, that prompted Ideal Logan’s confession. Shit, I think, as a shiver works down my spine, which has nothing to do with the (considerable) cold. Today’s Armageddon…yet Logan seems so CHEERFUL.

At least, I rationalize, as he unbuckles my skis, then dusts my butt off with great focus, I don’t need to worry about Madison jumping him. Not when he’s a big, flashing caution sign, personified. Probably my presence here is enough to change fate, anyway. And there’s no need for me to actually exercise, out in the cold...when I could be snug in the chalet, enjoying the cocoa I abandoned for sex. It’s not like I could keep up with Winter Olympics here on the mountain, even if I tried.

“We’re maybe a five-minute walk from the lodge,” I tell him, as the tune switches, unfortunately, to ‘Little Drummer Boy’. “What say we head in, put on something non-orange and dry, and enjoy hot beverages in the bar?”

“Give me your skis, first. I’ll take the broken one to the shop.” He sits to unbuckle his own, gesturing with one hand. “I’ll meet you in the front room in a few. But if I’m enduring holiday spirit in public, you’ll need to make mine a toddy.”

“As long as you’re not driving,” I say, although I’d rather he didn’t leave me. Accept the kiss he
presses to my cheek, then the room key he sets in my palm. Wave as he lopes happily away, on his
errand of sporting-equipment mercy.

The suite number’s on the key chain, so I have no trouble finding our log-walled chamber, on the
top floor of a startlingly kitschy chalet. Grimacing at the moose-themed artwork, I shed my clothes
and quickly shower, enjoying the warmth. Then dress in jeans, a striped t-shirt and my brown
Boyfriend Sweater, before heading back downstairs.

Logan’s nowhere to be seen, so I order cocoa, sit by the window to watch others exert
themselves. It’s peaceful, lulling--when he sneaks up from behind, murmuring, “Thoughts of me?” I
shriek and jerk, splashing liquid.

“You wish,” I say, as he strokes my cheek with one finger.

“Hourly,” he agrees, picking up the toddy beside me and draining it in two gulps. He’s still in the
orange gear, tracking water across the floor. “Can I have our key? I just need to scrub and defrost,
then I’m at your disposal for the afternoon.”

“Don’t go,” I say impulsively, taking his hand. “Stay. Who cares if you’re damp and orange, and
smell faintly like…tree? Not THIS girl.”

“Wow, you’re almost a SAINT.” He kisses my eyebrow. “I’ll be back in a flash, I promise. At
which point I’ll demonstrate how much nicer making out is, once I’m hygienic.”

I hand him the key, reluctant, and he calls, “Wait for meeee!” over his shoulder as he walks off.
Which makes me weirdly sad. Because I didn’t, last time he went to Aspen. Logan gave me the
excuse I needed, to run from scary intimacy, and I used it to throw him away. I gaze down at my
cocoa, desire for it dimmed…try an unenthused, lukewarm sip.

It takes me several more minutes of people-watching to spot Madison. She’s not immediately
obvious; for one thing, her hair’s dyed back to its natural brown. For another, she’s not making a
bitchy, entitled ruckus. She’s just sitting quietly on the other side of the bar, drinking something pale,
looking even more morose than I feel. I must admit to schadenfreude, as I sit spying; Madison
Sinclair’s neither happy, nor managing to seduce my boyfriend.

I head her direction, carrying my cup, because we’re sort-of not-enemies here, right? And if I’m
perched next to her, assiduously scaring her shitless, there’s no way she can liquor up Logan.

As I approach, I realize her gaze is fixed on Mac and Dick, just visible through the doors to the
lodge restaurant. They’re sharing fondue atop a moose-patterned tablecloth, laughing as they drip
cheese. The acid quip I planned to make dies on my lips. It’s weird to think of Madison having
feelings that get hurt.

“Ah Christmas.” I settle on the adjacent stool, gesturing at the bartender for a warmer cocoa.
“That festive time of year, so joyous and evergreen.”

“Veronica Mars.” She flashes me a brief, displeased glance, re-focuses on her drink. “Here to
brag about your friend’s new conquest? Because I’m not in the mood for games.”

“Nah.” I accept a fresh cup with a smile. “Dick’s sort of my annoying brother, but he’s not a guy
I’d recommend dating. My friend went there at her own risk.”

She makes a scoffing noise, watching Enbom, Ashley and Kimmy walk by; they’re trailed by
Carrie, to whom only Kimmy pays cursory attention. Carrie glances at us, then quickly away--
Madison smirks, enjoying the spectacle, and there’s the jewel past price I remember. “Like I even
want that idiot anymore,” she says, gaze returning to Dick. “It’s just, I don’t get his reasoning. Cindy Mackenzie isn’t remotely ONE of us. How does he know she’s not after money? What makes him think she’s worth his time?”

“They have a lot of the same interests,” I say, mildly. “And the way he’s running through his trust fund? I suspect, before much longer, HE won’t have money either.”

“Does she tell you her secrets?” Madison turns to me, and her slurred words and red eyes finally register. “Mac? Give you access to the skeletons in her closet?”

“MAC has the best poker face I have ever personally seen,” I tell her, instead of answering. “She doesn’t share often, except on the rare occasions she wants advice.”

“Do you ever feel like, even though you have more money than God, you don’t belong?” Madison asks, abruptly changing the subject. Stares into the depths of her drink. “Like, you may live in a nice house, and have Jake Kane for a stepdad, but you’re still really…trailer trash on the inside? I mean, your actual father lives in a TWO-BEDROOM. Even though you’re engaged to Logan…doesn’t the difference between you GRATE?”

This statement likely would have sent me postal, back in the day--when I was still Lilly’s pink, country-mouse sidekick, and this piece of work LOVED to make cracks. But I’ve successfully solved the Mysterious Case of the Baby-Swap, so I get the subtext. Madison isn’t worrying about ME.

“I don’t think a person’s worth is dictated by their bank statement,” I turn my cup marshmallow-ward, take a steaming sip. “So no, I never feel inferior. If I hadn’t spent my teen years in Jake’s house, though? I don’t doubt for a second our fine, upstanding classmates would have CALLED me a gold-digger.”

“I’ve seen how hard you work at seeming successful,” she says. “Debutante, class president, hottest boyfriend in school. So don’t bullshit a bullshitter, Veronica. The spit-shined way you and I present takes EFFORT, and there aren’t any guarantees. My stab at snagging a hot guy with a good portfolio failed…even though I’ve trained my ASS off in the gym, and endured four surgeries. I doubt there IS a happy ending that involves emotions, for me. And realizing that has really sucked.”

“At least you recognize you HAVE value,” I say, feeling stirrings of empathy. “Even if you still don’t get that it stems from your brain, not your nose job. I mean…it’s a start.”

“Look if I want to play the whining, ‘who needs 09’ers?’ game, I’ll go lower my social profile by talking to Carrie Bishop,” she snaps. “I won’t take that shit from you, when you’ve got everything any of us could want.”

“Why’s Carrie HERE, anyway, hanging around the fringes?” I ask. Because it’s the unresolved question that most bugs me. “I figured she’d be on the first bus to LA once I got Cobb off her back, flipping us all the bird through the window. The only person she’d stick around for is Susan--and even THEY seem to have drifted apart.”

Madison lifts her brows. “Are you serious?” when I give back blank incomprehension, she snorts a laugh and shakes her head. “Wow, I guess Logan DID hustle you out of his birthday party before their BFF break-up fight--that guy is SMOOTH. Susan SPLIT because Carrie’s spent a year trying to steal your boyfriend, Veronica. And Susan wouldn’t be a party to that, after you got her creepy statutory-rape baby adopted. She told Carrie if she didn’t back off Logan, they were done. Following which Carrie shrugged, said, ‘Whatever, loser, who needs you?’ and took out her frustrations on Dick.”
“Carrie wants my fiance more than she cares about her BEST FRIEND?” I demand, sure this can’t be right. “She busted her ASS to get justice for Susan, after Mr. Rooks did his horrible worst. She loves Susan more than ANYONE!”

Madison gives me a long, assessing look. “Logan didn’t tell you?” she muses, gossip-thirst perking in her speculative tone. “About the reason he ostracized her?”

“Just exactly what are you hinting?” I ask, incensed. Because I flat-out demanded an explanation back in jail. And it seems Madison’s suggesting Logan’s response was a lie.

“Look, I don’t know details.” She holds up a not-my-fault hand. “Carrie denied wrongdoing, and Logan ignored anyone who asked. But I heard she threatened him—said someone ought to tell you the truth about whatever it was they did. He cut her out, so she’d have no access, then made everybody else do the same.”

She squints at the last sip in her glass, drains it. “I never got why you wouldn’t ditch her, after she clung to him for MONTHS…why you were so SURE she wasn’t a threat. But it encouraged her to endure everybody’s hostility, instead of just fading away. It’s ironic, actually; she’d LOVE an excuse to chase YOU off, and take your spot in the sun.”

I sit back, reviewing all my encounters with Carrie in the slipstream, trying to make this story fit. Because sure, I get that she’s into Logan—every girl I know is. But I was positive he helped HER out of guilt…and that her priority was never men. If Other V trusts Carrie, though, and Carrie’s been messing with her head? It might explain recent relationship problems. Things have been rocky, except in Ideal Reality…where Carrie’s persona non grata.

“In FACT,” Madison drawls with relish, because maybe I touched a nerve during the Dick conversation, “I don’t see Carrie OR Logan ANYWHERE. And he went upstairs to change like twenty minutes ago. She was pissed she couldn’t get him alone, at the party last night. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s waylaid him somewhere.”

I set my cocoa on the bar with a shivering clank and rise, only to be pulled up short by her bitter, dry voice. “He’s not worth it, Veronica Mars,” Madison warns, meeting my eyes, dead serious. As if she actually believes she’s doing me a favor. As if maybe, in this one reality, she's on my side. “Men never are. Take your own advice…focus on yourself.”

You bet, I think, striding off towards Moose Central without bothering to respond. I’ll focus on myself proving this is paranoid bullshit. And then I’ll shove Carrie out of Other V’s life for good.

The whole way through the maze of hallways, up the elevator, I work on talking myself down. Things are different in the slipstream—Improved Past Logan would never. We’re engaged here, in this reality, and I’m pregnant. Plus he SWEAR he’d never cheat, and Logan keeps his word.

I’m ready to pound on the door when I reach the room—both because I’ve got no key, and to prove I don’t NEED the element of surprise. It’s been left ajar, though…blocked from latching by the sleeve of that horrific orange jacket. I push it open without a sound, and creep tentatively in.

Moving Jell-o-slow, as one does in nightmares, I hear them before I see them; his voice low and sardonic, hers higher and clipped. When I peer around the corner, they’re facing off. He’s in a towel with wet hair, dripping all over the floor. She’s still in ski clothes, doing the same.

“What do you hope to gain?” he demands, shuffling through a suitcase on the chair, coming up with a pair of boxers. “How desperate do you have to BE to not vanish when dismissed?”
“You seemed friendly enough last night,” she says mildly, reaching out a hand. He shrugs away from her touch, while my stomach bottoms out in rage.

“What, when you were crying and threatening to OD?” he asks, before I can storm out or start screaming. Steps into the underwear, tugging it up beneath the towel. “And Ashley, Casey and I staged an INTERVENTION? That wasn’t FRIENDSHIP--I just don’t want your death on my conscience.”

“Oh, why not? Because you’re a prince? As you proved, beyond a reasonable doubt, after the Park Bench Incident on Ski Ball night.” She smirks, crossing her arms in a show of bravado.

“That was ONE three-second kiss, Carrie,” he says, making an emphatic hand gesture as my nausea escalates. “I was drunk, and furious with Veronica; all I wanted was to talk to you about the slipstream, because you’re the only one who understands. But I have no intention of BETRAYING her, ever, unlike YOU. Really, Carrie, it’s no wonder everyone hates your guts. You’re a shitty friend.”

“One kiss you STARTED, Logan,” she says, mimicking him. “I’ll bet THAT weighed on your hero complex, even if you DID run off screaming. Oh, wait, no, I’m wrong. You blamed the whole thing on me, because you’re a sexist PIG.”

“Oh, is that the lie you’re currently peddling, in an effort to rehabilitate your image? I was the only one tango-ing? Nice. You really are a spectacular human being.” He picks up a shirt, yanks it on, and throws the towel angrily across the room.

“Whereas you’re the world’s most upstanding guy--although you haven’t told Veronica squat,” Carrie murmurs, dry.

“What do you recommend I SAY?” he demands. “That the two people she trusts most fucked up? No WAY will I hurt her like that, when she’s already dealing with a difficult pregnancy, plus MYRIAD other problems. I’m not glamorizing your leftover feelings from some tenth-grade Lilly-and-Casey revenge fuck, paired with my guilt because I didn’t save Corny. We’re a YEARS-AGO casual hookup, you and I, not my Happily Ever After, no matter WHAT the future holds. So just take your desperate, needy ass elsewhere. Prey on some musically-inclined idiot who can kick-start your career.”

“Get real, Logan,” she says, exasperated, not any more intimidated by his anger than I am—she knows he’s all talk. “This is just survivor guilt. You feel awful about knocking her up, in light of what’s coming. You’ll get sick of playing noble fast, once the shit hits the fan. And where will you be, when you end up crawling back, and I don’t want you anymore?”

“Better off?” he asks, acid. “You’re a bitch who’s trying to steal her pregnant best friend’s fiancé, and she’s the girl I love enough to MARRY. It’s not like you’re the GOOD choice, here. Not to mention, everything you just said about my motivations is wrong.”

“Look, I loved Veronica too, before the slipstream shoved her off the rails, and she started holding us all at arm’s length. But she’s going to DIE, Logan.” Carrie arches her brows for emphasis, and I think WHAT? “Soon, unless I miss my guess--certainly before the end of Freshman Year. You’ve known that since you realized who the spirit possessing her IS— her OWN, from a few months down the road. And since you learned, even though realities differ, there’s no way to escape fate.”

“Lilly’s still alive,” he says, stubborn. Carrie snorts.
“Sure, for now. Knowing Lilly and her love of danger, how long do you think THAT state of affairs will last? Lilly getting a couple extra years is NO reason to keep investing in a lost cause. Why chase a genuine spark, like you and I have, away, for this…ghost you’ll never even MEET?”

“That’s a REALLY good question,” I say, stepping forward to reveal myself. Logan jerks back as if punched. “I’d LOVE to hear the answer! Assuming I merit that courtesy, of course, since I’m apparently as good as DEAD.”

Carrie takes a look at me, locked so rigid with fury I’m shaking, and starts to laugh. She bends at the waist, holding her knees, and completely cuts loose with glee. “Looks like the cat’s out of the bag, Echolls,” she says, when she straightens. “Good luck explaining! And can I just say….I’m SO glad you’ve finally gotten what you deserve?”

She sweeps out past me with a haughty toss of hair, and I clench my teeth as Logan runs his palms across his skull. Hesitantly licks his lips. “This is why you treat me with kid gloves in the future,” I say, recalling his Ideal Reality admissions. “This is why you hid so much. So I’d never find out I’m your DUNCAN, someone you expected to disappear! You lined up a replacement, just like Weevil hinted; she’s even playing my original role!”

“No,” he says, an expression of sheer panic washing over his face. “Nonononono, Veronica, that is NOT what’s happening. I don’t know how much you heard, but you are COMPLETELY off the mark!”

“Am I?” I demand. “Once I was the girl you pretended to hate, but secretly wanted. I’m intimately familiar with your preferred form of foreplay.”

“That moment with Carrie was NOT ROMANTIC!” He waves his hands wildly to emphasize. “It was ONE KISS that meant LESS THAN NOTHING, because I was drunk, furious, and feeling bleak about fate. Then I walked away and cut off all contact, so I wouldn’t fuck up the best thing that’s ever happened to me. Which is being loved by you, and DESERVING it!”

“Then why lie?” I demand, so furious my lips feel frozen. “Even when I asked you point blank? I gave you EVERY CHANCE to come clean, yet you didn’t! You swore at the jail this wouldn’t blow up in my face, although you knew that wasn’t true; just like you ALWAYS do, after you get drunk and make some horrible mistake. I can’t trust you to be straight with me in ANY reality, you ASSHOLE!”

His face gentles, as if he finally gets it, and he approaches, palms out, conciliatory. I back up a step, and he stops. “Because I was scared, Mrs. R,” he says, in his softest, most coaxing voice, “You’re prone to go overboard with the judgments, in case you haven’t noticed—and I didn’t want to lose you. I’m NOT secretly in love with Carrie Bishop, for fuck’s sake. CARRIE’S not the one I privately pined for all these years. CARRIE’S not the one I wanted so much I thought I would die. YOU are. You, who’s always slipstreaming away, and leaving me with a V who’s only recently committed. You, who like Carrie said…I might not ever get to MEET!”

“So you don’t even love Other Veronica?” I ask, and he groans exasperation.

“I have ALWAYS loved her,” he says, resting frustrated hands on hips. “Since I was TWELVE. But I also always figured she’d come to her senses and dump me, until the day she accepted my proposal. Do you know how hard it’s been, waiting for her to become you, the version who embraced and supported me? Not sure she ever would? Never positive, until very recently, that you and she were even the SAME GIRL, in the specific ways that mattered?”

“Do YOU know how hard it is to constantly be ripped away from every VERSION of our
relationship?” I retort, jaw clenched. “And have no control of, or even REMEMBER, what happens when I’m not around? Do you know how much harder that becomes, when you’re not HONEST with me?”

“This has ALL been difficult!” He gesticulates, pacing. “But worth it. Because I love Veronica, and I love you, and FINALLY, you’re close to the same. And after everything—after the hundreds of times we’ve risked our LIVES—to let one bitter grope with Carrie while I pondered your death END us? Why would you DO that? What would it PROVE?”

“I want my dad,” I say, tears welling up. It’s hard to see. “I want to go HOME, and hug my REAL DAD, and have him make me lasagna with extra cheese. I want him to tell me everything’s all RIGHT!”

He slumps back against the wall, looking poleaxed. “Are you saying we’re over?” he asks, voice shaking. “Would you seriously slipstream AWAY FOR GOOD, back to a reality that’s more FAMILIAR? Lying about the baby and the Piz investigation were big betrayals too, Veronica, equally as bad as one measly kiss. But I STUCK IT OUT, even though I’m afraid I’ll lose everything. I TRIED. Honestly, I’m starting to think time travel’s your perfect excuse. You can flee the awkward moments, claiming nothing’s your fault, and leave others to pick up the pieces!”

“I don’t KNOW if we’re over!” I shout, losing it. “Like you’ve told me, time and again, I’m not the Veronica who gets to CHOOSE! But you kissed Carrie, and then you covered it up. And if your V can’t get past that, ever…it’s not like I haven’t been there!”

He slides down the wall, sitting, and I add, “You always claim you’re so different from my version; but here we are anyway, having the same fight. And this is the moment where I LEFT other you…because he couldn’t keep his hands off random girls.”

“Yeah, lash out and run,” he says, bitterly, staring at the wall. Waves a dismissive hand. “That’s your trademark, right? Your signature move.”

“I need time,” I say, instead of rebutting. Because I’d rather punch myself in the face than admit he’s right. “I’m going to Dad and Alicia’s, to process. When Other Veronica comes back, which will no doubt be soon, you can take this issue up with her. And if she’s willing to keep your sorry ass, after you kissed her best friend? You and I can discuss whether I WANT a slipstream partner who keeps me in the dark.”

I zip the red suitcase filled with my stuff, grab my messenger bag and coat off the chair. Storm out, ablaze with indignation.

At my last glimpse of him, he’s still sitting on the floor, hands limp beside him, palms up. Gaze fixed on nothing, as far as I can see.

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Four hours later, I knock on Dad’s door as the cab pulls away. He opens it like he’s been waiting, and hauls me into a hug.

“Hanging in there?” he asks against my shoulder, rocking; no judgment, no lecture, because he’s Dad, and he loves me unconditionally. I can see, just past him on the kitchen counter, a casserole dish covered in foil.

“Yeah,” I say, because I DO feel better, being here with him. “Logan and I had a dumb fight. There are always other girls, trying to poach, and sometimes I just can’t cope.”
“Alicia left food for you on the counter,” he says, patting my back. “I made up the guest room bed with fresh sheets, and you’re welcome to stay as long as you want. But Veronica…you and Logan are having a baby. You’re engaged. Don’t you think maybe, before you do anything rash… you should TALK about whatever problem you kids have?”

I feel the tears well up again—GOD, I don’t want to agree. “I’ll end up forgiving him,” I admit, blinking them back. “Because he hurt me, and he did wrong, but it’s not like he slept around. He’ll step up his game—become the perfect boyfriend—and I’ll promise not to leave. Then we’ll live happily ever after in our beach house with Peanut, and he’ll have her ultrasound picture framed. Somehow, I’m positive.”

And I am. Because I’ve lived it, in the slipstream, already. Other V chose when she put on his ring, knowing life wouldn’t be easy. One kiss with Carrie won’t dent her surety that she’s this Logan’s End Game.

“Fair enough,” Dad says, with a smile. “In the meantime, dinner and a hot bath cure all ills. The water pressure’s a lot better in this place…no icy, mid-scrub surprises.”

I smile, pat his cheek. Carry my bag into the room and take his advice…it’s the IDEA of lasagna I wanted, not the substance. The smell of it perfuming the air, and the certain safety of home.

Bathed and settled into bed, though, I can’t sleep. I pull my phone out, note the blinking message light, and figure, in for a penny. Press play.

“Veronica,” Logan says. His voice is low, gravelly, quite clearly plastered—I hear airport noises in the background. “I want you to know something, before you slipstream away. What I WOULD have said to Carrie, back in that hotel room…what I was ABOUT to, when you interrupted. I keep fighting fate, even though my Veronica and I worry she’s going to die, because that’s how much I love you BOTH. And because I’m positive the future’s not set. If I can just keep you alive, and keep us together, past the point where you enter the slipstream? I know…I KNOW…everything will be OK. I’ll get to keep my girl, my family—and our life together will be wonderful, Veronica. We’ll get our happy ending. All because I busted my ass and never gave up, no matter how hard things got. Just like you do, every day, when you wake up and find your whole world’s changed.”

There’s a long silence, then, “So that’s it. That’s my explanation. I keep going because Veronica Mars is the ONLY person I’ve ever really loved. The only one I’ve looked in the eye and thought ‘forever’. It’s always been you, Veronica. It always will be. I love you, SO much, and I’m sorry I caused you pain.”

He huffs, mutters something like, “Get it together before the tape runs out,” then continues. “I’m not going to storm your dad’s house and kick down the door, because I’m not sixteen,” he says. “But I’ll be at the Grand in three hours, and I’ll leave a key for you at the desk, in case either version of you wants…to talk. Which I really hope you do. Because you’re both my girl.”

The phone clicks as he hangs up. I sit staring at the screen for a long time, before finally hitting save. Other Veronica deserves to listen, on her own steam. She needs to hear his drunken speech herself, because really, when it matters? He always comes through with the whole truth, in the end.

I’d send a text to tell him so…but she deserves right of first response. Besides, I spilled my guts in that Nautilus lifeboat, as well as many subsequent times. And he just proved, in Ideal Reality, that he’s sure of how I feel.

I lie back, staring at the ceiling, heart pounding—think, fuck it, I know what I need to do. So I throw the covers back, stomp into the bathroom. Find a crusty green bottle of Nyquil in the medicine
cabinet, with an expiration date that hasn’t passed.

It says it’s safe to take pregnant, so I enjoy a slug, resettle in bed with a sigh. Decide, as I drift towards sleep, that what’s true for Improved Past Logan is true for every version; our connection is qualitatively different than what we feel for anyone else. We’re fated. And we’ll keep gravitating together, then colliding, for as long as we both exist.

I realize this, accept it, in that quiet, sleepy purgatory deeper than bones. Grow sure of my love, and his—which even threat of death can’t dent.

And in my darkest, most secret subconscious heart, I forgive.
So Many Tried to Compete with You

Chapter Notes

FYI, guys, I'm posting the last three chapters at once tonight. So If you started here by mistake, go read Ch 48 first, or you'll miss the big penultimate reveals!! :-)

THREAD FORTY NINE

I dream, the first time I ever have in the slipstream; and what I dream is, I’m surfing it. On my board, the yellow one Logan bought me, twisting through briny waves. I’m filled with joy as I shift and balance, aware I’m controlling my path. I have power over the ocean of time, even though I’m a speck, and it’s vast enough to consume me.

Then I’m on the Stanford Quad, in the dappled sunshine of early fall, wound in a companionable knot with Logan, Lulu and Loki—my head rests comfortably on Logan’s chest. I’m reading a sheaf of papers, sunglasses perched atop my nose, and there’s a latte in my hand. He’s got a phone to his ear, murmuring about Lamaze and my midterms, his free hand gently carding my hair. The sunlight’s bright, so I close my eyes. But I feel so happy, after a long and difficult road. So safe, finally, here with him, and fundamentally at peace.

I’m in the kitchen of that dreary, grey, pre-furnished apartment, jazzed up now with throw pillows and Hammer Classics posters. Hamburger Helper sizzles in a pan, while I listen to music and dance, wearing cutoffs and a tank top, under an apron emblazoned with hearts. I reach up to scratch my head—my hair’s itching as it grows—and the front door swings open, admitting first Loki, then Logan. He looks tired as he approaches; but then he sees the table, set with silver and china, boasting a melted-crayon, wine-bottle candle. His expression dissolves into a genuine, happy smile. He approaches, putting an arm around me from behind, kissing my neck. Dances me around in a circle, while rice flies off my spoon. Loki enjoys a surreptitious snack from the kitchen floor.

I’m walking down a country lane, somewhere quiet and bright; black birds croak hoarsely in the beech trees, and the air’s perfumed by warm herbs. Logan’s beside me, holding my hand. He’s out of bandages now, and boasts a scar on his temple—but when he looks down at me, he’s got both eyes. He smiles, crookedly, tenderly; I can feel myself blushing. I bring the wildflowers I’m holding to my nose as he bounds off to pick more, moving with his customary fluid grace. The light really IS gold, as the sun sets. Mingled with my bouquet comes the sharp scent of sage.

I’m walking across the beach in Neptune with Logan. He’s got a fresh pink scar along one side, wetsuit stripped to his waist, and we’re both carrying boards. His hair is bleaching, exposed to more sun than normal, and he looks fitter, healthier, happier. Some of his freckles are new. “Are you ready?” he asks, with a twinkle. “Not too tired?” I shake my head, take off running towards the line of surf. He follows with a shout of laughter that startles nearby seagulls into flight.

I’m in a big, soft bed, waking to a thready cry, quickly hushed by gentle murmurs. I open my eyes to see Logan, curled in the corner chair, holding Peanut and feeding her, while waves crash, ceaseless, past the window. He tucks the red silk robe more securely around her hungry, wiggling frame; starts humming, off-key and quiet, stroking her scalp with one thumb. I smile and sigh, snuggling back into the pillows, because I KNEW Other V would forgive him. I was right to believe everything would turn out fine.
And then I’m back in my tiny waterbed, in the shitty apartment I share with my dad. I fight through a Nyquil haze to alertness, while Backup bathes my face with spit like rotten fish.

My phone is flashing, from my bag beside the bed. I pick it up and listen to the message I now know by heart.

I rise and dress, and maybe it’s the Nyquil, but this moment FEELS dreamlike—the dark-underbelly inverse of those pink-petal-pool-Lilly fantasies. I gather the keys to the Le Baron, sneaking out to the soundtrack of dad’s soft snores. I drive to the Neptune Grand.

Tina waves at me gaily from the front desk, where she’s watching ‘Repo Man’ on a hidden laptop while pretending to work. Then I’m on the elevator, going up up up to the penthouse; using my worn card key for ingress, the one that came smothered in a sloppy red bow.

Logan’s sprawled across the bed in an unbuttoned white dress shirt, red-eyed and unshaven, staring at the ceiling. The room is a mess, pizza boxes and whiskey bottles, what looks like a Johnny-Depp-style trashing. Like this is a play; ‘Logan Echolls, Drama Queen, and the Five Stages of Grief’.

It takes him a while to notice me, standing still in the doorway—then he sits up, surveying me blearily, trying to guess if I’m a hallucination. He rubs a giant hand across his face, and his eyes fill with tears.

“I really love you, too,” I say, fighting not to cry in sympathetic response. “And I forgive you for everything. And I’m never leaving you again.”

He makes a noise like a groan, like he’s breaking inside, and then he’s up, grabbing and spinning me; kissing, with every bit of force in his foully whiskey-scented mouth. “Oh, God, Veronica,” he says, as we fall onto the bed. He wraps his arms and legs around me, puts his chin on top of my head. As if he’s terrified to ever let go.

“No more getting wasted, on your part,” I say, curling a palm around his sweaty skull. “No more hanging with shitty people, or failing because you’re skipping class. No more lashing out when you feel I’ve rejected you, in whatever way hurts the most. We talk instead.

“And no more running away from who I am and what I want, on mine. Lilly told me once that I was red satin, not yellow cotton, and I’ve recently decided it’s true. Red satin Veronica loves a dangerous job and a dangerous boy, and has no need to pretend.”

He starts to reply, and I lay a finger across his lips. “So from now on, I prove it,” I continue. “I flaunt you. You’re mine, in front of dad and Wallace and Mac…in front of EVERYONE. You get to be the muscle and protect me. And I commit to you—we buy a place together. A real house, on the beach, so you don’t burn through your trust fund eating buffalo burgers at this dumbass hotel.

“And I tell you how I feel, every day, in such a way that you HEAR me. You have ALWAYS been my One, Logan. No matter what you thought, based on who I dated, I have never truly loved anybody else. So don’t doubt that, even when your super-secret lack of self-confidence whispers you should, at night. Because your doubts aren’t true. It was always you.”

He leans up on one elbow, tenderly brushes hair off my face. “What brought this on?” he asks, voice soft and thrashed. “Because you’ve made a complete one-eighty, Veronica--a sea change. And I’m honestly not sure I’ve earned this level of forgiveness.”

“When you admitted your role, in the events of Shelly’s party,” I say, pressing under his chin with
one knuckle so his gaze locks with mine. “The night of your un-birthday, before I found the secret cameras. Did you think I would forgive you?”

“Of course not,” he scoffs, glancing away. “Why would you? I didn’t even forgive me. What everybody at that party did to you…nobody should have to grant dispensation.”

“How about when you admitted to sleeping with Kendall? Or Madison? Or when you described your behavior, the night of the Mexico fire? Did you think I’d forgive you, then?”

“You know I didn’t!” he says, exasperated. “Not my finest moments, Veronica, as you, of all people, are well aware.”

“So why did you tell me?” I demand, voice soft. “Why did you confess, even though you realized I wouldn’t forgive?”

“Because you deserved to know,” he murmurs, getting my point at last. “Because it was right.”

“Exactly,” I say. “You have Dangerous-Liaisons-level manipulative skills, Logan. You could cozen me into believing anything. Yet you always, eventually, tell the truth when it matters. You give me the crucial information, then respect my response. Because it’s RIGHT. That’s why I love you. And that’s why I forgive you. You’d rather treat me with decency, as an equal, than keep me. Despite your myriad poor choices, you are a GOOD MAN.”

“Veronica,” he says, then stops, pressing his face to my shoulder.

“Lilly loved you, Logan,” I tell him. “So did your mom. They didn’t act like it, because they were scared and immature. But they did. And back when I was scared and immature, I secretly loved you, too.”

“I was mean to you because I thought you didn’t care,” he whispers, breath of sound. “And I felt like a sucker, because I DID.”

“I know,” I say. “You demanded I choose between you and dad, and I couldn’t. So I just pretended I had. I’m a good faker, too.”

He laughs, shaky, and looks up at me from beneath his brow, warmth kindling in his expressive eyes. “Then all those thousands of orgasms…?”

“I’m not THAT good,” I say, and he presses his forehead to mine.

He pulls back and smiles, after a long spell of breathing in calm, the one-sided, devastatingly tender crook of his mouth that melts my brain. “So, since you’ve given back my reason to care…I’d better find a shovel, right? Dig my way out of this one-way-ticket-to-hell-hole. Become the guy Veronica Mars deserves.”

“Bath first,” I tell him, giving his neck a pat. “And brush your teeth. There’s Jagermeister leaking out your pores.”

He grins, and I grin back, and he pulls me against him. We stay that way, just existing together, for a long time.

“Come on,” he says eventually, into the dimness. “Let’s go clean up, and wash away this fight forever. Then, the first time at least, I’ll let you be on top. I’ll promise anything you want while you drift off to sleep, and keep every single vow.”
“Deal,” I say, take his hand. He climbs off the bed, and leads me into the future.

THREAD FORTY NINE INVERTS

I wake slowly the next morning, drifting up layer by layer from unconscious to alert, not bothering to open my eyes.

Logan’s half-beside, half-beneath me in the warm cocoon of blankets, smelling intensely himself, slightly damp with sweat. I nuzzle into his neck. He grunts and pulls me closer, curling his arms around, his cheek pressed to my temple. I kiss the skin beneath my lips; he sighs, very softly, like even in sleep this makes him happy.

Light streams through the window, turning the inside of my lids orange, and I wonder what I’ll see when I open them. I’m past the beginning of the slipstream, now, back in my own reality. Which I’m guessing means I’m at the end.

He shifts, limbs twitching, muttering nonsense, and my lashes lift, just a fraction. There’s light, lying across green sheets in bars from the blinds. An empty pizza box, resting on the side table. Logan’s surfboard, the big white one with the palm tree, which he bought in ninth grade and keeps out of sentiment, even though the fin’s broken. I’m in his room, in the one-and-only original-issue Neptune Grand.

I spread my hand lightly over my belly; wonder if there’s a Peanut inside yet, unfurling unseen. Glance across at him. His hair’s sticking out in every direction, and he badly needs a shave. He’s awake, too, watching me, eyes still faintly red.

“Hey,” he says quietly, corner of his mouth quirking. His lids crinkle at the edges, the barest and most peaceful of smiles. His hand slides down my spine, comes to rest in the lower curve.

“Hi there,” I say back, and lean down to kiss him.

And I grin while I do it, because I’m finally home.
Big Hands I Know You're the One

Chapter Notes

Hey folks, I'm posting the last three chapters all at once tonight. So if you start here by mistake, head backwards quick, because this is the epilogue! Ch 48 is where you want to begin, it's the penultimate stuff, and Ch 49 is the grand finale. :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THREAD FIFTY

“The wedding planner’s signaling,” Logan says, near my ear, capturing me from behind in an embrace. “We finally get to dance.”

I turn, from where I’ve been grooving with Dad to ‘Don’t Fear the Reaper’; because that’s our joke father-daughter song, and I’m not ashamed. Smiling, I let Logan pull me into his arms. “Far be it from me to argue,” I say, blowing Dad a kiss over my shoulder as he wanders back towards Alicia. “It’s more than our lives are worth, to defy that woman.”

We’re in a ballroom, large and ornate, shades of cream and gold throughout, splashed with red; napkins, flowers, little favors at the place settings, all of it shaped like hearts. My heavy, swishy satin dress, which shimmers like jewels when I move, is cut to fit snugly, even though I’m pregnant enough to make that a challenge. All our nearest and dearest—of which there are, surprisingly, many—surge and cluster in the cavernous space. They’re enjoying the best food and music Logan’s blood money can buy, and making a LOT of noise.

“You look SO beautiful,” he says, spinning me, as I loop my arms around his neck. The DJ starts making a speech, to which I pay zero attention. “Non-traditional and completely ravishable, just the way I like you best.”

I smile, toying with his lapels, because look who’s talking. He’s in a white tux with a red rose in the lapel; and though I’m still not used to seeing him out of his dress blues, on occasions such as this, I have to admit, he’s edible. “In some cultures, red wedding dresses are considered lucky,” I inform him, looking up through my lashes. “Maybe we can go skinny dipping later, and you can find out if that’s true. Once you help me OUT of it, I mean.”

“He laughs, just as the opening notes of ‘Sway’ kick in. Then I laugh, because of course. Of course, this is what Logan Echolls picked, for our first-dance-as-marrieds song.
I press my face to his chest, enjoying his warmth, the solid presence I’m now able to take for granted; he’s never abandoned me, despite years and continents, and I no longer think he will. Relax into him, letting my thoughts slide towards the lascivious. Swimming in the cool, but not freezing, summer ocean. Naked, the golden crunch of sand against our skins….

“Moom!!” I hear from across the dance floor, and Logan chuckles, tucking me closer. “Peanut, closing fast,” he murmurs into my ear. “Sounds like some poor bastard crossed her.”

She comes striding across the parquet, all grace and long legs in her gold bridesmaid’s dress, wearing the look of determination I know bodes ill. She stops next to us, shoving a hand through her mass of bronze curls, and hisses, “Bobby Enbom tried to SLOW DANCE with me!”

I feel Logan shivering with contained laughter, but he manages a scowl. “You want me to murder him and hide the body?”

She grins. She’s got my cleft chin and crocodile smile, and two deep, Mac-like dimples. When she laughs, her big brown eyes squeeze halfway shut, and she looks distinctly feline. “I want mom to do it. Bobby said his dad said he needs to live in fear of her.”

I look up at my daughter—at 12, she’s already three inches taller, and delights in telling me I can sit on HER lap—and mirror back the expression. “Give me five minutes,” I say. “They’re playing our song.”

She rolls her eyes. “Ugh, EMBARRASSING!” she moans, and lopes off, probably to eat yet another piece of cake. She’s bidding fair to be a Lynn-Echolls-level beauty, but she’s still mostly a kid.

“So what are you going to do to Bobby?” he asks, conversationally, once she’s safely out of earshot.

“Depends which weapons are unobtrusive, and close at hand,” I retort, with a smile.

He laughs, and says, “We may not be the most conventional family, but we boast both surgical and combat skills. Just don’t get caught, is all I’m saying. Because that would mess up our honeymoon.”

I snort, and murmur, “Like you ever WANTED to be conventional.”

“Well, no,” he admits. “I think the whole concept’s a ruse. But YOU did, once upon a time.” He spins me with flair, making my skirt billow, and my hair starts to spill out of its complicated up-do. “But tell the truth, Veronica, now that you can’t run without paperwork. Do you ever regret it? Sneaking off to bang the bad boy, I mean, instead of fleeing to Brazil with Student Class President? Some? Any? None at all?”

“I wouldn’t change a thing,” I say, and grin. “As I believe you know.”

“Probably wise,” he muses, dipping me. “If we’d lived life differently, we might never have made it this far. We should be grateful for the way the chips fell.”

I shake my head, definite, and yep, my coiffure goes tumbling. “Don’t believe that nonsense for a second, sugar pants. In all realities, under all circumstances, you and I are fated. No matter what choices we made? We were always going to end up right here.”

He smiles and kisses me, sweet passion and clear-eyed understanding. We sway to the music, entwined—spinning in tight, coordinated circles, as the DJ turns up the volume on our favorite song.
This fic was a massive undertaking, and there’s no way I could have completed it without help. So I owe a ton of gratitude to those who’ve assisted along the way.

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I’m grateful to you all for this wonderful experience, it truly is the most fun I’ve ever had writing anything. VM Fandom is the BEST fandom. Thanks for all the fish, and I hope you enjoyed the last chapter!

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