Better Then
by IsraelBlargh

Summary

Chloe has been dead for five months, and Max can no longer live with the choice she made. She's tried to go back, but her powers are gone. Or are they just dormant? Could she trigger them again with the right motivation? She can only think of one way to find out. Drama/Thriller with time-traveling mind twisters and tons of Pricefield. Inspired by Koethe and his awesome music.

Notes

Translation to Korean: Better Then by D4NGD0NG

The Better Then Project, an animated audio drama adaptation of this story.
Waves crash against the cliffside below, beating incessantly on foaming surf and bare rock. It’s peaceful up here: the scent of the sea, the breeze and birdsong, the nascent warmth of the sun at my back. And yet the peace is only skin-deep. As I stare into the photo in my hands I feel cast adrift in the currents, fluttering aimlessly among wind-bound memories.

Chloe’s been dead for five months today.

I thought it would get better, somehow. This is what she wanted, right? This is what was meant to happen, the life I’m supposed to live. How could I go against it?
It’s become routine to stare into the photo, this goddamn butterfly photo that I can’t bring myself to leave behind. I tried to go back already. I’ve tried a hundred times.

I’ve tried to rewind, too. None of it works. Ever since the funeral, the time-traveling powers have been locked beyond a door I cannot breach. I was relieved for a while, when I thought I could move on.

I don’t think that anymore. It’s been five months of going through the motions, of passing through each day without holding on to anything. Every aspect of life had seemed so important before, the grades, the homework, the social interactions and relationships. Now I can’t bring myself to care. It’s all so small and pointless. A distorted afterimage of what life could have been.

It’s been this long and still I can’t stop thinking about her, about the way she died, the person she was in this reality. I can’t get Joyce out of my head, crushed and broken, hardly a husk of who she used to be. I can’t sleep through the nightmares. Jefferson is lurking in every dark corner, even when I know he’s rotting in prison. Chloe dies every night before my eyes, she dies and I can’t do anything to stop it. I left the dark room, but the dark room stayed with me.

And no-one knows. Nobody can know. I wouldn’t believe my own story if I heard it. How can I move on, when every conversation is a crawl through a minefield, each question a tormenting reminder of knowledge I shouldn’t have? I can’t stand the way they look at me, wondering what’s wrong, wondering why I haven’t bounced back. They use words like “brave” and “tragedy” and “healing.” They don’t know any better, but it makes me want to strangle them anyway.

The weight of it all chokes me down. It’s too much, I can’t do it on my own. I just can’t.

So here is where I stand, atop the lighthouse. My legs are over the rail. This is my solution. After what Kate did in the original timeline, the irony does not escape me.

I put the photo away and close my eyes. I’m not suicidal, not really. I need to go back, and this is simply the only thing I’ve left to try, a life or death situation to trigger my powers again. I didn’t imagine any of it, I know they are there. If this doesn’t work, nothing will.

And if the powers don’t trigger...well.

Letting her die was the right choice. I still believe that, despite everything.

I just don’t think I can live with it.

I open my eyes.

I take a step forward.
In this moment, the wind whips at my face while the shoreline rushes up to meet me. As I drop one thought screams in my head: *I’m about to die.* This is the stupidest idea I ever had, how did I get this desperate? Too late to regret it now, isn’t it, genius?

A terrified wail starts in my throat as the cliff flies up closer and closer, painting vivid images of a mangled body bouncing down all the way to the rocks below. I spread my hands in front of me as if they’d be enough to break the fall.

One moment later, I am back atop the lighthouse.

I stumble a bit, holding on to the rail for dear life. One faltering breath, two, and then I collapse in a weeping mess.

I nearly killed myself. But it worked, but I nearly killed myself, but it worked. I keep going back and forth between the thoughts, horrified and proud at the same time. It takes me a while to put myself back together.

Eventually I take a deep breath and groan to my feet. I can feel it in there again, that otherworldly well of potential, of reality-warping power. It’s back within reach. I look at my right hand, searching for differences. There is nothing that I can see.

I look back up, and there is a blue butterfly on the railing, sitting exactly where I jumped from. It lazily flaps its wings, by all accounts uncaring of what I might do.

“Don’t know if you’re a guardian angel or a troll spirit, but...thanks, I guess.”

It flutters away, probably off to make a tornado somewhere else. With some hesitation I reach out and try to rewind. Reality itself thickens around me, prickling my senses in familiar ways. There’s the pressure, the reluctance, the compliance. It’s oddly comforting.

While wind and leaves reverse direction, the butterfly continues floating away.

I let go. “Figures.”

The power is back, it really is all back. Has it been in me all along? Or is it this weird spirit, watching over me, giving and taking away on a whim?

It’s all the same one way or another, isn’t it? I got what I wanted. There is only one thing left to do now.

With quivering fingers I pull out the photo again. Its edges are worn and the white border has yellowed some, but the picture is still as clear as the first day. I hold it with both hands so it won’t shake as much.

“I’m sorry, everyone. I wasn’t strong enough.”

I focus my senses. Its contours shimmer. Everything but the picture blurs away.

Let this reality be no more.

Move the cart. Grab the hammer. Smash the glass. Trigger the alarm. Everything the way it was.
I’m a nervous wreck as I listen to Chloe surviving the encounter. How much blood is on my hands right now? It isn’t like before: I know what will happen this time. I am actively, intentionally destroying the town for purely selfish reasons.

“It’s well worth the Price, Max.”

I can’t even hold back the smile. Am I a horrible person?

Leave everything the way it was—except one detail.

I pull out my journal and leaf forward. Will ten pages do? I forget how much I wrote before the final day. It doesn’t really matter, as long as I see it a couple days from now. If I don’t leave a note for my future past self, I will be stuck in a never-ending loop of misery.

I pencil it lightly so it won’t leave a noticeable mark through the paper. The words take up a whole page.

*Hi, Max. I’m Max from the future.*

_She will ask you to go back to the Blackwell bathroom._

_Don’t do it. Just move forward._

_Show her this note when it happens, but not before._

_Seriously, I’ll be pissed if you let her die again._

I feel my senses losing grip by the time I get to the end. I put the journal back where it belongs and my hand over the big red button as if I just pressed it. Hopefully my past self will do everything she’s supposed to do from here on out.

A blanket of white shrouds my vision.

In one moment there is a bathroom around me while a fire alarm hammers my eardrums.

In the next moment, I’m standing in a small nondescript room with a computer terminal and a door straight ahead. There is a weapon in my hand. A taser?

“I swear,” a familiar voice chimes in my head, “you’re the most badass superhero ever.”

I look down, and there is a still-twitching man on the floor. Two more lie behind me.

“Hello? Earth to McFly, why are you just standing there? Shit, did the feed freeze again?”

“Chloe?”

“Whoa, hey. You said not to use our names in the field anymore, least you could do is stick to your own rules.”

I bring a hand to my ear and find some kind of earpiece. “What, uh...what should I call you?”

There is only silence for a moment.

“Are you okay?” she finally asks. “This really isn’t the time to fuck around.”

“I...I just, um...”
The joy of hearing Chloe’s voice is somewhat dampened by all the bodies around me. I obviously just tased them. Nothing worse than that, hopefully.

“Dude, snap out of it.”

“Yeah, uh, okay.”

“What is going on with you?”

“Alright, so...don’t freak out, but I’ve told you what I can do with pictures, right? You know?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, right now? Are you serious? How far back?”

“Wh-what?”

“You just used a photo to make this timeline. How far back did you go?”

“I...f-five months. Why is there—”

“Five...”

Another stretch of silence.

“Holy shit,” she finally breathes. “you’re Mean Max. It finally happened.”

“I, uh...”

“It happened...shit, it happened. This is the worst timing ever...”

“Why am I holding a taser, Chloe? Where am I?”

“No time right now.” Chloe’s voice has become strangled, like she’s holding back tears. “Please do exactly as I say. Look in your coat inside pocket, left side. You’ll find a photo of us there.”

I start doing as I’m told, but something under my coat stops me in my tracks. Aghast I stare at the shoulder holster strapped to my chest.

“I’m carrying a gun?”

“There is no time for this, Max. Do what I’m telling you, chit-chat later.”

“Fine, sorry, okay.” I dig in the inside pocket. The photo is right there, all by itself inside a ziplock bag. We are staring into the lens, serious and businesslike. I barely recognize either of us.

“That’s an hour ago,” she says. My god, why is she crying? “Jump through, and tell me this word for word: It’s time to say goodbye. I’ll know what to do. Do you understand?”

“Y-yeah. Yes. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Just do it, Max. You’re in danger right now. I love you, okay?”

“Uh—”

There’s loud clattering noise on the other side, and buzzing and scratching from the microphone. Her voice can still be heard, distant and muffled. “Fuck. Fuck!” Loud crashing sounds. Things breaking. “Now she shows up? Why the fuck now? Fuck! God fucking dammit!”
She keeps swearing. She keeps yelling and crying.

What the hell kind of reality is this?

I stare into the photo. Just do what she says for now, it seems to be literally life or death. I try my best to concentrate past the weapons and the bodies and Chloe’s explosive rage.

My senses blur with astonishing ease, and once more I’m gone.

The camera flash goes off, and I blink for a moment, disoriented. I look to my left, and a raven-haired Chloe is quizzically staring at me.

“Aw crap,” she says. “You used the photo. I thought for sure the plan was good. What happened?”

I try to get my bearings. We’re inside a car, compact, sleek-looking interior. I’m dressed in black from toes to fingerless gloves, and so is she.

“Chloe...”

“That bad, huh? Wait, how long did you go? Please don’t tell me it’s been days. Oh god, are you okay?” Her hand squeezes mine as she leans forward, looking closer. There is so much concern in her eyes...

“Yeah, I’m fine, I...it’s not what you think.” I cover her fingers with my free hand. “You told me to tell you this: ‘It’s time to say goodbye.’ You said you’d know what to do.”

Her expression, it just...drops. She shrinks away, looking at me like I sprung a horrible tragedy onto her lap.

“No. No way. How long? How long from now?”

“Um...an hour, you said.”

She takes it in silence, leaning back on the seat, just breathing for a while. I look at the picture on my lap. It’s so weird to see myself with golden blonde hair, tight ponytail, loose strands tucked behind my ears. Chloe’s hair is done up in a wispy bun with side-swept bangs, black as can be. She now has a nose stud, apparently. We both look so tired.

“Alright,” she whispers. “Okay. Alright.” She blinks and rubs at her eyes. She looks at me and tries to smile through the welling tears. “You’ve got the worst timing.”

I smile back, apologetic. “So I’m told.”

“Yeah? How angry was I?”

“You...you were furious. I think you started trashing the place, wherever it was.”

“Yeah. I can relate.”

“You called me...Mean Max?”

Chloe waves her hand dismissively. “Just our nickname for the other you, it’s not mean-spirited. Look, it’s gonna be tough and weird, but first of all...thank you so much for what you did. The note you left.”
“Oh, uh...sure, I guess? It’s been a long time for you, but I just did that.”

“I know, yeah.” She blows out a frustrated breath, shaking her head. “Holy shitballs, this just got complicated again. Goddamn time travel.”

“I’m sorry, Chloe, but...can I please hug you? I’m just so happy to see you.”

Even in her state of shock I can see a playful twinkle light up in her eye. She stretches an inviting arm. “Babe, we’ve done far more than that, so knock yourself out.”

I gloss over what she obviously means and go to her without hesitation. It’s awkward to bend over the handbrake, but the hug is still everything I want it to be. I squeeze her against me as hard as I can, and I can feel the reality of her existence sink into my bones.

It was worth it. Whatever happens, whatever I’ve done...it was worth it.

“You’ve been dead for five months where I come from,” I say close to her ear.

“That’s what we thought. We figured you’d show up eventually. Didn’t think it would be this long.”

I let go reluctantly. “Why...why were you so mad?”

“D’uh. I didn’t get to say goodbye to BetaMax. I’ve always known it would happen, but that doesn’t make it any easier. But hey, this Chloe right here gets a whole hour, so...it’s all good.”

“BetaMax?”

“Cuz she’d be obsolete eventually, get it? It’s kinda mean, but it stuck.”

“Oh.”

I hadn’t thought about it, of course. I had never given much consideration to the Max I overwrote each time I traveled into a new reality through a photo.

This Max...she had known what would eventually happen, thanks to the message. What would it be like to live for months knowing that at some point everything you’re experiencing will be forgotten in an instant?

It was a death sentence, in a way.

“Chloe, why am I carrying a gun?”

“Explain later. You’re about to go, anyway.”

Right on cue, the edges of my perception start fraying. I grab her hand, suddenly afraid to let her go into yet another uncertain future. Or...present, technically.

She smiles at me. “See you on the other side.”

“Chloe, I’m sorry. Tell her I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. You saved me again and she knows it. She’ll only be mad about the timing.”

“Still...”
“Chin up, soldier. We’ll get through it, okay? And hey, don’t worry about the dye jobs. They wash off.”

It’s the last thing I hear before a world of white swallows me whole.
One moment I’m sitting in an unknown car in an unknown place, clutching Chloe’s hand like it’s the only thing keeping me from drowning.

The next moment her lips are locked with mine. Her body wraps me up in its warmth, her arms pressing me close with desperation. I’m sinking into Chloe, breathing her all around me.

It’s startling, but not in a million years would I call it “unpleasant”.

She must have sensed my surprise, because she half-heartedly pulls away. Her cheeks are streaked with tears. I don’t need a mirror to know that so are mine.

Chloe searches my eyes. “Max?”

“It’s...me. The other me.”

“Okay.” She lets go somewhat awkwardly. “Sorry. We started and...couldn’t stop.”

“It’s, uh...it’s okay.”

The way she tastes lingers on my tongue. It brings memories of another time, another kiss shared in a moment of despair.

I don’t know what she sees in my face, but she turns away like the sight is too much to bear. I’m leaning against the silvery hood of a car, probably the same car we were just in. There are benches ahead, a railing and sparse trees. Beyond the railing is the morning view of a gently sloping valley and a small town nearby. No idea where we might be.

Her back still turned, Chloe takes a deep, tremulous breath.

“She faces me and gives me a phone, headphones wrapped around it. “It’s your phone. You just got done recording this, listen to it. I...I need a moment alone right now.”

She walks up to the railing and leans over, hugging herself. Though she remains quiet, her shoulders are shaking.

Swallowing hard, I put an earbud on and tap the phone’s screen. It goes directly to the recording app and displays a just-recorded message.

Play.

After a few seconds my own voice comes through, damp and raw.

“Hi, Max. It’s me, Max from the past. Yep, five months in and time travel is still weird as fuck.

“So...I’m about to go away. I’ve struggled with that, you know? I wish I could say not anymore, but it’s still scary. Some time real soon, this person I’ve become will disappear. I keep telling myself that it’s not really dying, but...”

Sniffling. A small chuckle. “Talk about depressing. I need to shut up, I know you already feel like ass. I’m thankful for what you did, and this is the price we pay. Besides...some of my memories are better left forgotten.
"I’m recording this to give you a few quick pointers. The details are in the journal, so be sure to read it as soon as you can.

“So...I don’t know how things went down for you, but it’s been rough on this end. Leaving the powers behind wasn’t an option. I’ve done some questionable things I didn’t think I’d ever do, and you’ll learn stuff about yourself that might scare you. But please believe me: it’s all necessary. It’s all for the better. This is how it needs to be, because the alternatives are way more awful.

“I don’t know how many skills you’ll retain when you take over. Maybe you had to fend for yourself in the apocalypse and you’re even better, who knows. Anyway, here goes: you’re a decent shot but not stellar. You’re kinda shit at hand-to-hand and a clutzy mess, totally hopeless—but the time powers make up for it. You can soft-rewind for a good three to four hours now, super fast, super slow, however you like, just keep practicing and pushing the limits. Uh, sorry: I call it ‘soft-rewind’ when you remain in place, and ‘hard-rewind’ when you literally turn everything back to the same spot you were at. Like going back to class the very first time, remember? It’s happened again a few times. I haven’t figured out how to control it yet, but it has to be possible.

“Other than that, you can move while rewinding for a while, which is still rough as hell but insanely useful. There’s lots of room for improvement there. Strange enough, you can’t slow time going forward at all. And then there’s the visions, which can be a huge problem if you’re in the middle of doing something important. They just happen, don’t know when, don’t know why. Sometimes it’s just a flash, sometimes they’ll take you down cold. As far as I know whatever you see can’t be changed, so prepare for it instead. It would help a lot if at least they didn’t hurt like a bitch.

“Speaking of pain, migraines happen often but nosebleeds and fainting not so much anymore, only if you really overdo it. Just make sure Chloe is around when you train. Tough to work out the time logistics, but you’ll manage. She’s used to it by now.

“Chloe and I...well, we’re a couple. Like, real serious couple, hopelessly in love. So she’s gonna have a hard time adjusting, I imagine. Don’t take it personal, okay? She loves you so much, I...I can’t even explain—"

The voice breaks. Sniffling, heavy breathing. “I know you’ll feel the same way eventually. I can promise that you won’t regret it.”

“I’m gonna be so pissed if you forget you’re gay for me, Caulfield.”

“Oh my god, get back to your corner, donkey ears! This is supposed to be private.”

“Fine, fine...”

“Jesus.

“Listen...whatever you do, treat her right, okay? She’s...doing better now. She’s on meds, anti-depressants, make sure she takes them. I started too but stopped because they mess with the time powers for some reason. It’s been...it’s been real bad, major PTSD and all that. We’d have lost it without each other. She’s put up with enough of my bullshit, don’t you fucking hurt her now, okay?

“God, what am I saying. You’re me. You’ll be fawning all over her, just like I can’t help myself.

“By the way...because of our power, you’ll be tempted to keep secrets from her—to protect her, to avoid an argument, whatever. Just don’t bother. News flash: we’re terrible liars around Chloe, and she’s onto us. She can tell every time—and I mean that, every damn time, I swear. So be real
with her, share the burden, tell her everything. You’ll be glad you did, and she can handle it.

“Anyway, whatever the stupid magical tornado was, it seems like it was a one-time thing. I’ve twisted reality into a pretzel these past few months and nothing’s happened. I have no damn clue why Arcadia Bay had to be destroyed. Either it was all about Chloe dying in that filthy bathroom for some reason, or it didn’t have anything to do with me after all.

“I’ll warn you, though...get used to seeing weird shit. More and more these powers show me that there’s this whole world within our world that simply can’t be explained by any means. It pisses me off.”

A stretch of silence. A deep sigh.

“There is so much more. I started talking about Sean Fucking Prescott and had to rewind all of it, it was taking too long. I can’t do it justice here, anyway. Just read the journal, I spared no details about the awful shit he’s done to us because I knew you’d be reading it eventually, and I want you motivated.

“I’ve done everything I could. I’m gonna go kiss my girlfriend some more now. Feel free to keep at it when I’m gone.

“Oh yeah, Chloe said you were wondering about the gun. Don’t worry, we’re the good guys. Kind of. And yes, you have killed people. There was no choice.

“You’ll just have to deal with it. I know you can, because I have.

“Don’t let us down, Max Caulfield.”

The voice goes quiet. The recording stops.

“Wowser.”

Chloe turns to look at me. She seems calmer now. “Damn girl, you still say that?”

“Pretty appropriate for the situation, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, no kidding. It’s real heavy stuff.”

“Did you listen to it?”

“Just a bit, ‘til you shooed me away. You done?”

I nod. “I’ve killed people?”

“Wow, she told you that right away.” Chloe leans back on the railing and crosses her arms. “Yeah. We both have. Otherwise we’d be worse than dead.”

“You too?”

Chloe shrugs a shoulder. She doesn’t seem proud of it, but neither does she seem repentant. She’s just stating facts.

“Who? What’s happening?”

“Prescott goons. There’s some serious shit going down, Max. Way bigger than Arcadia Bay. We were about to end it when you showed up.”
“End it? End it how?”

“How do you think? We tracked down the bastard and you were getting past security. You’re an unstoppable assassin, girlfriend.”

I blink at her. “Holy shit, Chloe.”

“Yeah, like I said...heavy stuff. Take as long as you need.”

I lean back against the car. This is a bit much. We’re...killers? Fugitives? Outlaws for sure. It’s as if getting Chloe back created our own private post-apocalypse. Is this truly the only life she can have? Is this all I can give her, “miserable death” or “kill to survive”?

As I stare into my hand wondering how much pain I might have caused her so far, Chloe walks around to the back seat door and rummages through her junk. Our junk, I should say. She comes over and hands me a plain black notebook. After what I’ve seen of this reality, I half-expect “Death Note” to be inscribed on the thing.

“Your journal isn’t nearly as colorful these days. You basically wrote it as a guide for the new you. Or the old you, or...fuck, you know what I mean.”

I numbly flip through it. About three-fourths full. There are some photos, hardly any drawings, and loads of handwriting.

“It’ll take a while to read all this,” I tell her.

“Pfft, no it won’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“You can read it in an instant, dummy. As far as I can tell from this side, anyway.”

“Oh. Right. Time powers, d’uh.”

She gently closes the notebook while it’s still in my hands. Her fingers linger on mine. “Don’t do it now, though. Information overload and all that. She said there’s some gruesome shit in there, and you look rattled enough already.”

“You haven’t read it?”

“And incur the wrath of Mighty Max? I don’t think so.”

“Huh. She just got done telling me to share everything with you.”

“Yeah. I trust you to do that, and you trust me not to read your personal diary. Makes sense, doesn’t it?” She gives me a fond smile and a nudge toward the passenger side. “Come on, get in. You can ask me whatever you like while we drive back to TimeWarp HQ. Or...you can keep sorting out your thoughts in silence, whatever you want. Like I said...” the smile turns cheeky. “Take your time.”

“You don’t ever get tired of the puns, do you.”

“Nnnope. And you know you love ‘em. Partners in crime, Super Max.” She puts up her hand for a high-five.

“Groooan.”
“Come on, say it, don’t leave me hangin’...”

I roll my eyes and give her hand a half-hearted smack. “Partners in time, you dork.”

“Always and forever. Let’s go.”

We get into the tiny Nissan Something. Wonder what happened to her old junker. Probably abandoned on the side of the road after it exhaled its last sputtering, soot-spewing breath.

She cradles her phone into the car’s sound system and navigates through menus for a moment. “There, for old times’ sake.”

Music comes on, quiet enough for us to still have a conversation over it. I never knew the name of the song, but it vividly paints the memory in my head like it happened yesterday: Chloe dancing on her bed, puffing on her joint, telling me to shake my bony white ass. It makes me grin like I’m standing in her room again.

“Love to see that smile,” see says. The way she’s looking at me...it’s like a portrait for the word “tender”.

I have to look away. My cheeks feel really hot all of a sudden.

She starts laughing. “Haven’t seen that in forever, you’re the cutest thing! Shit, man, I need to dial it back though. I don’t wanna be creepy.” Chloe starts the engine and gets the car going. Yikes, manual transmission. “Don’t ever rewind while in a moving car, by the way. You’ll end up with your butt flat on the middle of the road.”

“I’m sure there’s a hilarious story somewhere in there.”

“Naah, not really. We tested a lot of things. For science, right? Didn’t stop me from laughing my ass off as I drove up to you and picked you up.”

“You’re well known for your empathy. Now I’m curious, what else did you test?”

“Well, let’s see. It’s not just moving cars. It’s like rewinding locks you out of normal space or something, taking away whatever momentum you had—or rather, it’s somehow anchoring you to the Earth’s own movement so you don’t shoot into orbit, we’ve guessed. So if you throw yourself off a building, and rewind at the last moment...you’re basically Batman, is what I’m saying.”

“Are you serious? I jumped off a building to test this?”

“Oh. Not...right away? First, you know, a tall ledge, then the top of a bus, then a tree...baby steps. Baby steps right off a cliff, hah. You’ve described it as sinking into a pool of jell-o, like the air thickens around you and holds you up. All I see is you at the top, then you a foot from the floor, hopping down to ground level without a scratch. Sometimes there’s this weird ghost afterimage in-between, depending on how short you make the rewind. Freaky as hell.”

“That’s...wow.”

I hadn’t known this before jumping off the lighthouse, and yet I did it anyway. I’d been counting on a “hard-rewind,” to put it in BetaMax’s terminology—which apparently is a rare and as-yet uncontrollable occurrence.

Let’s not think about it too much. Otherwise I might decide I’m fucking insane.
“Now I’m afraid to ask what else you tested.”

“Knowledge is power, though! Here are some other fun facts: the limit to how much stuff you can carry with you through time is complicated, but ‘half your weight’ is a good rule of thumb. More than that and it stays behind. You can’t rewind past any time you were unconscious. Not yet, anyway. Also, you don’t have to actually reach out with your hand like a doofus, that’s just something you do for some reason, like when Jedi wave a hand for mind-control. Mmmm...” She taps her lips with a finger as she steers with her other hand. It seems we are heading away from the town. “Say you tear up your shirt. It won’t mend if you’re wearing it, but take it off and you’ll watch it fix itself. Oh, here’s something pretty important: you don’t heal by rewinding. You stay tired, you stay hurt, and you stay dirty.”

“That sounds like I ran into trouble at some point...”

“Understatement of the year. There’s been real close calls, Max. I’m talking ‘freeze bullets in mid-air’ close. Let’s just say there’s a good reason why you carry failsafe photos anywhere you go.”

“Freeze bullets in mid-air, though? That’s pretty damn cool.”

“Yeah, okay, Neo. Sorry to break it to you but you’re not The One.”

I make an eloquent gesture with my phone. “Don’t worry, she already told me I’ll never be a kung-fu master.”

“I’m serious, though. You’ve been hurt pretty bad. You can totally get killed outright if caught by surprise, and you can’t photojump away if you’re dead.”

“Okay, okay, I get it...”

“Speaking of...” she checks her phone. “It’s been fifteen minutes since you showed up. How ya feeling? Is your head okay?”

“Y-yeah, I’m alright. Why?”

“Huh. You often get migraines a while after. Sometimes you’ll even pass out.”

“Wow. Awesome. Looking forward to that.”

She smiles to herself. “You hate photojumping.”

“What a shocker. Man, sounds like we’ve been super busy.”

She looks at me. There’s that playful twinkle again. “You don’t know the first of it, girlfriend.” She wags her eyebrows, a suggestive grin in place.

She really can’t help herself, can she? Well, I can play the game too.

“Oh yeah? Did you maybe chicken out again after I took you up on another dare?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, none of you will let me live that down! You caught me totally off-guard, I didn’t know what to do...”

“You talk a big game, ‘girlfriend’, but from my end it seems I always make the first move.”

I thought she’d bullshit right back at me, but Chloe goes quiet and thoughtful for a moment.
“It’s true, you know,” she finally says. “You’ve made the first move every time. I have plenty of chances, but I think about getting rejected and freak out.” She gives me a side-long glance, but doesn’t meet my eyes for long. “And now it’s even worse, because you know how I feel about you. Like...you know how fucking desperate in love I am, and if I try anything it’s like I’m pressuring you, and I don’t want that. It would suck for you to feel that...you know, that you have to. So here I am with an amnesiac girlfriend and a huge girl-boner and oh god shut up, Chloe, you’re making it so much worse.”

I was starting to feel bad, but I can’t help but laugh. “You were so right earlier. This is really weird.”

“I know! Fucking time travel, man.”

Her hand is on the stick. I cover it with mine. “Chloe...I wouldn’t worry too much about it. I spent all this time wishing I could be with you. And now I got my wish, so I don’t plan to ever leave your side again.”

She beams at me and quickly restrains it, like self-conscious of her reaction. “That’s awesome. It makes me stupid happy to hear that, you don’t even know.”

Chloe, demure and bashful. I never thought I’d see the day.

“Would you maybe say it’s...hella awesome?”

She bursts out laughing. “Oh, dude, blast from the past. We kind of phased out ‘hella’ without even trying. It ran its course pretty fast.”

“Hella fast?”

“Yup, there it goes, already got old.”

“Haha, I’m glad, to be honest. Rest in peace, ‘hella’. We hardly knew ye.”

“Amen.”

We glide into a comfortable silence, just watching the increasingly winding road for a while. The playlist has moved on to other songs I don’t recognize; a bit heavier on distortion than I’m usually into, but not anything I’d frown at. I simply let it sink in some more: Chloe is sitting next to me. She was dead, but now she is not. And holy shit, desperately in love—her words. I guess I don’t have to worry about rejection any time soon.

There are far more trees around us now. Wherever we’re going, it seems pretty remote. I should ask about it—I should ask about a hundred other things, really—but I’d rather put to rest the nagging concern at the back of my head.

“So...Mean Max, huh?”

She cringes a bit. “It started as Main Max. It morphed, somehow.”

“Somehow.”

“Hey, you sounded pretty mean in the note, and you did sacrifice my ass, so...Mean Max.”

The words make a clump at the pit of my stomach. She must have noticed a change in my expression, because she reaches over and gives my leg a quick shake, like trying to jolt me out of a
bad dream. “Shit. I was joking, you joke about that. Ha-ha, should have sacrificed your sorry butt, you know? That’s how we cope, I guess.”

I shake my head. “I’m sorry, I’ve just...I’ve relived it over and over in my head for so long. It was unbearable, Chloe. I couldn’t live with what I did to you.”

“Whoa, hey, you didn’t do anything, okay? I asked you to go back. It was wrong to saddle you with such a horrible choice. We talked about it later; you could totally see why future-you would leave that note. You told me how remorse would tear you up inside, little by little. How you’d try and try but never get over losing me. It was depressing to think about, but...it sure boosted my ego.”

I huff out a mirthless chuckle. “BetaMax sounds way smarter than I was. For a while I really thought I could cope, but...”

“You are exactly the same person, dumb-ass. She simply had time to think about it, instead of being forced into an impossible decision like you.”

“Having time to think makes it even worse, Chloe. There was nothing impulsive about it. In the end I decided to knowingly destroy everything just so I could be here.”

“Bullshit, you didn’t destroy a damn thing.”

“How can you say that? How are you not disgusted with me right now?”

“Oh, please, it’s not like you set off a bomb in the middle of town. Some insane powers got dumped on your lap, you tried to do the right thing at every turn and then a fucking tornado destroyed everything, not you. And even if you had, so what? I’d have done the same thing. I’d let whole cities burn to the ground to save you, I wouldn’t even care how you felt about it. What kind of a hypocrite would I be to get mad at you now? Yeah, nobody’s worth so many lives, I know that—but that’s never been the point. We are worth it all to each other. And that’s all that matters to me.”

Though firm and full of conviction, her voice remains calm throughout. Every word in its place, every bit of emphasis on the proper word. A well thought-out argument.

“We’ve had this conversation before, haven’t we.”

She gives me a complicit look, like we’re both in on the same grand con. “Not word for word, but...we had to come to terms with things, you know? We couldn’t just zombie forward and let guilt tear us apart.” She shrugs. “So we talked about stuff. A lot of stuff, let it all out, no shame, no judgments. And in the end it turned out...even with all the awful death and destruction, I was happy that you chose me, and so were you. Might be ugly and selfish, but it’s also fucking amazing to have each other. So, no, I’ve no desire to yell at you.”

I stay silent for a moment, looking out the window. As I think about what she’s saying, some of the weight lifts off my shoulders. I threw hundreds of lives off a cliff just to be with her. That is who I really am...and she is okay with it.

Max Caulfield, get over yourself already. You are not the first couple in history willing to kill for one another, and you will not be the last.

I catch a glimpse of a doe as the car makes a left onto a wide dirt road. We make eye contact before it runs deeper into the woods, and then it’s gone.

“Hey.” Her hand is on my shoulder. Her eyes alternate between the road and me. “We’re nearly
there. I don’t blame you, okay? Stop beating yourself up.”

I touch her hand and try to smile reassuringly. “I’ll be okay, I promise.”

“You better, or I’ll have to make you take my happy pills for a while, time powers be damned.”

“Hah.” I gesture with the phone again. “She said to make sure you take them.”

“Yeah, you’re such a bitch about it.”

“How is...I mean...do you want to talk about that?”

“Not much to talk about, really. It helps me keep it together and not fly off the handle at the stupidest things. There’s no shame in it. At least one of us should be somewhat sane.”

“You’re the sane one? That’s scary.”

“Bite my shiny metal ass. To be honest I probably could’ve used a prescription even before all this fucked up shit went down. Mom always wanted to get me into therapy too, but...you know how much of an asshole I was to her. Rather get baked and feel sorry for myself. I was such an idiot.”

“That’s harsh, Chloe. You had to deal with a lot. It takes time.”

“Well, at least time’s on our side now, right?”

“Okay, now you’re trying too hard. That one didn’t even make sense.”

“Everyone’s a critic. Eyes ahead, my Drama Queen. Behold your domain!”

The trees part to reveal a small clearing. I expected some kind of cabin in the woods, but parked out of sight of the main road is a huge Greyhound bus, except with much fewer windows. It’s painted two shades of dark blue with the usual logo in the middle, and every glass pane that remains is tinted black and highly reflective.

I give her a side-long look. “A bus?”

“It sure looks like a plain ol’ bus, doesn’t it?”

“That thing is ours? How’d you even drive it up here?”

She parks the car next to the monster. From where I’m sitting, it towers out of sight above me.

“Mad skills, that’s how. C’mon, let’s go inside. You’ll see.”

We get out and with a suspicious eyebrow arched I follow her to the entrance at the front. She presses a fob in her keychain and the door swooshes open like we’re in friggin’ Star Trek.

Chloe turns and bows flamboyantly, gesturing at the entryway. “After you, your Grace.”

“You’re such goon...”

Not quite knowing what to expect I go up the steps into the driver’s cabin. One look inside and I have to stop for a moment.

“Whoa.”

Chloe climbs up behind me. “Actually, I think this one deserves a full-fledged, fully loaded
‘wowsers.’"

“This is...it’s...”

It is, for one, way beyond our means. There is no way in a thousand years we could afford the leather couches, marble counters, kitchen sinks (two of them), stove, a *gigantic* HD TV...the list is long enough to make me dizzy. Past a doorway I glimpse a standing mirror and a bed so big I’m beginning to think this “bus” might transcend the laws of physics altogether. This thing is to Frank’s old RV what a posh mansion is to Chloe’s junkyard hideout.

“Chloe, this is *nuts.*”

“Wait ‘til you use the shower, you’ll melt into a puddle.”

“This is crazy expensive! Who the hell paid for it?”

She gives me a flat look. “Are you honestly asking me this question?”

“We *stole it*?”

“What? No, no no no. Legally purchased, registered, custom-painted, all legit—well, except with an alias.”

“Then...”

“Rewind powers. Online stock trading. You do the math.”

“Are you serious?”

“As serious as our multiple bank accounts. We are the one percent, baby.”

I step further in. It’s like entering an ad for retirees, with all the white leather and appliances and oh-so shiny tile. It doesn’t look very lived in. Folded clothes next to a messy laundry basket, bit of clutter in and around the sinks, half-empty bag of chips and a crumpled beany on the TV couch, a sweater thrown over the armrest and fast food trash on a nearby table...either we don’t spend a ton of time here, or I’ve done a good job so far curbing Chloe’s chaotic ways. Not that you can leave a lot of stuff lying around inside an RV, if you have to be on the move often.

I turn to Chloe. For some reason my head is starting to really hurt. “Okay, I think it’s about time you told me what’s going on. I’ll be honest, I’d imagined we’d be trying to put a life together in Seattle or something like that, not living large somewhere in the woods, doing missions and assassinating people.”

“Yeah. This wasn’t the original plan, that’s for sure.” She takes a closer look at me. “You’re getting pale. Are you feeling alright?”

“Just a headache, I’ll be fine...”

She’s immediately by my side, gently pushing me to the couch. “Fat chance it’s just a headache. That was a five month jump, Timelord. Come on, just lean back for a while.”

“But I did five years without...ungh.” The pain escalates quickly. Suddenly there’s a white blotch in the middle of my vision, and it keeps growing and growing and growing. It’s fucking unbearable.

Chloe cradles me like I became a glass figurine that might shatter any moment. “Max, you’re bleeding. Just relax. This is good, we’re safe here. So glad I don’t have to carry you around this
I feel myself sinking into the cushions, and just like that consciousness gives way to the pain.
Previously

I’m watching a laptop screen. On the other side there is a small room, and inside the room is a plain metal slab, and strapped to the slab is Chloe. She’s out of sorts and disheveled, her shirt is a torn rag on the floor. Next to Chloe stands a young woman holding a knife in her hand, and the blade is red with blood.

By my shackled wrist there is a small table with a phone on it. A voice, deep yet slightly nasal, comes through to smugly chastise me.

“You disappoint me, Miss Caulfield. You have told another lie. Miss Derrick?”

“No,” I beg him, “I swear, no, no, please, stop hurting her, please, I’ll do everything you want, I swear...”

“One line for every lie.”

The knife cuts into her, drawing another line of red. Chloe’s screams curdle my soul. She tries to hold them in, but she can’t. I would do anything, anything to stop them.

“Please, please, I swear...I swear I’m done fighting...”

“Will you take any further action against me?”

“No, I swear, I swear it...”

“You continue lying to me, Miss Caulfield.”

“No! Please! You win, I can’t fight you, I see that now! I’m begging you, please stop, I’ll do anything you ask.”

“One line for every lie, Miss Derrick.”

“Stop! STOP! Don’t touch her, I’ll fucking kill you!”

My wrists are bleeding from fighting the cuffs. I can’t rewind all this away. He knows what I can do and he can stop it. Like in a fever dream I watch Chloe scream and weep and yell profanities at that knife-wielding bitch. They are somewhere far, somewhere I can’t reach. This is what despair feels like.

“Finally something truthful, Miss Caulfield. You have such drive in you, it is a shame you wouldn’t take my generous offer. So unfortunate that we have...crossed the Rubicon now, so to speak. Imagine if you had only listened to reason all along.”

“You fucking asshole...”

“Miss Caulfield, I would appreciate it if you watched your language. I will not ask again.”

“...Sorry. I’m sorry. Look, I surrender, okay? You made your point, you won, I’ll do whatever you want. Just stop hurting her...”

“Repeat after me: ‘I’ll do whatever you want, sir.’”

“I...I’ll do whatever you want. Sir.”
“Going back on your word already? I cannot stand being lied to. Miss Derrick?”

“No, no, I’m sorry, please don’t, please!”

Make it stop. I can’t handle it. Make her screams stop.

I have never felt hatred like this.

“Let’s try again, Miss Caulfield.”

“You fucking sack of shit, how can you do this to anyone...”

“You will be disciplined for your language, Miss Caulfield.”

“Listen to me! I’ll work for you, I mean it. I’m helpless and I know it. But I will go after you if you ever give me the chance—and the more you hurt her, the more determined I’ll be to kill you. Nothing you do now can make me feel otherwise. Go ahead and tell me if that’s the goddamn truth.”

There’s a stretch of silence only broken by Chloe’s whimpers.

“It is,” the voice says. “It is indeed. Mr. Jefferson, take her back to the cell and work on her until morning. She is of no use to me this willful.”

A presence looms behind me. “It will be my pleasure.”

The room around me changes, transforming into black and white scenery. Harsh lights, storage boxes, clear backdrop...that infernal couch.

“A time traveler,” Jefferson says. “No wonder I couldn’t keep you to myself. But that’s okay, right Max? You kept me with you anyway. Forever in our Dark Room.”

This can’t be real.

“You’ve no power over me anymore.”

He leans in, and I feel a prickle in my neck. His breath on my ear sends a shudder down my spine.

“That remains to be seen, Max. Mr. Prescott wants you broken, and the man gets what he wants. We’ll see how you feel by the time I’m done.”

He undoes my restraints. I want to immediately jump on his throat, but my limbs refuse to obey beyond feeble twitching.

“Do you like my new cocktail? You’ll be just the right amount of conscious through it all. Aware, but helpless.”

He holds up my chin and stares into my eyes. Every fiber in my body wants to get away from this sick bastard. I can’t, and it’s driving me insane.

“Look at your pupils. That is perfect. You know, I didn’t get the chance to have fun with you the last time. It was all work and no play. We can fix that now.”

He takes my hands and brings them behind my head, and once more he tapes them together. As he leans close a repulsive sense of exposure and humiliation crawl inside my skull, drowning out rational thought. Fear rides alongside my breath as my heart hammers in my temples.
“Let me go, you freak...”

“Such a commanding argument, how could I refuse? But I must admit I’m impressed, Max. You’ve put up quite the fight, unlike your dear friend here. If you ask my opinion—and I know you’re dying to hear my opinion—she was hardly worth the dirt you walk on.”

In a drug-addled haze I notice Chloe is right in front of me, lying on the floor. There is a bullet hole in her forehead.

“Chloe...no, Chloe...I saved you. This isn’t real, I saved you.”

Her eyes flutter open. They are glassy and unfocused. She speaks without looking at anything in particular.

“You didn’t save anybody. You got my mom killed, Max. My whole home town. How fucked up is that?”

“What...?”

None of it is real. Stop listening, none of it is real.

“I asked you to save everyone. I would have done it myself, but the power was in your hands. Why would you turn it back? Do you really think I can live with this on my conscience? I might be breathing, but I am dead inside.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. It’s not real, it’s not real—I repeat it to myself, over and over. And yet I fight to break free, to move, to kick and thrash in any way I can. Paralysis holds fast all the same.

And then warm fingers brush into my hair, soft and careful. Their presence is a night-and-day contrast to Jefferson’s nauseating touch.

“Shhh.”

The hand holds my nape, cradles my head. Warmth and comfort trickle through the cold dark, like a beam of sunlight piercing the storm.

“Sleep, Max. Nothing will hurt you. You’re safe here.”

The whisper is quiet, gentle. It overtakes the accusing voices around me, firmly pushing them to the background. It lifts my thoughts above the roiling stormclouds.

“You’re safe here.”

I hold on to the words, lest I dive back into the maelstrom.

My eyes open to a warm orange glow. There is a fruity, cherry-like scent in the air, and soft strings play on the stereo. Fingers gently comb through my hair, tender and soothing.

“Chloe?”

“Hey there.” She puts something down by the armrest—her phone, probably. I can easily hear a smile in her voice. “You were out a while. I was getting worried.”

My head is on her thigh. I’m holding on to her leg like it’s a teddy bear. A well-toned, bare leg, I can’t help but notice.
I don’t feel particularly inclined to move. “How long?”

“A couple hours. First you were out cold, but then you had some kind of nightmare. You calmed down after a while.”

“Was it you? Holding me, whispering?”

“Yeah. Yeah, that was me. Not my first slumber party.”

I give her an appreciative squeeze. “Thank you.”

“Always.”

I realize it’s Message to Bears that’s on, some of their newer stuff. She must know I love it. And wherever that smell is coming from, it’s absolutely delightful. Scented candles, I guess? There is candlelight all around us, at any rate. It would all feel perfect if only the memory of the dream didn’t tarnish it so.

“It was horrible, Chloe.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“It was way worse than I’m used to. Did Sean Prescott really capture us?”

“You saw that?”

“Yes! Was it real? Watching you get tortured? Just tell me.”

“Not for me—I mean, I didn’t go through it. But it was real for BetaMax. She was able to escape after weeks with that madman. She went back through a picture and made sure it never happened.”

It’s stunning to hear her confirm it. What an awful thing to go through. I can still feel the hatred inside me, all that impotent rage. No wonder I’d wanted him dead.

“And Jefferson? He’s not around, is he?”

“No, that fucker is as dead as can be. A semi flew into the police station and crashed through his holding cell, only good thing to come out of that tornado.”

“He’s dead for real? They found his body?”

“Yes, what was left of it. I swear to you, he won’t hurt anyone ever again.”

I consider her words for a moment. “He deserved worse,” I tell her.

“My thoughts exactly. Max, what’s going on? You’re not supposed to keep any memories. It’s never happened before.”

“I don’t know. Maybe dreams are...different? I’ve no idea how all this works.”

“Do you remember anything else? Anything at all?”

“No, I swear. Just that awful dream. Maybe there’ll be more. As if I needed more nightmare fuel...”

“That’s such bullshit. I was hoping you’d finally be able to sleep now, but I guess it was too much to ask for. It sucks to see you so tired all the time.”
“Aw, it can’t be that bad. Not if you’re there to rescue me from the boogiemen.”

“I wish. Sometimes there’s nothing I can do other than wake you up. You’ve told me to just leave you alone so at least I get some sleep, but obviously I’m not going to do that.”

I look at her through the corner of my eye. “You’ve been sitting here the whole time?”

“Nah. After I got you settled nice and comfortable I worked out and showered, then came to check on you. I did my Max Whisperer thing and then I, uh...I got a few other chores done. It’s safe to do things while you’re sleeping, since I know you won’t be rewinding it away. Been chillin’ here for the last twenty minutes or so. Sure feels nice to slow down.”

“Sorry, I’m sorry, but...you said you worked out? You?”

“Yeah, laugh it up, you nerd. We’ll see if you’re still laughing when I have to carry your limp ass out of trouble again because Little Miss Oracle is having another vision.”

“Mee-ow, talk about a touchy subject...”

“Not really.” She pinches my arm. “I just like giving you shit.”

“Never noticed at all. You know, I want to keep asking you about a million things, but I feel like such a moron, shooting a thousand questions per minute.”

“You kidding? This is nice. Usually I’m the one with chronic amnesia. I finally get to be the infuriating know-it-all.”

“Well, now you know how it feels to have to explain everything all the time, I guess.”

“Oh, such heavy burdens we carry.” She sighs and rolls her shoulders, settling into the extra-plush cushions. “It’s a tough life, but we manage.”

We fall silent again, and I float adrift in the super cozy ambiance. Her fingers keep combing my hair, short fingernails tingling on my scalp now and then. Her other hand idly travels up and down my arm, grazing it, caressing, stroking back and forth, back and forth. It feels nice. So nice. I could definitely get used to this.

Man. If I’m perfectly honest, I’m feeling a bit...you know. In the mood? Slow music, candlelight, a whole lot of touching going on...it’s like custom-built to get me going, and I’m not made of stone. My eyes snap open. I suddenly bolt upright, grinning like a maniac. “Oh my god, you’re totally trying to seduce me.”

It’s there for only a second, but there’s no mistaking the sudden panic in Chloe’s features.

“What! Get over yourself, you were having a nightmare. I just...I know what you like, and I wanted you to be comfortable when you woke up, and...”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s true! This is basically a new life for you, I want you to feel like you belong here, so...”

“You’re so busted, Chloe, just admit it.” I glance down pointedly. “Nice short-shorts, by the way.”

“Hey, fuck you, okay? I try to do something nice for you and this is what I get.”
I tilt my head at her, completely unable to wipe the smirk off my face. A part of me knows this is kind of cruel, but watching her fidget is too damn amusing. Her cheeks fluster even more somehow.

“Fuck,” she says at last. “Am I that obvious?”

“Actually, you were really smooth. And it was working, too.”

“For real?” Her face brightens, but soon it transitions to a cringe. “Look at me, I said I wouldn’t be a creep and now I’m pawing at you while you’re sleeping. I don’t know how to handle this, okay? One moment you’re super into me, the next it’s like we’re back to square one. So I guess I figured...you know, if you wanted to make a move, why not make it real easy for you? I swear we don’t have to do anything, I know this is all—”

I close the distance, cup her jaw and press my mouth to hers. It might seem impulsive, but honestly I’ve wanted to do it since I showed up.

No, much farther back. In every day that passed. In every minute after our last kiss by the lighthouse. All this time I’ve been wreathed in the fire of that memory, I’ve roused it and fed it until it consumed my other life. Would I have jumped if we hadn’t kissed? Would I have missed her so if I hadn’t stolen a taste of what could’ve been?

Her response is...intense. After a tiny moment of surprise her arms slip around my waist and pull me in. Her lips lock and tangle with mine, avid and hungry. She’s breathing me in like there isn’t enough oxygen in the room.

I’ve done this twice. She has done it hundreds of times, and it shows. She knows my every tic and twitch. It’s weird and eerie and awesome.

Our mouths part, and we look at each other. There’s a wild flutter in my chest and such a sweet smile on her lips. “You’re so hardcore, Max.”

It’s painfully tempting to take this further, but I have to hold back. There are way too many questions in my head. I kiss her again briefly, just a peck and a smile, and then go back to resting on her lap. “Just letting you know for sure I’m really, really interested in what you have to offer.”

“Wow, um. Okay.” She’s a bit breathless. “Way to assert dominance, you cocktease.”

“Hah! That’s why I’m the boss, right?”

“I know you’re bullshitting, but you kind of are the boss. You’re often twenty steps ahead of everyone around you. It’s hard to argue with anything you say.”

“Doubt that ever stops you from trying.”

“Nope, sure doesn’t. You know me well.”

I want to stay in this moment. Let the conversation die and use her as my pillow forever, not give two shits about where we are, what we’re doing or what has happened. I guess technically I could stay, if I simply rewound this minute over and over. But then it would stop feeling special, wouldn’t it?

Doesn’t matter. The questions writhe in my thoughts, never far beneath the surface. The least I can do is face what I’ve done.
“So...you know what I have to ask about, right?”

She tenses for a moment. She knows.

I clasp her hand, hoping to make it a bit easier to talk about. “Did anyone survive?”

She breathes out slowly. “Yes. There were plenty of survivors.”

_Just not my mother_, I hear within the ensuing silence. “I’m so sorry, Chloe.”

“Well, don’t be. We’ve been through this already.”

“No, I mean it as just...I’m sorry it had to be this way. I’m sorry we couldn’t have both.”

“I know you are.” She squeezes reassuringly. “Me too. But we have to look forward. I was a shitty daughter, I screwed up everything with her, but I can’t go back and change that. All I can do now is make her proud of who I become.”

I can tell this is another conversation we’ve already had. I wonder how long it took for grief to become acceptance.

“Don’t know if this helps,” I tell her, “but she was devastated to lose you. Inconsolable. It’s...part of the reason I—”

“David’s still around, by the way. And Queen Skank Victoria Chase, since she wasn’t even in Oregon at the time.”

Okay, I can take a hint. Shut up about Joyce. “That’s awesome. It’s great that David pulled through.”

“Blackwell was razed to the foundations, so he wouldn’t have made it if he hadn’t taken a day off after helping raid Jeffershit’s lair. And then he found out about my mom...but even then he was able to set it aside and throw himself into search and rescue. He’s a big damn hero, and I was a dumb-ass to never give him a chance.”

“And...we didn’t help?”

“We tried. I swear we tried. But we couldn’t handle it. We came down from that hill and I watched you break down kicking through debris, you just lost it. We had to get away, it was too much.”

“So we simply left?”

“For a while. Well, I mean, we haven’t officially gone back, but we’re present. Remember all the money you’re worth? You’ve thrown so much cash at Arcadia Bay that they might rename it the Max Caul-Field.” She has the audacity to wait for a beat. “Get it? Because, you know...flattened.”

“You are the worst, Chloe.”

“And yet I’m the company you keep. Not that they even know it’s you, anyway. We’re shady people, everything anonymous, through charities and fund raisers.”

“That sounds...complicated.”

“Yeah. You went full Groundhog Day and taught yourself a million things in record time. It was the weirdest thing, you’d wake up, hang out for like a minute, make these insane phone calls and suddenly you were exhausted again, asking me to do a few things while you slept as much as your
fucked up nightmares would let you. Food would vanish from the fridge. You’d whisper in your sleep about routing numbers and penny stocks among all the usual bullshit. It felt like living with a ghost for three days.”

“Man, and I just overwrote all that knowledge, didn’t I? Way to go, Mean Max...”

“Will you stop with the self-flagellation already? You are the reason we’re here at all. Besides, you taught me a lot, I know all the passwords and you left yourself the cliff notes in the journal, so it’s not all lost. We knew this would happen, okay? We planned for it. Trust your loyal minion in this.”

“More like my babysitter, I think. Sounds like you’re constantly taking care of me.”

“It goes both ways, believe me. You know how it is. Great power...”

I sniff out a chuckle. “Great bullshit.”

“Yep. That’s why we decided to stay officially dead.”

It takes me a moment to process what she said. I sit up, frowning slightly. “We what?”

“We realized it was safest for everyone. You’re a target, and that makes everyone you ever knew a target.”

“For whom? Sean Prescott? I thought he knows who I am already, what difference...” I trail off. Alarm bells are going off in my head all at once. I grab her arm. “Chloe, are my parents okay?”

She gently pats my hand. “They’re okay, don’t worry. In this timeline, because you fixed it. Because we didn’t run to them. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“They...they got hurt? Because of me?”

“No, because Prescott. But they are okay now. They know everything, actually. You took care of it.” She sighs, shaking her head. “I think it’s time I start at the beginning and tell you the whole story. Or I guess you could read the journal and be done with it, whatever you want.”

“Wait, they know everything? As in...everything?”

“Yes, Max, they totally know you’re gay for me, though it pains me to see how distraught you are about it.”

“You know what I mean! They know?”

“That you bailed on your scholarship and you’re now a high school drop-out? Yep, that too.”

“Chloe.”

“Aaaand that you’re a time traveler, yes. You might have thoroughly convinced them of that as well.”

I sit there in dismay, trying to imagine poor mom and dad learning that their daughter is now a super-powered vagrant. I can see every hope and dream they had for me vanish from their eyes. Dad’s laughter turning to concern, to disbelief, to held-back tears. Mom would get annoyed first, then be horrified. She’d weep ‘til her eyes gave out.

And then the realization turns inwards. I had imagined moving back home with Chloe for a while. I’d imagined coping together with our loss, figuring out our lives, finish my studies, become a
photographer. And most of all, I’d imagined myself scarred enough never to touch these disastrous powers again.

Chloe delicately wraps an arm around my shoulders, as if afraid I might collapse under the weight. “You’re finally getting it, aren’t you? There is no normal life for us, Max. And you know what? Good riddance. Do you really want to worry about rent payments and career struggles, get us some degrees and enter the rat race? You are a time traveler. Even more than that, what you can do is crazy, some real superhero stuff. You can’t possibly throw that away just so you can go back to a quaint little hipster life.”

“Chloe, I fucked up everything using these powers.”

“So? More of a reason to try harder, to use them right. You got so wrapped up in my problems back then that you never stopped to think about the big picture. You can change the world, Super Max.”

I snort out an incredulous laugh. “Right, or blow it up to pieces! You’ve been drinking far too much Kool-Aid.”

“Can’t help it when I see the impossible happen every day. You’ll come around, I’m not worried. So anyway, what will it be? Journal or storytime?”

“Oh, um. I’d rather hear your voice, if you don’t mind one way or another. I’ll still read the journal later.”

“Fine by me. Let me go for a smoke break and we’ll start. Take some time to look around, I know you’re dying to poke your nose into every file and drawer.”

“That’s outrageous. Are you calling me nosey?”

“No, I’m calling you a shameless snoop. I’ll be right back.” She leans in and kisses my lips like it’s a matter of course, then half-way to her feet realizes what she just did. She looks back at me like she just got in trouble with the principal. “Shit, I’m sorry, I didn’t even think about it.”

I blink at her, pressing my mouth to a thin line. “Way to take me for granted, Chloe. You’re getting comfortable way too fast.”

“I seriously didn’t mean to, it just happened! I’m really sorry, I used to do it all the time!”

It takes everything in me to keep a straight face at her sudden panic. I might be a bit of a sadist.

“You will kiss me only when I give you express permission.” I point at the floor. “Now bow before your Mistress.”

Her eyes widen. Her jaw drops. It’s priceless. “You’re such a brat!” She shoves me back into the cushions, grabs her phone and beany from the armrest and stomps off to the sound of my laughter. “This is what I get for giving a shit...” The front door swooshes open and closed.

I can’t help myself. I know terrible things have happened, and we’re embroiled in all sorts of dangerous crap, but...there is this deep-seated joy inside of me, filling me with hope and excitement. I did something monstrous to be here, something monstrous that I don’t regret. For the first time in months, I feel happy again.

Does that make me a monster?
"It just makes you fucked up in the head," I say to the empty space in front of me.

I look around in the candle-lit darkness. The clock on the microwave says it’s one in the afternoon—those are some seriously effective blinds and tinted windows. I notice my coat and gun holster on the chair next to the couch I’m on, and chuckle at the mental image of Chloe struggling to take the thing off me while I’m passed out. The reminder that I’ve actually shot people is quite sobering, though.

Without much thought I stretch over and drag the coat closer, ready to dig through its pockets. It’s hardly snooping when I’m rifling through my own belongings.

One empty plastic baggie. One switched-off phone. One magnetic-band security keycard; **Prism**, the logo reads under a stylized cube outline. One pack of sugar-free gum, strawberry. One fancy-looking taser, holy mother of god. And in an inside pocket, the same ratty old velcro wallet I’ve had since my thirteenth birthday. The velcro doesn’t even stick anymore, but I will forever cherish all the slots and now-broken zippers and side compartments, so compact yet useful.

I pry it open and I’m greeted by a photo of Chloe. She’s sleeping, blue hair all over her face, mouth slightly open, one cheek pushed up a bit by the pillow. It’s adorable and sincere and perfect. Inside its usual slot is my driver’s license, but it’s totally different. It’s an Oregon license, for one, and in the picture I have long-ish dark hair and...lipstick? Ew. I look at the name, do a double-take, roll my eyes and facepalm.

Apparently my official name is Lauren Frost now. That’s the name of my level eighty-five undead mage. A...**pretty cool** name, you could say.

“Yeah, it’s final. You are an irredeemable nerd, Max.”

Nothing else seems to have changed. Fifteen dollars in cash—I thought we were rich now?—and I even kept my Blackwell student ID tucked all the way in the back. A painful dash of nostalgia, I suppose.

I pocket my wallet and power on the phone, terribly curious about my message history. Uh...actually, no thanks. Fuck you and your four-digit pin, have a nice day.

I put the phone back and get up, gaze wandering about. Chloe’s taking a while. I’d go find her but I could do without the smell of smoke. Might as well occupy my mind with something, right? Wonder what kind of food we have. I shuffle into the kitchen area and start opening random cupboards.

“Ooo, cookies.”

I dig into the box and fish out a few. Chewy chocolate biscuit with coconut flake frosting, yum. Munching away I head deeper into the belly of the beast, my sock-clad steps all on their own drawing closer to the giant bed beyond the open doorway. There is a laptop on the counter, but nah, it would take too long to boot up and poke through—I mean, it might be Chloe’s and I respect her privacy. Yes.

Walking into the bedroom, the reflection on the standing mirror is the weirdest reality check. Skin-tight, long-sleeve black shirt with matching slacks. Fingerless gloves, badass as all hell if you ask me—and I can perfectly envision Chloe painting this dark shade of blue on my nails. And a shiny golden mane down to shoulder-length, finger-combed every which way. It seems weird as fuck to my eyes. Sure hope the dye washes off like she promised.
I look so...small. Gaunt, even. Am I developing an eating disorder? Better eat another one of these cookies for the greater good.

I use the convenient hair tie on my wrist to redo my ponytail while I survey the room. A wall-spanning closet, dressers and lamps on either side of the bed and a tiny chair-and-desk with another laptop on it. A beautiful Spanish guitar hangs by the window, easy to reach. The bed is neatly made and super fancy, round mattress and everything. There’s an adorable eyepatch-clad teddy bear on it with a striking resemblance to the Captain. And ah, yes, finally. There’s my Chloe, empty beer bottles and clothes scattered on the floor, somewhat hidden by the right side of the bed. I get the feeling this won’t be nearly as endearing after months of living together.

I open the top drawer of my own dresser. Hair clasps and ties, mints, tissues, guitar picks, gummy bears, a watch.

“Ooo, pictures.”

A selfie of us in front of the Seattle skyline at dusk, somewhat smiling—we look just like I remember us in this one. Chloe in some park somewhere, red-faced at the top of a chin-up. A shot from behind of Chloe on this very bed, on her stomach, using her laptop. Her hair, wet and combed straight, is a blue cascade on her neck and shoulders. It looks freshly dyed. And oh, she’s only wearing her panties.

I speak strictly as an artist when I say that the contour of her shoulder-blades draws enticing shadows on her skin. I’m convinced this is the only reason why I took the photo.

I put them away and open the second drawer. A massive binder takes up the whole space, barely leaving room for a few pens and colored markers. Upon its black surface two words are written in silver: Selfie Archive.

“There’s no way I’ve been working on a portfolio on top of everything that’s going on.”

It weighs a good ten pounds. I haul it onto the bed, sit next to it and lift the cover. Each page is thin white cardboard with a five-by-five grid of plastic sleeves, and each slot contains a selfie of some description—sometimes both of us, sometimes just me. Every photo has the time and date scribbled on its white frame: they start at the end of October and it’s mostly one per day, some time during the evening hours. With very few exceptions they are utterly joyless and uninspired, like they were taken as part of some kind of routine.

I pick one at random and slide it out of its sleeve. My handwriting is on the back: Before going to bed. I try a few others with the exact same result, then search for one with daylight. December 14th. Chloe wrote on this one, big bold letters that take up nearly the whole frame: Before retrieving fake IDs.

Okay. Awesome.

I flip to the last one, a bit past the half-full mark. It’s the photo I jumped through today, dated March 7th, 9:35 AM. Chloe wrote on this one, big bold letters that take up nearly the whole frame: Before saying goodbye.

“Poor Chloe...”

I wonder if I’ve ever pranked her with this. One of these days I’ll pretend to be from the future after taking a picture, and tell her to do laundry and dishes or the whole place will catch fire while we sleep. Don’t argue with me, Chloe! It’s the only way!
I can’t decide whether it would be funny or just totally messed up. Probably both.

Energetic strides subtly rock the RV, and I sense more than hear Chloe’s approach. “Max?”

“In here.”

There is a pause in the steps. The music goes quiet, then changes into some other band I don’t recognize; it starts coming out of speakers inside the room somewhere. I like how it starts, mellow strings and female vocals, rich and soulful. Glass bottles clink together out there, which I guess means Chloe opened the fridge. There are two distinct thuds one after the other and then the burbles of pouring liquid, after which the fridge door closes again.

The tempo picks up, percussion coming in short bursts of depth. Wonder if she’s playing it for my benefit, I’m falling in love here.

Huh. It’s a weird thought. I probably have new favorite bands that I don’t know yet. I didn’t exactly keep up with new music during my five months of emo heartache.

Her head pokes through the doorway, black hair down to her collarbones under the blue beany. She seems greatly amused. “Yep. I didn’t for a moment expect you to stay put when there are mystery drawers to get into.”

I show her my last cookie. “You were holding out on me, so I had to take matters into my own hands.”

“And a lengthy one, too. You took a while.”

“I chill for a bit, too. And munch on a mint, because Princess Maxine Hemsworth the Third doth protest about the smell.” She smiles impishly. “And the taste.”

“Really? It never bothered me that much. It’s all part of the tats and ‘tude package.”

“Mm-hmm, say that again after months of living together. I’m quitting, anyway. Down to two a day.”

“Wow. Just for me? I’ve got you so whipped.”

“Bite me, Caulfield. I started smoking to piss off my mom and David. Now I feel like a jerk every time I light up.”

“Oh.” Foot, meet mouth. “That’s, uh...I was just teasing, sorry.”

“And also I’m whipped, yeah, whatever, I’m not ashamed. You were in it just as deep, you know? Give it time,” she says while wiggling her pinky, “I’ll have you wrapped around my finger soon enough.”

She seems to consider her own words, blinking repeatedly. “That...came out way dirtier than I meant it.”
I simply look at her while searching for an appropriate way to respond. How does anyone respond to what she just said? We are probably the first couple in history to be in this situation.

It doesn’t help that right now I find myself terribly distracted by her proximity. She’s so damn gorgeous, sitting there in her shorts and flimsy shirt and cute hat. When did this start happening to me? We slept in the same bed before and I didn’t think twice about it. It’s like all this talk of romance has made me hyper-aware of her physicality.

“So whatever the hell is this?” I ask while gesturing at the binder. Deflect and move on, good strategy.

Chloe smiles like she knows exactly what’s going through my head. “You can’t guess?”

“Well, yeah. The fucking Necronomicon, in my hands.”

She laughs. “Dude, you’re so dramatic. Just let me tell you the whole story, otherwise we’ll keep going back and forth with questions forever. Not that it would bother me, since you’re rewinding all of it.”

“What? Why?”

“Wait, wait, let me set up the marker.” She stretches over to the teddy bear and props it up so it sits on her nightstand. “There. Did you rewind yet?”

“Oh, no?”

“Allright, cool. So, watch First Mate Bongo when rewinding and stop the moment he moves. Don’t go any further, okay? You even got a fifteen minute buffer of me smoking in case you overshoot, because I plan ahead like that.”

“Jeez, why do you want me to rewind this so bad? Is the story that awful?”

“No, dummy. Well, it is pretty bad, but that’s not the reason. We need to test your powers to see if anything’s changed, and we’re gonna have to rewind over something, so...away goes the infodump.”

“But that means you won’t remember any of this. You’re okay with that? It feels so...wrong.”

Chloe shrugs. “You’ve always struggled with that way more than me. It literally makes no difference from my point of view. If anything it makes me feel bad for you, always so guilty about it.”

“Well, it’s like stealing your memories! I remember doing it so casually to everybody when all this started. ‘Ha-ha, let’s see how she’ll react if I say something else.’ I shouldn’t have been like that, I feel gross thinking about it now.”

“Not sayin’ your heart is in the wrong place or anything, just...you know, it’s no big deal if it happens.” She tilts her head toward the teddy bear and smiles. “That’s why First Mate Bongo is here to help you, ‘cause I’d love to keep that badass kiss on the couch. To put it in words you’ll understand, it was hella amazeballs.”

My laugh is so sudden that it comes out with a dorky snort. Eh, who cares. “I’ll do my best, I promise.”

“Allright, all formalities out of the way, let’s get this story rolling.” She takes a swig of her beer.
“So what’s the last thing you remember? Top of the cliff, reality throwing a fit as we yell feelings at each other?”

The memory is usually enough to bring a wet sting to my eyes, but the way she puts it makes me chuckle instead. “Yeah, pretty much. You gave me the butterfly picture and you said...you told me it was the only way.”

“Okay. That’s when you pull out your journal and show me. Weirdest moment of my life.”

Chloe wriggles up the bed and leans back against the headboard. She pats the pillow next to her.

“You might want to get comfortable. This will take a while.”
Chloe's Voice

I was thinking out there about everything that’s happened and how to tell you, and it’s pretty obvious that I have to go through absolutely everything I remember. Giving you just the facts would probably do more harm than good—and you’d be asking questions until tomorrow, anyway. Honestly I want you to know everything so you can put yourself in...well, in your shoes and understand why things went the way they did. I want you to be...proud. Of me, and of yourself, of what you’re capable of.

So yeah, this is totally going to take a while. You ready?

Alright, so...you pull out your journal and show me the message you left us. I’m like, well, fuck. You are so intense, staring into my eyes like I just tried to stab you. You take my hand and put it over your heart, and you tell me...I’m not ever leaving you.

It hit me so hard. Made me break down and cry like a bitch, I mean, just bawling my eyes out on your shoulder. We’d said stuff like that to each other before, but...it meant everything at that moment. I didn’t realize it at the time, but that’s when it kind of clicked in my head. I hadn’t let myself believe it until then.

Come on, you have to ask?

The way you loved me, Einstein. The fact that I loved you and you actually loved me back. It was horrible timing with a huge magical tornado coming to destroy the town, but it was real all the same. It stuck with me and got me through everything that came after.

Are you serious? I talked you into an intimate midnight swim. I casually got you to sleep in my bed. I dared you to kiss me. Did you need me to draw you a map to the landing strip or something? Stick a post-it to my forehead saying, yes, I would like some romance with you now, please?

Yeah, you did, and I freaked out, okay? Give me a break, I didn’t think you’d actually do it, and I was such a mess over Rachel, it suddenly felt like I was cheating—whatever the hell that meant with her, anyway. To this day I don’t know if she even liked me that way.

Well, you’ve no idea what it was like in my head, then. The moment you jumped into my truck and we started talking I was like, yep, same old Max, I’m screwed. I was crushing on you pretty hard when I was fourteen.

Of course you didn’t know, you were fucking oblivious as usual, go figure. To be fair I wasn’t, like...in love or whatever. Just, y’know, a sexually confused teen getting weird thoughts about her best friend all of a sudden. You’d have freaked big time if I’d mentioned it. And then you left, and came back, and I was angry about everything...

No, forget it, how’d we even end up talking about this? This isn’t a conversation, you’re supposed to just listen.

That’s right, I’m the boss now, shut your face already. So we’re by the lighthouse hugging and crying and all that mushy shit...and then you turn around and tear up the photo, like, fuck you, storm, this is what’s happening. We watch it flutter away into the wind, standing there, knowing there’s no going back.

It’s so surreal, seeing that huge tornado tear into the town. It makes a straight line for Blackwell, like...on purpose. Like it’s on a mission from hell to raze the place to the ground. The Two Whales
isn’t exactly on its direct path, but...there’s black smoke coming out of it. There was an explosion, you tell me later. At least...at least it was quick.

Thanks. I know. I’m okay, it’s alright. Don’t worry.

Anyway. We’re like in a trance, forcing ourselves to watch. It’s insane, it’s...a nightmare. We probably shouldn’t have watched, but now I’m glad that we did, because it gets to Blackwell and it actually stops there, like it hit a wall. Over ten minutes it swallows the school brick by brick, spitting pieces over miles all around town. And then the storm simply dies, sudden as it started. I think that was the most surreal part. One moment it’s this violent monster on a rampage, the next it’s dissolving into nothing. Lightning stops, the funnel cuts off and comes apart, and the stormclouds thin out and just fucking vanish. It’s barely five minutes later that we’re standing in the sun, staring at this huge scar straight in the middle of Arcadia Bay.

I know! That was no natural disaster, Max. It came for Blackwell Academy, fucked it up and then left. Just like you, am I right?

You’re welcome.

So...you’re kind of numb at this point, staring at the mess. I remember standing there with you, looking down at the destruction and just feeling...drained. And then I look at you, at the way you’re taking it, and it’s so heartbreaking. At that moment all I can think about is you. I have to keep you safe now. I have to get you through it. If I can at least do that, maybe I’m not so fucking worthless.

No, no, I know, I’m not saying it was right, it’s just...the way I felt at the time.

We’re soaked and shivering, so I start pulling you away, try get you in my truck so we can warm up...

Actually—maybe we can skip the whole “tornado aftermath” part? It’s just non-stop miserable shit until I literally drag you away from the rubble and drive us out of there. I mean...you didn’t even notice how much your hands were bleeding. I don’t want to ever see you like that again, it was so...it was—

Sorry...I’m sorry, I’ll be fine. It’s just...rough memories. I’m so glad you don’t remember this shit anymore.

Alright, so...we drive off, going forward, doesn’t matter where. I want to talk to you so bad, but I’ve no idea what to say—I don’t think there was anything we could say at the time. Your hands are pretty fucked up, so I just focus on that. I zombie into a gas station and get some food and bandages and supplies for whatever the hell we’re going to do. I realize right there that all we’ve got are the clothes on our backs...but at least we’re good with money. “Handicapped fund” my ass, that wad of cash in Wells’ office was so shady.

Really?

No, you gave me some shit about it but let me take it anyway. That’s weird. Wonder what else is different.

So anyway, I get back to you and work on cleaning and bandaging your hands. Turns out to be just a few bleeders, nothing that serious. Is it weird that I remember every single second of that? Standing there by the passenger seat, wiping the blood clean, looking through every inch of your hands, peeling band-aids open, wrapping gauze around your palms...and the way you’re just
looking at me the whole time. A shrink would say there was some therapy in there somewhere.

It must’ve done something because you finally start crying like a normal person. We just hug it out for a while, you keep saying you’re sorry, and I keep telling you I totally get it, that it’s such fucking bullshit, that no-one should have to go through something this awful.

By now our phones are going off non-stop. I find out about David, you have me text your parents back and...we finally start talking. Grim shit like death toll and survivors and how long will it take for help to get there, but at least we’re talking. Eventually we get to the big mystery: what the hell do we do now?

You don’t want to run to your parents, not yet, and I don’t want to go back, no way. California and Portland and all the stupid road-trip daydreams we had feel dumb and childish, too. It kind of sinks in right then: our lives are completely trashed. Not talking about our stuff or whatever, I’m saying...down to our identities, you know? We are not the same people now. You understand what I mean, right?

Yeah. So we just roam until we find some grubby roadside motel to crash. The first night is actually the least bad. We’re both so drained that we pass out on the bed like we’re shitfaced, dirty clothes and all. It’s the early morning that’s awful, lying there awake, huddled together, thinking about all the people that are gone. At some point we start saying names out loud, and going yes, or no, or probably. Now it feels so weird and morbid that we did that, but it somehow made sense at the time. Don’t ask me why.

No, no, I- I want to tell you. I want you to know how we worked through it. You should know these things.

We just hang around the place for the day, sitting outside, sorting out all the crap in our heads. We talk to each other, no filter at all, just trying to find out exactly how we feel—I mentioned this earlier, right?

Yeah. Well, it isn’t all grimdark bullshit. We get through guilt and regrets and we finally talk about, you know...us, about where we stand and what we want this to be. It’s like you don’t give a crap about feeling embarrassed, or exposed or whatever; you tell me the only thing you regret is not reaching out to me all those years, you’d do everything else all over again in a heartbeat. You tell me how I’m worth the fucking world to you, that despite everything I’m still the best thing that ever happened in your life, and how...how you feel like the best version of yourself when I’m there. Big surprise, you’re making me all weepy again, so that’s when I tell you flat out I’m mad in love with you.

It seemed obvious to me, like, of course she already knows this. But you look so...relieved. You give me the sweetest smile and—whoa, hey. Hi there.

Yes, cuddling in bed, I approve. About time you—

...

I...

I love you too, Max.

Fuck. Way to go...look what you did, I was trying not to get too emotional here. You’ve turned me into such a pitiful sap, it’s so pathetic.

Pfft! Start tickling me and you’re dead. Just sayin’. I can take you down, bitch. Don’t try me.
Damn straight, I am the boss of you. This cuddling is only happening because I allow it. Can we please get back to the Chronicles of Misery now? Thanks.

So we keep talking about love and all that garbage, and the more we talk the less awful everything feels. I mean, it doesn’t go away, but it gets...bearable. It’s why we chose this path, right? To be together, to love each other. We don’t do anything other than hold hands, ’cause we’re not there yet, but...we both feel it, we want it. And that’s good enough.

You even let out the cutest giggle when I tell you I’m crazy about your freckles. Hahah! Yes, just like that.

Of course it’s true, are you kidding me? You’re super pretty, Max, come on. Don’t go fishing for compliments, it’s beneath you.

Mm-hmm, whatever you say. So we finally decide to go to your parents, or I guess I kinda talk you into it. It just makes sense, and they’ve been so desperate leaving messages on your phone. You call and it’s tears all over again. They’ll totally take me in, how dare we even question it.

It’s an eight hour trip without stops and probably ten in my rusty old deathtrap, so we plan to take off the next morning. The night in-between...it isn’t that great. We lie in bed talking until we can’t stay awake anymore. We’re afraid to try to sleep, because then we’ll be alone in the silence. Your words.

And well, you know all about night terrors, don’t you. I don’t need to explain a damn thing. They start then and rarely go away. I have it rough too, but nothing like you. I mean, I lost Rachel to a psycho and my mom to a storm, but...you watched people die, you got fucking tortured by that sick asshole. Shit, man, I asked you to overdose my crippled ass to death, how fucked up is that? And I haven’t even started with what’s happened since then. Sometimes I wonder how you’re even lucid with all this garbage in your head.

You’re tough shit, Max. Don’t you doubt it for even a second.

So we get going and you turn on the radio, scanning for news about Arcadia. I tell you it’s probably a bad idea, but you’re not listening. It’s as if you want to punish yourself or something, you want it to hurt. I get where you’re coming from, because, you know...self-destructive behavior after a tragedy, sure sounds familiar. But there’s something else, too. You’ve been different the whole morning, like you’re not all the way there.

Sure enough, the freak tornado is all over the news, biggest ever recorded in human history, they claim. They’re spouting death counts and going on and on about the devastation. Do you...do you wanna know? The final numbers, I mean. Pretty sure you do, but...

Alright. Two hundred and sixteen dead when it’s all over. Over six hundred injured.

At least...most people survived. Right?

Look, I know it’s small comfort, but they are recovering, and we’ve helped, we really have. All the money we’ve thrown at that place will make it come back better than it ever was. And want to know the best part? We’re sticking a thumb in Prescott’s eye and his precious Pan Estates. With all the cash and supplies pouring in to rebuild, no-one’s moving to those overprized shitboxes.

No, we work through a stupid amount of proxies, I’ll show you the system some time. We’ve got good people on our side, the fuckwad has no idea it’s us...as far as we know, anyway. By the way, did you look at your driver’s license yet?
Haha! I love the name, seriously. It’s one of many, but that’s your main, so to speak. No-one knows the mysterious Lauren Frost, working from the shadows for the good of mankind. I can always tell you get the biggest geek boner when talking about it.

My license? Uh...

Elizabeth Deckard.

Yes, Lisbeth, whatever.

Don’t laugh, it’s my freakin’ middle name! It just happens to be the same as...fuck’s sake, it’s impossible to stick to a damn story with you.

I did no such thing! It’s all you getting us sidetracked. Be quiet, now we’re getting to the part when shit really hits the fan.

So...you’re listening to all this awful stuff, and it doesn’t take a shrink to see you’re not doing well. I try to explain how this isn’t helping right now, but there’s no talking to you. You literally tell me to shut the fuck up and let you listen. You’re not, like, angry? Just...hurting. I throw my hands in the air and I tell you to do whatever you want to do, and that’s about it for the next couple hours.

Around noon I can’t take it anymore and turn off the damn radio. I try to talk to you again but you’re in one-word response mode. See, I don’t know it then, but this is one of your patented Max Caulfield Signature Bad Days, and it was only made worse by all the disaster stories. You basically clamp down and doze off and on, I shake you awake whenever you start whimpering, fun trip all around.

Pfah, you say it like I’m a battered wife or something! It isn’t me taking abuse for no reason. It’s me understanding that it’s a fucking mess inside your head.

Hey, what can I say, the truth hurts. Don’t think I’m all sugar and rainbows all the time, though. Believe me, we’ve raged at each other. Sometimes for the dumbest things.

I don’t know, my mess? You using my goddamn toothbrush whenever you feel like it, as if you’re still twelve? I swear, if I go to brush my teeth and find it all wet and nasty again I’m going to lose my shit, you’ve been warned.

Seriously, though...we cut each other a ton of slack, but we get angry sometimes. We’re still people, it happens. In a way it feels...good, kind of? ‘Cause we know we’re gonna stick together no matter what, so...bring on the shouting match and let it all out, who cares, we’ll solve the problem one way or another. Am I making any sense here?

Fuck, whatever. The make-up sex is out of this world, so there’s that. Anyway, between food and gas stops and breaks for my sore butt, we get there close to nightfall. You already said you’re sorry and you’re even telling me a bit about living in Seattle, so we take a break by this nice view of the skyline, with the sun setting just right. I take your camera and talk you into posing for a selfie with me, see how it turns out if I take it. I just want to cheer you up so bad.

Little did I know...I was saving our lives.

The moment the camera clicks, you vanish from my side. There’s this afterimage of you instantly going to the truck and back, and right away you pop in front of me. Your old journal is in your hands, and your face...god, I won’t ever forget your face at that moment. You’re a totally different person, hella intense and hyper-aware of everything around you.
Fuck, did I just say hella?

Goddammit, Caulfield.

Anyway, you’re shoving the journal to my chest, grabbing my arm, and you tell me to get the fuck out of Seattle, like, yesterday, or your parents will get killed and we’ll get taken. It was thirteen days until you could get to this photo and have a chance to warn us, you wrote details and instructions in the journal, but we have to go right now. Literally you’re pushing me until I’m behind the wheel, then you climb into the passenger seat and tell me to take the first exit and go East, don’t stop moving, don’t leave our names anywhere, turn off the phones, ditch the truck soon, don’t use cards of any kind, and for fuck’s sake convince you to learn your powers again because you will need them sooner or later.

Nothing makes sense, but I know better than to question this kind of thing by now, so I start the engine and get going. You take my hand and kiss it like your life depends on it, which it just might, and say, I’ll see you in two weeks, please take care of us.

I’ll love you forever, you tell me. And then future-you is gone.

Holy shit is right. By the way, before I forget—don’t you ever dare prank me with this stuff. I mean it! When you change right after a picture I need to be able to trust what you say completely. If you cry wolf for shits and giggles even once, you’re killing that trust. I won’t be laughing, and you’ll have a real problem with me. Are we clear on that?

Oh, I know you thought about it, you’re twisted like that. We had a hell of a fight about this because you went and did it, and I’ve never been angrier at you. And it made me feel like shit, too, because you were really just trying to have fun and didn’t realize how much I’d hate it. So, promise me right now you won’t ever do it.

Alright. Good. Argument avoided, isn’t time travel great?

Well, I have to be stern with you sometimes. It’s all part of the re-training process.

So, back to shitland. Future-you is gone. Present-you has no idea what the hell she’s doing back in my truck, so you have a tiny panic attack thinking you rewound by accident or you’re losing your mind or something. I try to explain as best as I can, and then tell you to open the journal and read whatever message you left for yourself. Turns out there’s something like ten pages of really, really pissed off rambling about one Mr. Sean Prescott, a lot of it crossed out, like you started over several times because you couldn’t get all the anger out of your system.

The short of it is: the man knows that you can reverse time and wants you as a minion. He was personally waiting for you at your parents’ place. First he offered you a job, which you obviously refused because you knew the kind of asshole this man is. Things got out of hand real fast, we got grabbed, your parents got killed without a fucking second thought and he tortured me until you agreed to work for him. He employs other people with weird abilities and he might have powers of his own, we’re not sure yet.

I know, it came as a shock then, too. But it does make sense that you wouldn’t be the only freak of nature out there. I’m sorry, I’m sorry...’spirit-touched.’ That’s what he called you. You said he seems to know way more than us about it, but he wasn’t precisely answering questions.

I’ve no idea. Our best guess is that he saw you hopping around the Dark Room surveillance and put the pieces together. He was waiting for you to flee to your parents, Max—he was prepared. He must have known about you even before the storm hit, and we’re pretty sure he knew about the
storm itself. Remember the e-mails and notes we found? Yeah. Either he knew the signs, or this
guy has an oracle of his own.

He used you to make boatloads of easy money in the short term, but he also put you through some
kind of nightmarish training regime, grooming you for some other nefarious shit that you never got
to do before escaping. He’d give you some kind of drug to stop you from rewinding when he didn’t
want you to, but you could still photojump and that’s how you got out. We’re pretty sure he still
doesn’t know you can do that.

So in your journal you tell us to send a text to your dad saying we’re not ready to go back yet and
we turned toward Portland, Chloe had some money saved and knows a friend there, don’t worry,
blah blah blah—and then you say to shut off the phones completely because he can track them. It’s
full-on tinfoil hat stuff, but you scared the shit out of me, so we do most of it: dye our hair, get new
clothes, fake glasses, the works. It’s with great sorrow that I leave my sweet, sweet junk heap in an
underground parking lot in Bellevue. You say to get a new car “by any means necessary” in your
rant, but we settle for bus tickets to the next town over because we’re not irredeemable criminals
yet, thanks.

There’s one thing you definitely won’t budge on: you are never reaching for the rewind, ever
again. I honestly don’t blame you, and the truth is...I did a piss-poor job at trying to convince you
at all. After everything that you had to go through, I didn’t want you to do it either. We figured, if
we do everything else she told us to do and stay on the move, that’ll be enough. This guy can’t
have eyes everywhere in the freaking country.

Well, guess what? We find out later that he doesn’t need eyes everywhere for this. All he needs is
to have the right kind of “spirit-touched” on payroll. We probably would’ve stayed ahead if they
hadn’t found my truck, but after that it’s real hard to hide from someone that can see her prey’s
path like a trail of Christmas lights.

Helen Briar, exalted everchosen of the Wolf scion. She’s fucking insufferable, but she’s
unofficially playing on our team now. We’ll get to that.

Bottomline is, Prescott’s private security outfit stormed our crap-ass Spokane motel room the
morning of the fourth day after the storm. That’s the day when I first saw what you’re
really

able capable of.

It’s a couple hours before dawn, and I’m lying there half-awake, already fretting over how the fuck
can we get out of this mess. There’s a random thump outside, and one moment you’re curled up
against me, the next you’re standing over me, fully dressed, shaking me awake with one hand over
my mouth—and you’re just heaving, out of breath like you’ve been running non-stop, ready to
collapse. Your fingers smell weird, this really pungent metallic smell.

You tell me I need to do exactly as you say. You tell me you’ve redone the whole thing too many
times to count, and you’re nearly wiped out, so if we don’t get it right this time we’re both fucked.
And then you shove a gun into my hands.

I remember every word you say next, panting like crazy. It’s like they got branded into my brain,
like you said them to me a hundred times.

Get up quietly, put your shoes on. Run for the door when I yell. Turn left outside, immediately
shoot the man straight ahead, don’t fucking miss, brace for the recoil, don’t stop shooting until
he’s down. Jump over him, jump the rail, run into the alley next to you, then run straight. I’ll find
you. Don’t fuck it up, Chloe. I can’t do this without you.
I’m just looking at your silhouette in the darkness, trying to wake up, trying to make sense of whatever the hell’s going on. You move closer to the window, into the light from the streetlamps, and that’s how I notice all the blood on your face, running down your chin. You spit out some as I’m looking at you. There’s a wound on your shoulder and your whole left arm is covered in red. You’ve a gun of your own sticking out of your coat pocket, and in a moment of clarity I understand...you got these weapons from whoever is about to attack us.

I am seriously not shitting you, Max. This really happened. Here, give me your hand. Feel around over...here. See? Feel the scar?

Yeah, I know it’s still tender. I dug out a glass shard the size of my thumb from there.

So...yeah. You look back at me and you’re all like, shoes, Chloe. Move! Real quiet and urgent, so I finally get my ass moving. For once I’m glad these motel beds are so gross that we sleep mostly dressed on top of the sheets. You’re working to catch your breath still, staring at the window with your hand raised like something’s about to fly in, and that’s exactly what happens. Much later you tell me it’s tear gas, but I don’t even get a chance to see it at the time. The window starts to crack open, and the next moment you’re right there, tossing what came in back outside. That’s when you yell at me to run.

I take off, and everything happens insanely fast. The door crashes open and you pop in front of it, aiming the gun at the man’s head, pulling the trigger with no hesitation. It’s loud as hell, and the guy goes down like a chunk of lead. Nearly at the same time the window explodes into the room, and in the blink of an eye you’re right there, firing at whoever’s coming in. While that happens, this woman is barreling through the doorway behind his buddy, pointing her taser straight at me. One blink later you’re next to me with your hand raised. I swear, I swear I see the fucking prongs in my face—but it never actually happens. Instead what I see is you next to her, pushing her weapon to the side, pressing the muzzle of your gun to her temple and firing. I remember the image so vividly, her blood spattering all over the wall. In the same motion you’re shoving her out of my way, so I keep running out the door. You’re gone elsewhere before the woman even hits the ground.

Of course it’s horrible. It’s horrendous. But later, when I’m trying to process it...I’m just in awe of you. What you did...I totally get why you were so ruthless like that. By this point you had watched these guys take me down, Max. Several times. You’re not murdering these people in cold blood; you’re surviving, you’re saving us. Without a problem I can imagine the kind of mind space you were in. I only wish I could protect you the same way.

None of that matters in the moment, though. It’s all pure adrenaline and just doing what you gotta do—so when I clear the door and turn left, I raise the gun you gave me in both my hands and shoot a man full of bullets. At the exact same time there’s another struggle right behind me, but I can’t afford to look back. It’s you, of course, taking care of the fourth member of their squad.

I jump over the guy and over the rail, duck into the alley and keep running. With all the glass and debris all over the place, my feet would be completely wrecked by now without the shoes.

I don’t know this at the time, but another squad of four was spread out covering every possible escape route. You’ve already dealt with the other three by the time you show up behind the goon I couldn’t even see straight ahead.

One last shot goes off, the man goes down...you stand there for a moment, looking at me with glassy eyes. You’re a hell of a sight to see, bloody and spent beyond words. As I get close I can already see you sag and stagger, and I close the distance before you collapse altogether.
I’m the one that’s heaving now, calling your name, but you don’t respond. For a moment it’s the absolute worst feeling in the world, thinking you might be dead, or dying. You’re just this lump in my arms as I lie you down against a nearby dumpster.

But you’re breathing, and there’s a pulse, which makes me desperate to stop the bleeding...but first we need to run and hide far away from here, and you’re not even remotely conscious. And where the hell can I take you? We’re running from a **firefight**. There’ll be sirens and cops soon. Self-defense or not, we killed those people, and the motel’s front counter will have our description. I’ve seen enough movies to know that taking you to the hospital is the same as sending us to prison.

I’m looking at you, pretty much freaking out inside my head. I’m *this* close to a screaming fit, but your life is in my hands now. I get it right there—this is what you feel when you see me get hurt, *this feeling* is why you’ve put yourself through hell to save me time and again. Everything else goes away and all that matters is *I have to keep you safe*. I notice you bothered to take your bag. It occurs to me that you’re a real smart girl, so I start searching it, and your pockets too. Sure enough, I find our phones, a charger, our wallets, the rest of our money, basically anything that can be used to identify us...along with car keys I’ve never seen before.

I stare at them, trying to piece things together. I have to assume you got the keys from the same people that you got the guns. There was at least five of them and they want you alive, so there has to be a van or a truck somewhere. And since it’s a snatch operation, it’s going to be discreet and unmarked and out of sight from our room, but pretty close because they need to take two bodies to it when they’re done. Best place I can think of? Straight ahead, around the corner of this alley. So I take off running again.

There’s only one van in the whole street. I run to it and jam the key in the lock, and thank god, it opens up. I didn’t even consider that there might be someone guarding it, but there wasn’t, so it’s all good. There is a *lot* of gear in the back and plenty of room for you, and there’s totally gonna be medical supplies because these people are bound to get hurt on the job and they’d be prepared for that, right? It’s fucking perfect. I hurry back to you as fast as I can. I need to get you in there and GTFO ASAP.

I try to lift you up in my arms like any superhero would and fail miserably. Have you ever tried to carry somebody that’s not helping at all? It’s way harder than it looks in the movies. You might be tiny and all skin and bones, but that’s still a hundred pounds of dead weight on the floor, and I wasn’t exactly buff at the time. I honestly have no idea how I managed the strength to haul you up onto my back, it must have been all the adrenaline and sheer desperation. It sure as hell wasn’t dignified for either of us.

I lay you down in the van as careful as I can and get behind the wheel. It’s only after I get the engine going and the tires rolling that I see the driver dead on the street. So...yeah, you’d definitely thought that far ahead.

We’re in the outskirts of the city proper and I don’t know where I’m going, so it’s just a matter of driving elsewhere for now to keep us out of sight. Sirens are going off in the distance already, getting closer: I want to tear through the pavement and run every red light but I manage to calm myself enough to drive slow and careful, speed limits and turn signals and everything else. Finally I park in some back street in the suburbs, maybe a mile away from ground zero. I *have* to take care of you.

You’re lying there a complete mess, and I remember thinking for a moment...god, she’s just eighteen, we’re just teenagers. You look so frail and small, just this girl passed out in a van. I get to work looking for a med-kit, which was easy enough to find—there’s a whole footlocker full of
bandages, painkillers, water bottles, disinfectant, sewing kits and even a small suitcase with surgical tools. I try not to think much, just focus on cleaning you up and see what the actual damage is. It’s not how I’d fantasized peeling off your clothes for the first time.

There are cuts and bruises and you bit your tongue at some point, but the only truly awful thing is your arm. Can I tell you how very unfun it was to take out the glass shard and stitch up your shoulder with just a fucking google search for guidance? I had no idea what I was doing, I just knew I had to do it. Fuck, I get shudders thinking about it still. It’s an ugly scar you got and it’s totally my fault. It’s a miracle it didn’t get infected.

No, no way, that’s a load of crap. They came for you, Max, you didn’t ask for any of it. You did what you had to. You think you didn’t feel like shit afterwards? It messed you up, fucking thousand yard stare for days. You knew you had no choice, but still you beat yourself up like you suddenly became a serial killer. Sometimes good people have to do terrible things to survive. There’s nothing more to it.

There’s a good reason I’m telling you all this in so many details. I understood a few things that day, as I nursed you back to the living. I want you to understand them too.

One, you are going to keep me safe even if it kills you, and there isn’t much I can do about it. I don’t think you can help yourself. If you thought I had a hero worship problem before, it’s nothing compared to now. I’m your number one fangirl.

Two, I’m a liability when shit goes down, a fucking damsel in distress. If I want to be a worthy sidekick, I’ll need actual skills. But even if I become some kind of badass, your best chance to survive will always be not to have me near. You can say whatever you want, it’s the truth. It would’ve been a cakewalk for you to escape if I hadn’t been there.

And three...running away is not good enough. We have to fight back. We have to get rid of Sean Prescott. You see this pretty clearly by now, right?

I know. I know you don’t want to kill anybody. But we have to do something about him, something drastic. He’s not going to leave us alone, Max—and it’s not all about us, either. You beat yourself up all the time about misusing your powers, but can you imagine if they were in the hands of someone like him? We can’t let that happen.

Man, I’ve been talking for almost an hour and we’re only five days in. Things should go faster from here on out, at least until—what? What’s wrong?

Hah! Yes, you doofus, my epic tale of survival and heroism can wait for a pee break. It’s the tiny door over there to the left, it slides open. Don’t fart too hard if you gotta, the wall is paper-thin.

I’m not being gross! We live together in an RV, girl. All the glamour goes out the window the moment either of us needs to take a dump. And with that wonderful romantic image I leave you.

You’re welcome.
Intermission: Déjà vu

Washing my hands clean feels like wishful thinking. I’m expecting the water to run red any moment.

Luxury RV or not, the bathroom is by necessity a cramped cubicle of function over form. Sink, mirrored cabinet, toilet and trashcan crammed inside a three-by-six room. No amount of round design and expensive fixtures could take the oppressive sense of enclosure away. Doesn’t go as far as “airplane bathroom,” but it sure reminds me of one.

Avoiding my own eyes in the mirror I notice the toothbrushes in a holder next to the tap. Blue and gray. The blue one has CHLOE written in black marker all along the handle. I think the funniest part is that I don’t think I’d care anymore if she used mine. Oh, how people change.

By now I might be taking a bit longer than necessary for this. Sure, I had to pee quite badly, but I also needed a minute to process the madness my alternate selves have gone through. Make that ten minutes, I guess.

What she says is true, I didn’t go out of my way to kill those people. That honor is reserved for two hundred and sixteen Arcadia Bay residents. Still, it’s a stark difference, isn’t it? To let a storm follow its course. To press the muzzle of a gun to someone’s head and pull the trigger. There is something inside of me that doesn’t hesitate to do either.

“This is nothing you didn’t already know,” I mutter to myself.

I didn’t hesitate in the junkyard, did I? I would’ve shot Frank if there had been bullets left in the gun. It seems to be the same constant underlying all that I’ve done: Chloe comes before everyone and everything, no exceptions. I will do whatever it takes to see her through, however questionable or brutal.

I am proud of it. I am afraid of it.

I let the water run and make it a point to stare at myself in the mirror. Don’t avoid it. This is who you are. I could call myself a hundred names, but I refuse to ever again be a coward.

...Kinda getting used to the hair color though, as frumpy as my current ponytail may be. And I still bother with the touch of eyeshadow plus eyeliner, looks like. It was always my one concession to makeup culture. My face looks even more bland and puffy without it.

Although some people appear to think I’m super pretty. They’re allegedly crazy about my freckles.

“Don’t believe anything she says,” I tell my reflection. “She just wants to get into your pants.”

It still felt stupid good to hear her say it. Makes me want to roll my eyes. I blushed furiously because my girlfriend said I’m pretty. I’m shaking my head as I shut off the tap and begin drying.

She’s my girlfriend now, right? We said the L word to one another just a moment ago, pretty sure that makes it official if it wasn’t already. The thought gives me the most amazing jitters. Gosh, I’ve never even dated anyone before, and now I’m moved in with my girlfriend of five months. Welcome to the love life of a time traveler.

The transition happens before my eyes, immediate yet smooth, without a shock to the senses. The background on the other side of the mirror shifts shapes and colors, and I am now staring at myself.
sitting in a gray room, in a gray chair. The voice I hear comes from the side, out of frame.

“I don’t understand why you don’t like ‘Maxine.’ It’s a cool name, I like it a lot.”

It’s a woman’s voice, somewhat high-pitched and...young? I stay in a transfixed stare. I’m still in the bathroom. I raise a hand and my reflection tries to, but is stopped by the restraints.

“But fine, whichever you prefer. I just don’t get it, why not work for him? He treats me with respect and the pay is great, you just need to do what you’re told and not ask questions. It’s a good deal, Max. What did the world ever do for us anyway? What are you even trying to accomplish?”

My reflection looks at whoever is talking, eyes seething with resentment. I mimic my own movements, but there is only tile on my end.

“Stop. Playing. With my thoughts.”

The last word comes out of her (my) mouth, and the image shifts again as quickly as before. The mirror is just a mirror. Once more everything is as it was.

What the fuck just happened?

“Chloe?”

“Yeah? Did you fall in?”

“Do you mind coming in here?”

“I knew it, your butt finally became so narrow that you fell right into the toilet.”

“I didn’t fall into the toilet! Just get over here...”

“I’ll bring the plunger just in case.”

I keep staring into my reflection while she moves out there. Nothing changes.

She slides the door open. There’s an actual plunger in her hand. Chloe commits to her gags.

I gesture at the mirror. “Have I ever seen weird visions while looking into this?”

She puts the thing down, her ridiculous grin fading to concern. “No. Not that you’ve ever told me, at least.” She touches my arm. “What did you see? Are you okay, did it hurt?”

“It didn’t hurt at all...”

I tell Chloe exactly what I saw. Her face has drawn into a dark scowl by the time I’m done.

“Samantha Derrick. We haven’t met her in this timeline, but I’m sure you can guess that BetaMax had a pretty big score to settle with her.”

“Miss Derrick...”

One line for every lie. I can’t contain a shudder. “She sounded like just a kid.”

“You told me way back that she’s about our age. So she’s as much a kid as we are, I guess.”

“She’s... ‘spirit-touched’?”
“Hell if I know which spirit it is, but she’s some kind of telepath. Mind control, or at least...suggestion, or inducing emotions, or something along those lines. Like I said, nobody was answering questions when you were with them.”

“Gosh, how many of these people do we have to worry about?”

“Four that we know of for sure. Well, three if you don’t count Helen, though she’s pretty pissed right now. Prescott himself is still a wild card.”

“Why is she pissed, what happened? Can we even trust this person?”

“We were supposed to deliver today. She helped us for that express purpose. Bitch was screaming at me on skype earlier, while you were sleeping. But yeah, pretty sure we can trust her, after what you did.” Chloe lightly touches my shoulder and leans closer, concern in her eyes. “Max, seriously, what’s going on? It’s like memories are bleeding through from your other self. It’s never been like this, you always lose everything.”

“I don’t know, Chloe...”

My own words echo inside my head. Get used to seeing weird shit. Is this what I meant? Or is this completely new?

Either way, I am not excited about it.

“Let’s assume it’s a good thing,” I tell her. “It could be a good thing, right?”

“Oh, yes. That always works out for us.”

“Well, I can’t do anything about it anyway, can I? So might as well stay positive.”

Chloe only purses her lips for a response. So I lean in and kiss them, brief and casual.

“Don’t worry about it, girlfriend.”

Her startled smile makes my hands itch for a camera. I want to capture every bit of spontaneous delight in her features and treasure it forever. Also, I really like her nose stud.

“You know...” Chloe reaches down and entangles her fingers with mine. “I’ve been careful not to mention it because you’d have totally freaked out, but...it’s ‘wife,’ actually. We got married in Seattle three weeks ago.”

Time drops to slow motion without any help from my powers. I can feel my eyes widen and my breath catch in my throat. I’m frozen in place, staring like she just grew a second head.

With the hand she’s kept hidden behind the doorframe, Chloe brings my camera up to eye level, points the lens at me and snaps a shot. She lets go of my hand and calmly shakes the photo before presenting it to me.

“I’m also pregnant, and you’re the father.”

I look down at the picture. The contours of the dorkiest expression ever committed to film are already taking shape. I look back at her just to find a shit-eating grin plastered on her face.

“Payback’s a bitch, isn’t it?”

“You’re such a liar! I totally believed you!”
She starts laughing. I shove at her shoulder, though honestly I can’t even pretend to be mad. “You’re fixing lunch for me now, just because of that.”

She’s beaming like I just gave her the greatest news ever conceived. “You hungry?”

“Starving, actually. Did I even have breakfast?”

“No, and it bothers the crap out of me. Don’t get me started on your eating habits these days.” Chloe looks down, hooks a finger in my pants’ pocket and slides in the photo. She gives me a wink. “Promise you’ll show it to me after you rewind for the last time today.”

“Oh, shit, that’s right. We’re rewinding all this. Are you sure?”

“For the bajillionth time, yes. It’s no big deal.”

“But...I said—we...we told each other...”

“Just tell me again, it’ll be amazing to hear it out of the blue. Or wait, maybe you’re running out of ‘I love you’s? You have them in short supply, is that it?”

“Don’t laugh, it was such a special moment.”

“Every day with you is full of special moments.” She brings my hand to her lips and kisses it. “I’m not greedy.”

Oh my god, the way she’s looking at me. My head is suddenly flooding with a dozen less-than-chaste urges. I think my face just caught fire.

She tugs at my arm so that I follow her into the kitchen area. “BLT or vegetable omelet?” she asks. “You’ll love either, guaranteed.”


I’d have kissed her again if she hadn’t changed the subject so quickly. Hell, I’d have done a lot more than that. Get a hold of yourself, Max, you haven’t even been here a whole day.

The playlist has moved on to more music I don’t know but instantly love, along with some old favorites from Syd Matters and Alt-J. Chloe is basically playing a mixed tape for me, it’s adorable.

She grabs a small frying pan from the rack and switches on the stove. “Just sit back and relax, babe. I got it all covered.”

“Wow, do you always spoil me this much?”

“Only when I want to get in your pants. Which is all the time.”

“I knew it.”

I watch her from the couch as she busies herself around the place: roll up the blinds, snuff out candles, fetch our half-finished drinks from the bedroom, prepare all the ingredients...there’s something deeply comforting about it. She’s at ease in her domain, humming along to I Might Float as the bacon snaps and sizzles on the pan. It’s so peaceful and harmless. This is what a normal life would feel like.

She realizes I’m watching and smiles. “I sure hope you brought pancake-loving Max back with you.”
“I noticed in the mirror I’m a bit...bonier than usual.”

“Yes! Thank you! You kept brushing me off like it’s no big deal. I know that on bad days everything tastes like ash, but I don’t give a shit. Eat the damn food anyway, you’re already skinny to begin with.”

“Hah. You really are my mom.”

Chloe shakes the pan at me. “Watch it, missy. Keep giving me attitude and all you’ll get are Brussels sprouts.”

The smell alone is making me drool, can’t wait to nosh on her hand-crafted bacony goodness. A minute later she’s handing me a sandwich-laden plate and sitting next to me with her own, which is great because I didn’t want to make a pig of myself while she just watches. She plucks the half-empty bag of chips from the armrest and props it up between us.

“Thank you, Chloe. This is great.”

“Everything’s great if there’s bacon involved. C’mon, bite into it.”

I obey without objection. I like this nurturing side of hers. It feels good to be cared for once in a while.

“Mmm...mm, dagh gud.”

“Of course it is, it’s an ancient recipe passed down the Price family line for countless generations. The secret is...”

“Lots of bacon?”

“You got it.” She takes a hearty bite and talks past her cud. “So where were we with the story?”

“Actually, could we maybe just hang out for a while? Watch a movie or something?”

She cringes with sympathy. “All this stuff is a lot to process, isn’t it?”

“You could say that. I think I have question fatigue. I could stand turning off my brain for a couple hours.”

“You say it like it’s ever on.”

I half-heartedly shove her with my elbow. “Smartass.”

“I suppose I can allow it, since it’s your first day. We’re kind of tight on time right now, but we’ve got some breathing room.”

“That’s a joke, right? I am a walking time machine, we can afford a little bit of peace...”

“Didn’t take you long to be full of yourself! You can’t rewind the same four hours indefinitely, Super Max. It wears you down, and even if it didn’t, you still have to sleep at some point. If all goes well, from my standpoint in the final timeline you’ll be awake ‘til the marker, then suddenly get tired and go back to sleep.” She chuckles and takes another bite. “Your circadian rhythm is totally out of whack.”

“But why the hurry? Aren’t we safe here?”
“We were, but we got close to Prescott today before you showed up. It won’t go unnoticed for long, and then the hunt is on. Helen said she can only stall for three days tops, and we need to set off the decoys and be long gone by then. She really does have a right to be mad this time, she’s risking everything to help us. Out of self-interest, but still...” Chloe sets her plate aside and crawls on all fours to browse the shelf straight ahead, under the wall-mounted TV. “But let’s forget about all that for now, okay? You’re right, we deserve a bit of R&R.” She drags her finger through DVD spines and picks one. I am absolutely not staring at her butt or exposed midriff, nope, not at all. “We’ve been watching a crap-ton of Futurama in our downtime lately. I know for a fact you’ll like this one.” She pops it out of the case and slides it into the player.

She comes back to her seat with a handful of remotes. Turn off the music, turn on the TV, navigate menus. *Bender’s Big Score,* it says on the screen. Man, talk about an awesome plasma. Eat your heart out, Victoria.

I’m making a mess of myself, shouldn’t have taken such a big bite. I wipe at my mouth with the back of my hand. “I’m down for whatever, but I was actually wondering if you have Fi—”

“Max.” Chloe turns to me and leans close. Her eyes are wide and intensely focused. There’s a hint of warning to her stare, an edge of desperation to her features.

“If you ask me to put on *Spirits Within* again, I will barf.”

Well.

Futurama it is, then.
Trial and Error

So you are lying unconscious in a van while I drive us into the horizon, right? And I can feel getting more and more paranoid. So the next town over I go into a drug store and get a bunch of things to give the van a makeover. I get creative with some paint, I bust it up and scratch it real good, and then take duct tape and a black marker to the license plate. No fugitives here! Just new age artsy hippies in a shitty beat up van. Turns out to be such a dumb waste of time, you’ll see.

All the while you’re out cold inside, you’re passed out for hours and hours. By the time you come to, we’re in a truck stop somewhere in frikkin’ Idaho. Happiest moment ever when you call my name. Even then you’re desperate to know if I got hurt, you’re fucking incredible. I talk you into taking some painkillers and not to worry about a thing, and you’re pretty out of it so you don’t argue too much. I get some stuff so we can sleep in the van, and we keep going for as long as I can stay awake.

Late that same night Helen Briar finds us, because that’s what she does. But she’s alone. She wants to talk.

I wasn’t at my most receptive and I nearly shot her, which...maybe would’ve been the smart choice? Staying ahead of these guys would be a lot easier without her. But hey, we’re not murderers, right? You see, Helen’s as much a prisoner as we ever were, she’s secretly desperate for a chance at freedom...and she’d just watched from a distance as you got rid of eight trained men and women in a few seconds. She knows you can time-travel and Prescott’s making such a big deal about controlling you that there must be a really good reason for it, so...if there’s someone out there that can get her out, it’s you.

You seem barely there, so I do most of the talking while you listen. I’m asking questions and boy, does she have an attitude for someone that’s asking for help. She keeps staring at you like I don’t even exist—she’s this world-weary Scottish thirty-something, she’s “read our profile” and she’s acting like we’re just clueless teen girls playing with fire. Even after what she saw you do to those guys, she doesn’t seem concerned at all that we might decide to get rid of her right there and then.

She says that Prescott gives her cash and training, but “keeps the sword of Damocles” over her head at all times...or rather, her sister’s whole family. She’s proven her loyalty over and over for years, so she doesn’t really get questioned anymore. And if she wanted to fuck us over she didn’t even have to tail us, because the van’s got a GPS tracker and how could we be so dumb to stay in it. Sure made me feel like an idiot.

She could’ve been a good lapdog and stayed away, she could’ve come in here pointing guns and demanding things...but instead she’s approaching us in good faith. She’s unarmed and she’s going to tell us how to evade her powers, so that she can later truthfully say that she lost us. She’ll share everything she knows and help however she can as long as it doesn’t give her up. All that we need to do is kill the man when the opportunity comes.

I’ll admit...I only needed one glance at you to know I was all for it. I still am. Someone hurts you like that, I’m gonna see red until they pay. There’s nothing else to it.

You’re just sitting there, head down, listening. Then you calmly reach for your bag, fish out your camera and take a photo of yourself. You shake it and put it away, quiet like death. Then you look up at her...and disappear.

Here we go again, right? A moment later you’re standing behind her with a gun to her spine. You
speak in this low, furious rasp: *We helped you, and you dare betray us?*

I’m seeing her terrified face, and it’s probably something like my own. A fuck-bomb is going off in my head, and I’m already lining up questions to ask future-you, but you’re rather busy at the moment. You’re tearing into her, saying how we treated her as a friend and yet she double-crossed us at the first setback—how you’re a fucking time-traveler so *of course* you’d see her coming. You were angry like I’ve never seen you before, or since. I admit, it was...pretty scary.

I remember your words so well. *Get this in your head*, you tell her. *There’s no middle ground, you can’t play for both teams and see who wins, betray us...*no, no, wait, wait, you went, *you have one more chance. Betray us again, and I will come back to erase you from existence.*

She looks rattled like you wouldn’t believe, but to her credit, she just takes a minute to process what you’re saying, and then she nods. Helen starts telling you things but you shut her up and tell her to skip to the end, since you already heard everything she has to say. And apparently skipping to the end means shooting her in the leg and taking her bike?

No, no, it’s *her* idea—she claims it’s no big deal, that she’s gone through much worse. She knows how to treat a bullet wound, just don’t shatter her kneecap or something stupid like that. What she’s afraid of is getting caught helping us, so she’d rather appear incompetent, say that you used your powers to jump her because she underestimated us and got sloppy. All of which is true, considering.

So...I volunteer to do it. You’ve shot enough people already. I thought you’d argue, but you simply nod at me, like you get it.

It was no fun at all, to be honest.

When the deed is done we gather everything we can carry and leave her swearing like a sailor in the van, with all the medical supplies she could ever need until they come for her. We’re walking to her sweet-ass Harley, and you’re leaning on me like you’re about to pass out. I’m desperate for answers before present-you takes over again, so I start whispering questions. You look up at me with this smug little smile on your lips.

*I didn’t use the photo*, you tell me. *It was just obvious I needed to scare the shit out of her. Pretty sure it worked.*

Yep.

That’s right! No photojump at all, just a badass performance after a whole bunch of rewinds. You basically owned her ass.

Uh-huh, you’re so full of shit. You can be devious and you know it, Max. Don’t feel ashamed, it’s something to be proud of. Anyway, I’m practically carrying you by the time we get to the bike—rewinding around her bullshit wiped you out for good. We dig through her bags for suspicious shit, and then off we go into the road again. Everything’s *so* fucked up, but it’d be a lie to say it didn’t feel awesome to ride off together like that.

This whole thing finally lets us catch a break. By the way, the main trick to fooling Helen’s power is “trail saturation.” We just need to mail our stuff all over the country and make sure it ships on ground. The more it’s in contact with us, the better—so I hope you’re not too attached to that outfit yet. We always wear gloves, and we don’t touch anything we don’t have to. Aaand I know it’s gross, but you’ll be saving your nail clippings from now on, sorry. They’re great decoy fodder.
We didn’t have to worry about any of that stuff then, though. The hound is out of commission for a good while and a regular search doesn’t have much to go on anymore. So we turn South because why the hell not and keep going for a couple days, way down into Nevada. You’re quiet most of the time. Holding on tight, sorting out your thoughts I guess. We talk a bit here and there, when we stop. It’s so easy to see you’re growing...harder. More jaded and bitter. Not at me, but, you know, at the world, at all this unfair bullshit that we’ve had to deal with. It’s a little heartbreaking, but I also feel the same way. So we kind of feed off each other, you know? Get this attitude of “fuck everything, at least we’re together.”

We focus on that a lot, actually. We always stay close. We touch constantly. We hold each other at night and we kiss a lot, more for comfort than anything else.

And a couple days later you ask me...what will happen to you when the Max that got captured takes over?

Yeah, it dawns on us for the first time. It’s not dying, of course not. But what you’ve done those few days, this person you’re becoming...that’ll be gone like it never existed.

Part of you is relieved, because obviously. But it’s still awful, right? Or...weird, at least. And who knows the kind of trauma that the new Max will have? Who knows what she’ll want to do? And how will I take the change—will I simply go with whatever she wants? Will I love her just the same? I mean, think back to our first week together. It was only five days, but we came out of it completely different people. The more we talk about it the more convinced you become that the new Max will be someone else entirely.

So with everything that’s happened...you sort of go off the rails a bit at this point? You don’t go crazy or anything, you just kinda stop giving a shit about taking shortcuts. Everything starts feeling like one fat cruel joke, like fate itself is toying with you. Might as well start laughing with it. So the universe wants us to fuck around with time travel again? Fine, you got it. Want to ditch the bike and get a new car? Fuck it, here, right off the lot, zero down, no monthly payments. That other car’s license plate will do, they won’t miss it, right? And who the hell needs money for groceries? It’s like a magic trick, we’re standing there in the S-Mart parking lot and things keep popping out of your coat. Boom, deli sandwiches, boom, half-gallon of chocolate milk, boom, whole bags full of fruit and snacks and maxipads because you’ll be starting pretty soon, and I just can’t stop laughing. Running low on cash? We’re in Nevada, let’s tear through the Vegas Strip like there’s no tomorrow...which isn’t that far from the truth, after all. And then it’s easy to sleep on a real bed when the front counter “forgets” they checked you in.

Well, it felt good at the time in a rebellious and destructive kind of way, but honestly...I think it was our lowest point ever. We were getting to a place in our heads where nothing mattered to us but each other. I don’t feel proud of it, I embraced it way too easily—I should’ve tried harder to keep you true to yourself, to help you rise above the tide of shit crashing down on your head. Instead I let myself fall back to the Chloe I never wanted to be.

And at night...well, you can imagine what we do at night. We get over the whole “it’s too soon” thing in a hurry. We don’t even talk about it, there’s this...force, pulling us close, and we’re not fighting it anymore. Zero restraint.

And sure, the sex is grounded in love, deep and sincere love, but...all this anger and frustration that’s been piling up inside? It’s like a flood breaking through a levee. It feels a bit messed up, and awesome, but kind of...twisted? You want me to keep you awake for as long as I can, there’s some real wild abandon to it. Some...desperation. It just—I don’t know, I remember it fondly, but I’m aware now that it wasn’t...it wasn’t healthy. None of it was.
We’re complicated people, I guess. We were dealing with things in our own way. Or maybe we were sick of dealing with things, so we stopped caring for a while.

I know! Not romantic at all, I’m sorry. I wish I could say there were candles and slow music and coy giggles with longing looks and all that shit, but no, we went wild at each other. We let it all out. We made love and then we fucked, and everything in-between after that. God, I’m sorry, it sounds awful when I put it that way.

Shit, is this too much information? I forget you’re not used to talking about sex stuff with me anymore.

Well, hey, in my defense, I can barely think of anything else right now, what with you being practically on top of me. I don’t think you realize how distracting it is.

No, don’t move! I didn’t say that, stay right there. It’ll be a grueling test of will to keep going like this, but I’ll manage.

We get into a fight on the last night, actually. I’m trying to bring up some kind of long term plan, trying to figure out what the hell are we going to do to keep ahead of this guy and eventually turn the tables. You don’t even want to think about it, you’re like, what’s the fucking point, let’s keep moving and let the real Max deal with the problem. I’m frustrated because I’m feeling the guilt, I’m thinking about my mom and my dad and what they’d say if I don’t learn from the thousand mistakes I’ve made. You taught me that we can’t give the finger to the world and expect problems to solve themselves.

It’s the wrong thing to say to you, though. You tell me that I’ve no fucking clue what guilt really is. So I say a bunch of crap that I don’t mean, and you do the same. We were barely hanging by a thread by this point, you know? It doesn’t take much for it to become a full-blown meltdown. Lots of yelling, lots of tears.

No, it was just angry self-loathing bullshit that doesn’t help anyone, I’m not going to repeat it. We weren’t even angry at each other, why would we be? We just needed a target. Fifteen minutes later we’re already hugging and blubbering apologies and feeling like assholes. I always feel like a total bitch when I get mad at you.

We...you know, we kiss and make up pretty thoroughly, and that’s how we fall asleep. Exhausted. Holding each other. We thought we’d have time to talk in the morning, but...the change happens in the middle of the night. I’m asleep and I’m the big spoon ‘cause that’s how we roll—and suddenly you’re waking me up, holding on tight enough to choke me, weeping and laughing, saying my name over and over and oh my god Chloe we’re naked. I hadn’t seen you that happy since we were kids, it was great.

So...yeah, welcome home, BetaMax. You take some time to settle down and properly blush, and I take some time to get used to how weird it is. And so the questions begin!

I try to fill you in on everything, which leaves you far less shocked than I thought you’d be. Helen’s a pleasant surprise and our descent to petty crime is not so pleasant, but you get it. Also, the wound on your arm hurts like a motherfucker, which is weird, because you weren’t complaining before.

You give me the barebones of your end of things, and it’s so obvious you don’t want to talk about it at all. I ask how’d you get out. You answer that you did “whatever was necessary.” The way your voice drops when you say it...let’s put it this way: I don’t ask you about it ever again. I can imagine, and you’ll talk if you ever want to. Which you never did—but I’m pretty sure it’s in the
journal, if you want all the morbid details.

So I go back to what we’ve done, and all the while you keep inching closer and closer. I’m yapping away about Helen’s attitude or something like that when you up and kiss me, just like that. And it’s not just an “I’m so glad to see you” kiss, if you know what I mean. You look at me for a moment, you touch my cheek...and then you lean in for more. You’re so nervous that you’re trembling, but there’s absolutely no question as to what you want.

I’m like, holy shit, are you sure? You just went through hell, maybe take some time to adjust or whatever? Don’t push yourself to do something too soon, or for the wrong reasons.

You tell me you’ve been living a nightmare where all you hear from me is pain and misery, where you live desperate to be with me, to make it better. And now none of that is real anymore, it doesn’t exist. You woke up into a wonderful dream that’s everything you want. So you’re going to make the best of it, because it could all end any moment.

Words of wisdom, as far as I’m concerned. Hey, you’re naked and smiling right in front of me, there’s only so much restraint I can muster.

Funny part is...it was so different. All tenderness and...almost reverent. You’re so careful and gentle, like I might break if you touch me the wrong way. And you fumbled a lot because, you know, it’s your first time all over again, which was a hilarious thing to realize.

I said it felt unhealthy before, right? This is the opposite of that. It feels...like you’re healing. Like I’m giving you the world. All I need to do is be there, be happy and enjoy myself, and I’m giving you the world.

Catharsis in orgasm.

Haha, c’mon, it’s not smutty, it’s deep! I’m being deep and insightful. What, you’d rather I skipped all the sexy bits?

Yeah, I didn’t think so.

Seriously though, it was fucking magical, I’m not even joking. When I feel the insecurities creep in and I need to remind myself that it isn’t all in my head, that you love me just as much as I love you...I look to that memory. I think of how happy you were to be there with me.

Alright, I knew I’d get sappy again, enough about that.

We were utterly aimless before, but that’s over. BetaMax means business. She’s got a plan, and holy shit is she hell-bent on revenge. I’ve seen anger in you before, but I had never seen actual hatred for someone—even with Jefferson you were always kind of...conflicted? Like you couldn’t decide whether to hate him or just pity the sick fuck. Getting him arrested was good enough.

But Sean Prescott, though...you don’t want to just kill him. You want to crush him. You want to see him ruined.

I think that’s the weirdest part of it all. I know you, it’s not your nature to hate anyone like that. This man broke something inside of you, Max. He changed you. Of all the reasons I have to want him gone, that’s number one.

But you were in no hurry to get it done—well, let me rephrase that, because you became crazy focused after we got up in the morning, nearly every goddamn second was suddenly precious to you. What I meant is that you didn’t rush off to go find him or whatever; instead, you go to work
on giving us the means to do something, something big and meaningful to fight on his turf. You’re on a mission like there’s a clock ticking. Come on, tell me why, you get three guesses.

First try! Yep, you’d already figured it out. At some point all your memories would be gone, and it could happen any time because somebody forgot to mention how long she went before using a certain butterfly picture. Bit of an oversight there, huh?

Yes. I demand more information the next time you travel back in time to save my life.

So anyway, better get done as much as possible since the Main Max might turn out to be useless, right? Which...you kind of did. No offense.

Good. Things got pretty quiet and boring for a while, actually. We hole up in a hotel in Glendale and you go all out. By the way, you’d be surprised how insanely easy it is to get a bunch of new identities online. It’s kinda gross.

What, me? I was all for it. You were a bit scary, sure, but it was also great to have actual goals. I was losing my mind with all the running and hiding, waiting for disaster to strike again. I wanted to fight back, and that was exactly your plan.

So what can I do to be useful? Well, the Spokane incident was a disgrace, so I’m going to work out until I can carry you for miles if I have to. I don’t get do-overs like you, so I better learn to throw a damn punch and aim a damn gun. I need to understand everything you’re doing so it’s not just you managing all the finance and computer stuff. And you know what? Taking care of you whenever I can...it makes me feel really good inside. Like back at the beginning, bandaging your hands. Or driving you around, or watching over your sleep. And I guess I’ve something of my mom in me after all, because I enjoy the shit out of keeping you fed. I get why she liked doing that for us so much.

Well, somebody has to, because whenever you’re not working, you’re training. Your wonderful stay at the Prescott Spa and Resort showed you that you can get way better with your powers. I don’t get to see a lot of it because you’re constantly rewinding, but you make it a point to explain what it’s like. Apparently none of it is nearly as fast and awesome from your standpoint, huh? You’re always exhausted and drenched in sweat by the time you reach the final timeline, often woozy with migraines.

Eeh...you’re somewhat worried? But not enough to stop you. For the record, nothing deadly or violent has happened since the storm. It’s like reality flipped out once and now it’s gotten better at handling the changes. That’s how you put it, at least.

Either way, it isn’t much of a choice, is it? You either use everything you have, or we end up getting caught and the powers get abused anyway. That’s why we started taking daily photos for the archive, so there’s always a last-ditch measure to stay ahead of whatever happens. In fact you were so single-minded about all this that helping Arcadia Bay didn’t even cross your mind before I mentioned it to you.

Yeah, that’s exactly right, I’m getting to that. It doesn’t take a genius to see that not all is well in MaxLand. Why would it be? This Max went through worse than all the others, and it’s like you’re dealing with it by working non-stop. More than once you drive yourself far past any sane threshold, and I mean pushing yourself until you literally collapse. It’s no fun to watch you do that to yourself.

So I bring it up and brace for another argument, but you pretty much agree. It’s necessary, we’re not fucking around and blah blah blah, but you admit there’s more to it than that. It’s the only way
to drop into a dreamless sleep, you tell me. All the fucked up thoughts stay away if your body hurts bad enough.

It’s not like you’re dumb, so it’s easy to argue that there’s no way you can keep up like that. Believe it or not, it’s my idea to maybe go see a doctor. I mean, sexin’ me up is awesome and all, but it’ll only help you so much.

Aw. Got a bigger laugh back then.

I’d been thinking of David, actually. He was popping pills pretty hard for a long time. So I called him up and told him a few things—nothing supernatural, of course. Basically that we’re not doing too well and asked if the drugs helped him much after Iraq. He told me they won’t work a miracle, but they do help. Just gotta find out what works for you. He said that therapy at the VA was a load of shit for him, but that we should try anyway. At the very least, he said, don’t bottle everything up inside, don’t be like him before Joyce. Talking to her about his issues was the best thing he ever did.

It was still a bit weird to talk to him without yelling. We went back and forth about other small things...I tried not to lie, and he was real kind and understanding, no judgment about us leaving. “You grieve the way you have to,” he told me. He sounded so exhausted. I said I was sorry about everything, and he was too.

It was a good talk.

So yeah, pills. Blah blah blah, long story short, I ended up on fluvoxamine, which isn’t even supposed to be for PTSD but hey, it’s working better than the other stuff. You started on something for a while but drugs really fuck up your powers for some reason, so...lots of long talks with Doctor Chloe and try to have happy thoughts, I guess. You got much better over time, so I’m going to take some credit for that if you don’t mind.

Pff. That’s very nice of you to say, and also a big fat lie. I was a mess before the storm, Max. It only got worse. I’ve been talking about you a lot, but I was dealing with a lot of bullshit issues inside my head, too. I’m not saying drugs fixed everything, that’s dumb—but now that I can compare before happy pills and after...

I mean, you can tell the difference, right? There’s no way you haven’t noticed. I feel so much better now, I feel like myself. I don’t have to fight down my own anger all the time. I don’t have this voice in my head telling me I’m a fuckup, telling me I’m not worthy of being alive—not a literal voice, smartass, you know what I mean. And I can deal with all the bullshit anxiety about you, all those thoughts of...you know, what if you go crazy, what if they fucking kill you? Or the absolute worst, what if you get into your head that the only way to keep me safe is to leave my side, or to kill yourself? I could see you doing that, disappearing one day as some noble gesture of self-sacrifice that nobody wants.

I’m telling you right now, Max: rather dead than without you. I know it’s corny as fuck, but it’s the truth. What’s the point of doing all this if we don’t end up together?

Okay, alright. As long as you’re aware.

God, this is starting to sound like another therapy session. It’s basically what we do ‘til the new year. We lie low, we move often, we gather information on the Prescott Empire. You pile on the bank on Arcadia Bay, we train, we test exactly how your powers work, we talk and talk and talk and squeeze in some sexytimes now and then because seriously, can’t keep our paws off each other for long. You went on your solo adventure to your parents’ a bit after thanksgiving, by the way.
Boy, was that nerve-wracking.

I wanted to, of course I did, but you travel way faster by yourself. “Borrow” a car, rewind it back, rinse, repeat, no harm done. Hardly took you a day, there and back.

They took it...the way you’d expect them to take it. But hey, at least you were alive, right? If it weren’t for the bogus postcards you’d sent, they’d have reported you missing right away. You had to redo the whole thing several times and get creative to avoid any possible surveillance. It was so rough on you. Broke my heart. I couldn’t wait to drown you in hugs when you got back.

Of course! We stayed on the phone the whole time, but it sucked so many balls anyway. I’ve become such a worry wart about you, it’s sad.

No, no, we got rid of those and got new phones. We got new everything, Miss Frost. Even a place to live because eating out all the time and a new bed each night gets old fast. Pretty early on we had a small RV, very...“Frank-esque,” as you’d say. It was kind of a shitbox, though—so we upgraded to TimeWarp HQ for Christmas. It was weird to realize that suddenly we could afford anything we wanted.

I wish. Sorry, but...Christmas sucked anyway. Like every Christmas since...you know. My dad. He used to love it so much, remember? It hits me so hard still. And now, with my mom gone too...it wasn’t good.

Thank you. I swear to you, I want to get over it so bad, I’m so done with all this emo teenage bullshit. I want our next Christmas to be great. They wouldn’t want it any other way.

You dealt with it like a pro, though. Didn’t make me feel bad for moping, didn’t try to crack dumb jokes or anything. You simply gave me space. And when I came to you...you held me. That’s all I wanted. It’s what I needed.

Yeah, you did rewind. You told me I wanted you to, after I blew up in your face just for trying to cheer me up. I was selfish and asked you to break the rules for me, and you did.

Oh man, I haven’t even mentioned the rules, have I? It’s just something to keep things real between us, we’d go bonkers without them. It’s real simple: we don’t take back arguments, or tears, or sex. If you had to rewind anyway for whatever reason, you tell me. Only exception is if we plan ahead for it, like right now.

Of course sex, especially that! Can you imagine the frustration? I’m all ready to go, but you’re all gone—it’s inhumane, I’m telling you. There was this one time...

Look, believe me, it can drive a girl crazy.

Fuck, it’s five already? We gotta put you to work, let’s wrap this up. A bunch of stuff happened between New Year’s and now, but it doesn’t add much to what you already know—it’s more of the same, kind of. Well, except...

Alright, yes: the visions, you should know about that. You started getting visions again. It’s early January and we’ve made it to California to poke around a Prism subsidiary in San Francisco. We’re having dinner at this barbeque joint because we felt like it, and suddenly you go quiet and drop into this weird trance, just staring into nothing, catatonic. You didn’t pass out—kind of the opposite, you start breathing really hard and gripping the table like you’re about to flip it. You come out of it after a minute or so, totally freaked out.

You said the restaurant disappeared and then you were roaming inside this burning building, fire
and smoke everywhere. There were screams all around you, loud and horrifying, children wailing like they were burning alive. It’s some kind of office building and you come up to this daycare center, and it’s the most horrific sight, kids banging on a glass pane as the flames eat up the room. Before you can do a damn thing the whole floor collapses, and the vision ends right as everything crashes onto your head.

It ruined dinner pretty thoroughly.

So obviously you’re not going to let this happen, right? It’s the tornado all over again, you’ve no idea what you did to cause it, but this time it will be different. Right away you’re trying to come up with a plan to find where and how, and maybe you’ll get another vision and you can find out from inside and yadda yadda yadda...and that’s when it comes to me that you can simply cheat the system. I tell you, “Just take a selfie and let your future self tell me what needs to happen.”

Yeah, I feel pretty proud of that one. Who said I couldn’t think in four dimensions too? Not that I suggested it lightly or anything. A photojump means another forgotten Max, and it sucks to watch that happen.

But you do it anyway, and it works. The change after the camera goes off is as weird as usual, but at least this time you’re calm and smiling. You say you’re from a week into the future. It’s an office building like any other downtown, hardly half a mile from where we are, here is the address—and guess what? Right across the street from the place we wanted to check out. The fire happens in three days, Tuesday at 11:15 AM. There is no stopping it: a gas leak deep underground coupled with an electrical fire causes an explosion and a massive power surge that sets off a huge fireball into the elevator shafts. As far as you can tell, you and your powers had nothing to do with it...but we’re going to save those people anyway!

Best solution you’ve come up with is to call in a bomb threat three hours before. Make it serious and detailed enough and they’ll evacuate the place completely; so hey, here’s a phone number and the info on a dude that got fired recently from one of the law offices in there. It should work, glad to be of service and good luck, kiss kiss.

Well, your next vision hurts like a bitch but doesn’t have children in it anymore, so that’s cool. But you’re still in there, and people are still screaming. I’m gonna skip ahead and spoil it for you right here: in the end it isn’t you that goes in to get the stragglers and the dumb-ass skeptics out. It’s me. You watch me through the feed, rewind all my mistakes and tell me what to do at all times. Lots and lots of trial and error. We don’t save everyone, but...enough, I guess. Way more than if we hadn’t gone for it.

Wow, is it that hard to believe? It makes way more sense than you going in. Sorry to break it to you, but you can’t carry anybody for shit, Max. Try to kick a door down, see how far you get. And what’s really important: if a rock or whatever falls on your head and you drop unconscious, it’s game over forever. This is the way we do things: high risk or intel gathering? I go in. Stealthy theft without leaving a mark? You go in. Basically you only do it yourself if your powers are absolutely necessary to get everything done the way we need it.

Yes, of course you hate to be the one watching. But that’s too bad, get over it. How do you think I feel when you take all the risk? I see you in pain every fucking day one day or another. You have to let me keep you safe when I can, Max. I know it’s hard to watch me get hurt, I know exactly how awful it feels. Just be glad you can take it back at will. I don’t have that privilege.

Can you tell we’ve had this conversation before?

And how about this: in the final timeline, when it was all said and done...I felt awesome. The shit I
did was right out of a superhero movie. And those people will forever remember the hyperactive blue-haired devil that shoved their sorry asses to safety. We saved so many lives that day...I’d never been so proud of us. Isn’t that worth the pain?

What do you mean?

But it’s what ended up happening, isn’t it? You had the vision because it happened that way. It happened that way because you had the vision. It’s not the first time we get caught in a chicken-and-egg situation like that. Would we have gone to the lighthouse if you hadn’t seen yourself there before the storm hit?

Chew on that one for a while.

Anyway, you keep seeing weird shit now and then, but the latest set of visions blows it all out of the water. It all came true two weeks ago. It’s how you got that Prism keycard in your wallet.

Oh, Prism is the shady parent company that lords over every branch of the Prescott Empire. Lots of money in real estate, but they’ve got their tendrils in a hundred things. The family business started in Arcadia Bay, but the bastard’s all over the west coast and mid-west these days. It’s as Evil Corporation as it gets.

These visions, though...they come and go in bits and pieces. Usually you get to look around and puzzle out what’s going on, but these are one-second flashes, sudden jolts of what’s going to happen, one after another. Shattered glass. Blood on your hands. You flickering in and out of standstill mode. Your powers failing, then coming back, then failing again...and then you falling down a ten story drop in the black of night.

The kicker is that this happens in the run-up to the Big Heist. That keycard you’ve got? It’s the master key, the back door buster for Prism headquarters and the Prescott estate. The admin of this one office in downtown Portland is Walter Hammond, Prism Vice President and Prescott’s second, he’s like the real hands-on man that takes care of the mundane stuff. He carries one of these cards in his pocket and has a backup in a strongbox right there at that office. The plan is to take that backup without anybody ever finding out.

Max...don’t ask if you don’t really want to know. Let’s just say that many Bothans died to bring us this information.

Okay, fine, if you insist...you interrogated him at his home. He was tough to crack. You did whatever was necessary until he told you everything, and then rewound the whole thing. You didn’t give me a lot more details than that, but do you really want to know more?

I wasn’t kidding earlier, you know. That time you spent at their mercy...it broke something inside of you. Nothing was going to stop you from getting even. And you know what? I never blamed you for feeling that way. How could I judge? I was one-hundred-percent ready to kill Nathan after we found Rachel’s body—I’d be willing to do much worse if I’d been in your shoes. I know that much about myself.

So yeah, we’ve got a plan, but these visions make it pretty fucking clear that the plan goes to shit somehow. We do the selfie cheat and nothing happens. Which means either the outcome of whatever we do is good enough, or...you know, you are too dead to use the photo, or the photo itself got destroyed somehow. It’s not the best sign.

So obviously we abort, right?
Nope. One, you’re still on the clock, don’t think BetaMax ever forgot. This needs to be done and planning something else would take forever. Two, we’re going to use those visions to prepare, because we’ve seen that the details aren’t set in stone. And three...you’re goddamn curious as to what the hell gave us away, because nobody but us knew what we were up to.

We never found out, which was another point for the “Prescott has some kind of oracle” theory. They seem to know only some very specific things ahead of time. Just like your own visions.

So, into the fray you go anyway. I admit I was sulking about it, not going to apologize for that. Middle of the night, standard “bomb your way in and rewind” strategy. Rewind a few times past security, take the stairs, another pipe bomb fun time and you’re in. I’ve become so good at making those, by the way. I’d make such a great homebrewed terrorist. So you’re in the storage room, opening up that strongbox, and the moment you stick your hand in there to grab everything you can, all hell breaks loose. It’s like they were all hiding under the rug or something.

You’re obviously expecting it, so the rewind kicks in faster than the darts and tasers can reach you. They’re still trying to take you alive, which is a good thing. You go back an hour, and the ambush still happens. Two hours, three, four...they’re always there, and you just can’t go back anymore. I guess they’ve puzzled out how you operate after months of dealing with our shenanigans.

On my end it’s 11 PM and you’ve just disappeared from the car mid-conversation. Most of the stuff I’m telling you is what you told me later. And before you ask, yes, it gets super old to plan ahead for all the possible time jumps and adapt to whatever the hell happens in the final timeline. It’s a rough life, such is the fate of the trusty sidekick.

The feed is starting to show all the havoc; can’t rewind anymore, so you’re stuck with freezing time and walking in the standstill, which still fucks you up pretty hardcore despite all the work you’ve been doing. It’s a crazy mess, you have to literally climb over the bodies, and you can’t sustain the freeze after pushing the rewind so hard so you’re skipping in and out, heading for a window. It’s like they’re not aiming at you, they’re aiming at where you might be in a few seconds. You shoot the glass pane ahead and run for it, jumping hopscotch through space like you’re fading in and out of reality...and something hits your leg. You stagger and crash through the shattered glass as fifty thousand volts make jelly out of your brain. Your scream is so distorted and unnatural, like you got thrown into a blender or something. Most bloodcurdling sound I’ve heard in my life.

Right away I’m peeling out of the parking spot and racing to the side of the building, and I can see you dropping like dead weight up there. I’m screaming like a maniac for you to wake the fuck up, there’s this awful sense of impending doom clumping up in my gut. It’s literally one second before you hit the ground that suddenly you slow down just enough not to splat, then drop the last few feet and crumple onto the floor. I get out, drag you into the car and get the fuck out.

You pass out in the passenger seat, so goodbye to rewinding the whole thing and not leaving a trace. And they obviously know you took the card, so they’ll simply update the system and make it obsolete. The keycard is nothing but a worthless piece of plastic now.

Soooo...that’s why you snuck in during the weekend and left a very discreet pen drive plugged into his computer.

Boom, plot twist! Was it good? Did you see it coming?

Ha! In the visions it was night time, get it? So we came up with something else. We don’t need to hide taking the keycard if we have full access to a top-level clearance computer. The flash drive very quietly installs a Trojan horse, and all we gotta do is connect remotely and do whatever we
want. And I happen to have learned leet haxxor skillz, yo.

Sorry.

You timed the rewinds down to the second. On a security camera, you would flash there for an instant, plug in the thing, then disappear. Hardly something anyone would notice.

I know, it’s so damn tricky. When you take an object, it stays with you through the rewind, right? But if you let go of something and then rewind, it will go back to your pocket or hand or wherever. Only exception is anything that’s part of you, your DNA I guess. Hair, fingernails...bodily fluids and solids, if you catch my drift. They stay unaffected, at least until they break apart enough not to be considered “yours” anymore.

You bet we tested it. You stared at your poop in the toilet while going back in time. It was very scientific.

Yeah, let’s move on from that. So the pen drive is plugged into the computer, and because it was obvious what we were trying to do with the strongbox and the keycard, they don’t suspect a damn thing. Ta-da!

Oh, it’s ever so tempting to go all out, sell stock and property left and right, donate every penny to charities all over the world and fuck up the computer systems real good...but then we’d be tipping our hand. We want to make the keycard functional again when no-one’s looking and then leave it alone. Everything’s connected and remotely accessed so it’s a total cakewalk.

It’s okay, we couldn’t outright ruin everything, anyway. It’s a huge company, you don’t leave the whole thing vulnerable to one hacked computer, that’s crazy. Could’ve done some damage, but nothing all that significant in the long run. And that’s what we care about. The long game.

Which brings us to...this morning, on our way to downtown Olympia and Prism Headquarters. Prescott would be there. We’d already rewound once to have Helen give us his exact location throughout the morning. You were about to get your hands on that man and make him tell you absolutely everything.

And then you were going to kill him.

Like we already established...the time you showed up was less than ideal.

I’m just teasing you! Dude, look...I know exactly what you’re thinking, it’s been at the back of my head the whole time. It’s okay. You can stop fidgeting now, you are not disappointing me.

Max, seriously. It’s okay. I get it, you don’t have it anymore, that near-insane drive of yours is gone. I don’t expect you to feel that way, I honestly don’t want you to! Believe me, I’m glad you’re not as fucked up inside, it’s a huge relief.

But it sure brings up a pretty important question, doesn’t it? It’s the big fat elephant in the room.

What do we do now?
Her question lingers above our heads like cigarette smoke. It curls into my lungs and brings a sting to my eyes. My first thought is to say that we should leave everything behind and run away together.

So much for not being a coward anymore.

"You're wondering if we could run away, aren't you."

I lift my head from her shoulder. Do we have telepathy now? Because I wouldn't so much as bat an eyelash if we did. She should have her own superpowers.

Chloe smiles at me. "It's just obvious. You didn't sign up for any of this. All you ever wanted was to have me in your life again."

We're on the bed, snuggled close. She smells like fresh body wash and deodorant, some flowery lavender scent that's oddly fitting for her. This feels like our natural position, Chloe on her back, me on my side and pressed against her. It took some daring to drape my leg over her thighs, but it was totally worth it. She's been holding it in place since I threatened to move away.

I tighten my arm around her waist, pulling her in. "I made all this mess, though. The least I should do is deal with it."

"You don't owe a damn thing to anybody."

"Would you really run away with me?"

"I've thought about it sometimes, not going to lie. Drop everything and move really far, to Sidney or something. Even if that crazy asshole wanted to chase after us, we have all the cash in the world, we could move into a fortress and pay people to protect us just like he does. We could totally do it."

"But we haven't."

"I brought it up, once. A couple months ago. You said there was no way you could let this go, that he needs to be gone before we can move on with our lives. I agreed, and that was it."

"You're not answering me, Chloe. How invested are you in all this, really? Would you drop everything and go if that's what I wanted?"

"I'd follow you anywhere. You should know that by now."

"That's...not what I'm asking. What do you want to do?"

I can feel her fidgeting. "I just...I want to do whatever makes you happy, Max. That's what I really want."

"Oh, come on, that's such a cop out!"

"It's the truth!"

I get an elbow under me so I can look at her. "You're telling me it's all the same to you? Killing a man or running away, you'll do what I tell you, it doesn't matter?"
She cringes and looks away. "No, that's not what I'm saying..."

"Then what?"

"I'm saying I'll be happy either way, as long as I'm with you. Why are you getting in my face about this?"

"I'm not, I'm just grossed out with myself! I mean, what the fuck, was I some kind of bully? Did I ever stop to ask what you wanted?"

I'm hitting a nerve. Huddled so close to her body, I can sense the uneasy tension building in her chest. "We make decisions together," she says, short and terse. "You didn't push me into anything."

"Well, it's not what it sounds like. It sounds like I barged in with all my crazy and simply assumed you'd be cool with murdering someone."

Chloe doesn't so much push me away as she rolls over to face me, sitting halfway up. "It's not just someone, okay? Sean Prescott needs to fucking pay for what he's done. I was all for killing him, I was eager this morning. It's been one shit-shower after another since the storm, and no-one hurts you like that and gets away with it, no-one. Alright?"

I reflexively pull away from her sudden intensity. She's leaning forward, taut with hardly-contained energy. "You're asking me how invested I am in this? I'm up to my eyebrows in it, it's my fucking life. I keep talking about your hatred like it was a one-sided thing, like I'm on the outside feeling sorry for you, but that's not true. I want him dead just as much. But I can't do it myself, I need you to do it. And it tears me up inside because that means I need to talk you into killing someone. How fucked up is that, Max? What kind of person does that? You're finally free of all this baggage, I shouldn't be dragging you down into this awful shit again..."

I shake my head, reaching out to softly touch her arm. "Chloe..."

Whatever she sees in my expression, it seems to placate her significantly. She shifts to sit cross-legged in front of me, her gaze low to the space between us, her lips pressed together like trying to hold in her anger.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I'm trying so hard to play it cool, but...you get how hard this is for me, don't you? We've worked so much at this, we've killed people up close and personal, for fuck's sake. Those goons didn't deserve to die, they were just doing a job. That blood's on him, too. But I can't sit here and pretend it's okay to ask you to..." she blows out a frustrated breath and glances at me. "Fuck. This is such a mess." Chloe runs her fingers through her hair, pushing the beany off. She cradles her head, fingers entangled at the nape. "Goddamn it, what a mess..."

"It's okay, Chloe. Really. I'm glad you're telling me how you feel."

"No, you don't get it. I'm putting pressure on you now. I only wanted to give you the facts and let you make up your mind. This is so unfair to you..."

"It's unfair to us both. It is what it is. And you are giving me the facts. The way you feel is important to me, it's what matters the most."

The words get a reluctant smile out of her. She looks up at me, some of the tenderness returning to her eyes. "I'm complete shit at subtlety, aren't I."

"I love that about you. Subtlety is overrated."
She reaches for my hand and takes it into her lap. She absently caresses my palm with her thumbs.

''I would run away with you, if that is what you wanted. You are my life, not all this.'''

Her eyes are lost in the middle distance. Her shoulders droop like there is no air left in her lungs. She's not lying to me, but...

I wet my lips. There's an unpleasant jitter in my stomach.

''I'm going to ask you some questions, Chloe. You need to give me the truth. No filter and no coddling me. Okay?''

She's quiet for a moment, then nods. ''You got it.'''

''Alright.''

I sit up in front of her, mirroring her crossed-legs pose. I clasp our hands together.

''Do you believe we could escape from all this? Find somewhere safe and eventually forget it all?''

She takes a moment to respond. ''I'm not sure. Maybe, if we tried hard enough to erase every track. But...he still wants you alive, even after everything we've done to piss him off. Just covering up Spokane alone must have cost a fortune. Makes you wonder.''

''What do you mean?''

''I don't think you're just another tool for him, Max. I think you might be his end-game, for whatever the hell his final goal might be. He won't give up easy.'' She takes a deep breath, lets it out. ''And even if he did...could we really ever relax? I don't know...''

I nod at her words, taking them in.

''Would you hold it against me? If we just left?''

''No. I swear. I mean, I wouldn't sleep easy for years, but...part of me wants to escape too. I would never blame you.''' The hint of a smile touches her lips. ''You might hear 'I told you so' a million times if it doesn't work out, though.''

''I definitely believe that.''

I try to imagine the path we'd follow. Plane tickets under a new alias, end up somewhere remote and off the grid. Leave decoys traveling inside the US for as long as they'll last, maybe even send them over from wherever we are so they can circulate periodically. Always looking over our shoulders. Always under disguise, worried of doing too little or too much, of being noticed. Living afraid of our own shadows.

No, that's not living at all. We'd have to go the other route altogether, use the distance as a bulwark and put all that cash to good use. Build an empire overseas to match his own, complete with a foolproof anti-kidnapping security network. Eventually become a force that's just too much for him to handle. We don't have to be in the US to make the world a better place.

I've no idea how to do any of that, but I could learn. That is, if my powers don't rip apart the very fabric of space-time first.

And yet...
This man has ruined everything. Across realities he's had my parents killed, Chloe tortured, my mind broken to a form of high-functioning insanity. The dream-memory is crystal-clear in my mind, a glimpse of the horrible fate that awaits if we ever let our guards down. And beyond the personal grudges, he is clearly advancing some kind of sinister agenda. Something tells me the outcome won't be for the good of all mankind, precisely. Knowing what I can do...isn't it my responsibility to oppose him? To...defeat him?

The outrage and spite are there within me, easy enough to tap into. Are they enough to carry me down that path, to the last of its consequences?

Two roads before me, leading into two completely different futures.

"Is there no other way?" I ask her. "Couldn't we just...bankrupt him somehow? Take away all his power?"

She purses her lips and looks to the side. "Prescott is old money with a million connections, diversified to a nauseating degree. It'd be like trying to take down Oscorp, supervillains and all. I suppose it's possible, but it would be a long corporate war, and at some point we'd probably have to explain where all the money is coming from. It was never an option for BetaMax, it would take too long. Maybe it is for us."

"But you don't think it's a good idea."

"It just seems like a long shot. And since I'm being honest, the thought alone gives me shudders. I've seen enough to know I'd rather run away than deal with all the paperwork. Not even joking, bureaucracy is its own brand of Hell on Earth."

The two paths remain, clear as day.

"What if I just...give in. What if I simply work for him?"

Horror takes over her features. Her hands recoil to her chest, as if my words might be a contagious disease. "You cannot be serious. A deal with the devil?"

"If it would keep you safe..."

"That is not an option. Never. I would rather be dead."

"Okay, alright...I understand."

Two alternatives before me. My hand is on a doomsday switch. Turn it left, turn it right—either way likely leads to ruin. Pick your poison.

It's a familiar feeling.

"Do you believe I should kill Sean Prescott, Chloe?"

If my previous words were a disease, these are a stab to the chest. "Fuck, Max, don't ask me that."

"Just tell me. Please."

"Would you really murder this man in cold blood?"

I stay quiet for a moment.

"If...if you asked me to. If you believe it's our best choice. I'd do it for you. For us."
"I can't ask you to kill someone!"

"I think...I think you'd have to. I think otherwise I would flake at the last moment. Knowing the facts isn't enough."

She blinks several times, gaze wandering in concert with her troubled thoughts. I can see tears welling in her eyes before she partially covers her face with her hands.

My fingers rest lightly on her knee. "You know what I did to be here."

"So?" She sniffls. "It's not even remotely the same."

"No, it's not. The people that died to the storm were innocent. I'm sure there were children, too."

She doesn't respond.

"I still don't regret it. I would do anything for you. Anything."

"This is so fucked up..."

"Do you want me to kill Sean Prescott?"

She looks up and stares at me, eyes glinting in the shaded daylight. She knows why I have to ask like this. Chloe sees the two paths ahead, and this time it can't be my choice alone that sets us down one or the other. Her hand is on the switch now, covering mine.

It's our fate. Our choice.

"I do," she says. Tears overflow her eyelids and start running down her face. "I do, Max. Please put an end to all this. That's what I want."

It's too much a sight to bear. I reach out and caress her cheek, wiping tears with my thumb. She leans into my touch, eyes closed. Her breath shudders past her lips.

It's hard to speak around the lump in my throat. My voice is a frail thread, barely stitching words together. "That's all I need to hear, Chloe."

She brings my hand to her lips, kisses my palm and clutches my fingers tight.

I know there is some righteousness to this. Some honest justice. If I get it done in the end, the world will be a better place.

If I said that such a thing matters to me right now, I would be lying. It's her. It's all her. I'll do whatever it takes to give Chloe the life she deserves.

If that means more blood on my hands...so be it.

We sit in silence. I listen to her sobs. I join her with my own.

What we mourn exactly, I do not know.

I'm looking at my right hand, reluctant. I might go as far as "unwilling," actually.
"Isn't it against the rules to do this now?"

"Nope. Agreed to it beforehand. You're not getting out of it so easily."

"I don't want to get out of it! It's just that we had a pretty intense moment, we cried and everything. Don't you want to remember it?"

"Honestly? Not really. I'll be okay forgetting how I flat-out asked you to kill my enemies."

We're back on the bed, sitting in front of each other. We wept, we hugged, we felt sorry for ourselves, we held hands for a while and went for a short walk outside. Though she insists there's no time to waste, it felt wrong to get straight to work without shaking off the drama first.

"Tell me about it all in the final timeline," she continues. "It'll put me at ease real fast. I'm not dumb, Max—I knew going in we'd be talking about a lot of prickly issues. I'll be happy to hear everything went okay."

"How can you be so cool with this? It would drive me crazy to forget what happens all the time."

"Your eternal question. Would you rather I bitch at you and made you feel like garbage every time you rewind?"

"No, I don't mean it that way..."

"I know just the way you mean it, babe. Look, I'm in love with a time traveler, okay? I'd be the shittiest girlfriend if I weren't at peace with letting go. I do love the fact that you care so much. I'll start worrying when you don't feel bad anymore."

I purse my lips at her, which only widens her smile. She does seem sincere. I wonder how many times she's encouraged me like this, then forgotten all about it.

I could see it becoming a comforting thing, to hear her say the exact same words of reassurance each time, Chloe never knowing she's repeating herself.

"Let's start small," she says. "It's been...about five hours since the marker, so no way you're even reaching it anymore. For now let's see if you can go back to the start of this sentence. You'll probably overshoot, but don't worry. I'm backwards-compatible."

"Um...do we know for sure if it's safe to use the time powers? Have we noticed any damage at all?"

"My god, you're determined to procrastinate."

"It's a real concern!"

Chloe rolls her eyes. "Right, sure. Well, I'll have you know that as far as we've noticed, it is safe. There's nothing I'd call 'damage.' Some freaky stuff does happen from time to time, but we've dubbed it as reality adapting to the changes, or the spirit animals being dicks sometimes."

"Freaky stuff like what, exactly?"

"There's no real pattern. Glitches in the system, like...ghosts of what would have been. It's very rare."

"Uh...okay?"
"Yeah, like small objects changing places. We've seen it happen. And I've seen two of you before. Pretty sure I wasn't drunk, there truly were two of you for like five seconds. One was dressing up. The other putting on eyeshadow in front of the mirror. I called your name and dressing up Max vanished."

"And you don't find that alarming?"

Chloe shrugs. "Nah. Also, wild does have a tendency to stare at you. It's a thing. Then there's the squirrels. They bring us shit, just worthless trash. They'll run up, leave it nearby and run away. Anything from shotgun shells to severed doll heads. And there's always a spider somewhere after you go to sleep. Never fails, every time a tiny spider somewhere—the wall, a counter, scurrying on the floor. Always there in plain sight, don't ask me what's up with that. I started to let it live a while ago, just to see what happens, but there's no difference."

"Chloe, are you making shit up?"

"What? No! Oh dude, I should've thought of that! Missed opportunity right there. The squids! They rain from the sky and wrap around your legs! All the birds perch on your window and crap all over the place, it's annoying! Man, that's so weak, give me a minute, I can come up with something better..."

"Okay, I think I'm going to rewind now."

"Psh. Fine, be that way. Give me a goodbye kiss."

"Is that a thing that we do? Kiss goodbye?"

"It's a thing that I want now, stop asking questions and kiss me."

She tugs on my arm so that I lean over and comply, not that it takes much to convince me. She cups my jaw and gently pulls me in, eager to receive my lips.

Kissing her still makes my skin prickle up with gooseflesh, but it's starting to feel natural. It doesn't need a reason or complicated subtext. It's simply a kiss, just another way to express our love for each other.

When our mouths part she playfully pulls my ear and winks at me. "Go get 'em, tiger."

I smile back. "See you earlier."

"Dork."

I raise my right hand, but she catches it before I do my thing. "Tah-tah-tah! No crutches. Use only your mind, young apprentice."

"Jeez...how about one thing at a time?"

"Oh, alright, you big baby. I swear, I spoil you too much."

"There's no such thing."

She's fondly smiling as I raise the hand again and try to concentrate. It would feel so weird and directionless without reaching out. I'm holding my breath for some reason as I exert my will the same way I always do. I haven't done this since the small test at the lighthouse.

My vision warps and blurs, and right away it's clear that something is different. The familiar sense
of pressure is more like a mountain bearing down on my thoughts. The reluctance of space-time to do as I say feels insurmountable. I watch words and events travel in reverse at a snail's pace, every backwards second a deathly struggle.

It's crushing me, I have to let go.

"Give me a minute, I can come up with something...uh. You alright?"

I find myself breathless, pushing my hands against her knees just to keep upright.

"Chloe..."

"Is a vision coming? Here, lie down, I got you."

"No, Chloe, something's wrong, I can't rewind like I used to..."

I hold out my hand and try again before she even responds. The crushing pain swallows me instantly, snapping onto my psyche like a bear trap clamping shut. I hardly go a few seconds before I have to stop.

"Here, lie down, I got you."

"Something's wrong, Chloe...something's wrong, I can't rewind..."

The panic that grips me right now is in itself a shock. I don't really want these powers, it should be a relief that I can't do it. Instead I feel as if my legs suddenly stopped working.

"Oh, right, okay." Chloe seems perfectly calm about it. "So what's the problem?"

"It feels like...like I'm deep under the ocean, fighting an impossible current. I can barely manage."

I'm anxious to try again. I stretch my hand, but she catches it just like before. "Nuh-uh, no crutches. Use only your mind, young apprentice."

Oh my god, this'll get old really fast, won't it. "I need the training wheels for now, don't you think?"

She sniffs with amusement and shrugs. "If you say so. But training wheels slow the pros down."

I press my lips together and make another go. It's like forcing a river to flow upstream. I push myself to go further anyway, physically thrusting with my hand as if I could punch through the fabric of reality. It's an excruciating crawl away from the present until I have to give up again.

"Always there in plain sight, don't ask me what's up with—hey, whoa. You alright?"

I stare at my hand in frustration. "What's going on?"


"It's barely working! I don't know what's happening..."

I might be hyperventilating. We've barely survived this far with my powers. Do we stand a chance at all without them?

"Give me more details, Max."
"I... I don't know, it's just way harder than ever, it's nearly impossible."

"But you've made it this far, though. How long from now did you start?"

"About a minute?"

"And you're wheezing like this already?"

"That's what I mean!"

"Alright, okay, calm down..." She takes my hands into hers and holds them between us. "Catch your breath, I might be able to help you out."

"You can?"

"Obviously I can't go from experience, but BetaMax would talk to me a lot about how the powers work and what she did to push them further. She was a bit obsessed, between you and me. You won't tell her I said that, will you?"

"Your secret's safe with me, Chloe."

"Good. So, back when you were starting to really delve into these things, she... you said that the biggest thing holding you back was the way you thought about the rewind, the way you approached it inside your head. You kept thinking of it as reversing time around you, like you're literally warping reality with your hand. But that's not what you're doing."

"Uh, okay?"

"It's you that's traveling, Max. These powers let you run through time like anyone can through space. You said approaching it that way blew the whole thing wide open, it felt like an entirely new way of doing things. I mean, think about it: what's more likely, that all of reality bends to your will, or that you are walking up and down a temporal dimension?"

I do as she says and think about it. To be honest I never truly reflected on the semantics. I just stuck out my hand and made things happen. Or... un-happen.

I suppose what she's saying makes sense...

"How does that help me, though?"

"I don't know, meditate about it or something? That's all I got. Maybe you could do some of the thinking, for a change."

"Oh my god, how do I even put up with you?"

"It's a mystery. Come on, close your eyes and figure this out, Sherlock. Look deep within yourself or some shit. I'll be right here, basking in my irrelevance."

This is my life now, getting rewind tips and constant sass from my new-old girlfriend. I try to relax and follow her advice. Maybe now it'll be easy, just by having this new perspective in my mind.

I'm starting to raise my hand, but she holds it firm. "Nope. I'm done spoiling you. No more training wheels."

I open my eyes again so I can blink at her. "How'd you know that's what we said earlier?"
Chloe smirks, smug like a monologuing supervillain. "Like I said, I'm in love with a time traveler. I think a lot about how conversations might play out in the future." She squeezes my fingers. "I'm holding on to this hand for dear life. Only way to break free is to rewind me away. What are you waiting for?"

"I'm on it, jeez..."

Alright, let's just take it slow. Put some deliberate thought into it. Can't be that hard.

Eyes closed and hand down, it's just me and the power. It feels like a well of possibility inside me, a coiled spring of unreleased potential that extends beyond my mind, to my whole body. Like willing my legs to move, I can will this potential to affect the world around me. No, rather...to carry me where I want to go. It's not moving a mountain, it's walking to the mountain.

I reach for the power, carefully channeling some of that coiled energy into action. Immediately the pressure is a vise on my skull, the reluctance of reality to let me through still as strong. Or...is it?

I go as slow as I can, drawing the faintest trickle and exploring exactly how it feels. I make it a point not to look at what's happening outside; just focus within, concentrate on what it's like to travel back in time. Faced so conscientiously, the experience blossoms in layers of details. There is a wobble to it, an otherworldly ebb and flow that feels perfectly cyclical in its vibrations. The pressure I always feel becomes a throb, intensifying and relaxing to some kind of universal beat.

This is incredible. There is so much more nuance to it than what I've known so far, how did I never stop to explore the fine grain of my crazy superpowers? In just this moment of introspection what's blocking me becomes obvious. There is something else at work here, something I hadn't noticed until now.

It's...some kind of barrier. Through the pressure and the pain I survey its contours, bumping against its boundaries. Back in the doomed storm-less reality, the powers had felt as if locked behind a door. This barrier feels more like scar tissue, like a scab that's haphazardly grown in the way, tightly pulling at the edges of a wound. My will bleeds through it, accessing but a tiny fraction of the power that lies beyond.

Why is it there? Something my past-selves did? Something I carried over? I didn't have this problem atop the lighthouse. Is it then a byproduct of repeatedly overwriting my own psyche with radically different experiences? Is it what BetaMax did, this fucked up brain that I inherited from her? Or maybe something else entirely that I can't even guess?

I have no idea. But regardless of its origin, I can feel the barrier bend and waver under my prodding. With enough focus and resolve, maybe I could tear it apart.

I don't think about it twice. I throw at it everything I've got, driven by this newfound insight and no small amount of separation anxiety. My will is pressed against it in a way that's almost physical; I can feel the struggle not just inside my mind, but in every part of my body, a thought-rending ache that continues to build to an unbearable degree—and as the tension mounts it starts to feel hopeless, like agonizing death throes before certain demise. Inside this mindscape I'm in a burning building, heaving through lungfuls of smoke. I'm a lost miner desperately digging in the dark deep below ground, hoping to find a way out. I'm a failed magician, thrashing underwater in a chained straightjacket.

I am devoted so completely to this fight that it comes as a shock when the block abruptly gives way.
All at once I burst through, and like shoving at a door that suddenly opens, I feel myself being flung into the past at breakneck speed. Back-spelled words collapse to a whining garble. Opening my eyes brings an overwhelming flash of events undone. Chloe is there and then she's gone and then she's back, all in the same moment. In a panic I try to slow down, to stop, but I'm not even sustaining the rewind anymore—it's like I've thrown myself from the present to the past with irresistible inertia. I'm a nerd stuffed in a trashcan, rolling downhill, and all I can do is brace for impact.

A moment later the rewind crashes to a hard stop and leaves me reeling on the bed, bent over and breathless like my chest just broke in two.

Chloe lets out a startled yelp somewhere out there. Vertigo keeps my head spinning. The room, now only half-lit in filtered sunlight, is flying in spirals around me.

"Max? Where'd you go?"

In here, I try to say, but finding my mouth is kind of difficult right now.

A note of worry enters her voice. "Max?" She stomps through the hallway and into the doorframe. Her silhouette becomes framed in soft candlelight. "Oh, fuck, Max, you scared the shit out of me. One second I'm petting you, the next you go poof on me."

I try to get my hands under me and become somewhat upright. "Fuck my life..."

The walls are finally calming down and I've mostly caught my breath. I check for a nosebleed, but for once my fingers come back clear.

Chloe sits by my side and lays a hand on my shoulder. "What happened?"

Wake Me is back on the sound system, which is a terrible sign. I look around, starting to feel almost normal. Just like I feared, First Mate Bongo is listless between our pillows.

"Shit, it's way too far back. I lost control, I went too far..."

"Oh, okay. Rewinding already, cool. How far did you—"

"It's not cool. Fuck."

"Hey, come on, don't beat yourself up, you're not used to it anymore. Just give me the rundown so I don't repeat myself."

"No, you don't understand, the marker...I took it away. Fuck, I took our first kiss away, I took everything!"

"First kiss? Score! I knew it'd work."

"Oh my god, Chloe, this is serious, you asked me to let you keep it..."

She laughs and jostles my shoulder like trying to shake some sense into me. "Dude, you're so fucking adorable. There's no way I didn't tell you not to worry about this stuff so much. Give me another kiss, problem solved."

"It was such a special moment, though! I gave you shit for the romantic setting, and you got super flustered, and I felt so giddy just looking at you, like I'd explode if I didn't kiss you, so...so I did, and you loved it, and now..."
My eyes start to sting. As sweet as it was, it's not even about the moment itself. I couldn't do the one thing she asked me for. I've disappointed her, and she doesn't even know it. What a horrible thought.

"Whoa, hey, don't cry over this, come on."

"It was so special, Chloe. You wanted to keep it, I really tried. It was our kiss, it was perfect..."

She lightly rubs my back. "You know, there's plenty more kisses where that one came from. Just sayin'."

"You're unbelievable, how can you be so cool with this!"

She's chuckling and trying to restrain it. "Well, here's the thing: I happen to be in love with a time traveler."

"Time traveler," I finish the sentence with her. It makes her laugh.

"Exactly." She brings her fingertips to my chin and lifts it, movie-style. "Hey," she says. I look up and meet her eyes. She's smiling at me. "Just give me another special moment, Max. Or are you going to run out of them? Do you keep them in short supply, is that it?"

A chill runs through my skin as we look at one another. There is so much love in her gaze, like she understands exactly why this is so upsetting. And I finally get it. Of course she cares about forgetting and one-sided memories, who in their right mind wouldn't? But she cares more about the way it affects me. She knows the guilt it brings. Chloe has taught herself to let go, because to hold on would be to cause me pain.

The connection between us feels like a tangible thing—I'm breathing it, I'm swimming in it. I take her face in my hands and join my lips to hers. I give her everything I have. I want to make it as good as our first, make it better, make it everything she wants it to be. Chloe welcomes it with the same hungry fire as before, hands slipping around my waist to draw me near.

When our mouths part I don't relent this time around, I go right back in, sidling closer. I drape my arms around her neck and avidly lean forward, savoring the taste of her breath. Her tongue flicks my lips, like making a suggestion, like asking permission. I respond with my own, nervous and eager, growing bolder with every touch. As we kiss I press onto her, pushing. She's leaning back and I'm chasing after. I'll follow wherever she may go.

I'm on top of her, she's feeling my breath quiver, I'm feeling Chloe's heartbeat on my skin. Her fingers run through my hair, and I'm kissing her, I can't get enough of it, I want to explore every texture and flavor. I bite her lip just to see what it's like, and she lets out the smallest, most arousing moan.

I leave her mouth and tread a path down her chin, her jaw and neck.

"Wow...wow, Max, hey."

Her words are more like gasps. I don't hear their meaning or intent, I just keep pressing my lips to her skin. I'm lost in her, I don't want to ever leave.

"Max, this is...it's getting intense..."

I pull back and look at her, eyes lidded like in a trance. She's under me, flustered, panting lightly. I have never wanted something so much in my life.
"That's the whole idea," I breathe out, and kiss her again. My stomach is fluttering like it wants to dance.

She speaks in-between the kisses. "No, I know, I...wait, slow down..."

It takes me some time to understand what she's saying. I only want to taste her again. I want to feel her lungs pressing against me and listen to the whisper of her skin on mine.

"Max, please, stop."

I stop. You're in bed, and someone asks you to stop, you simply stop. That's just how it goes.

But I'm looking at her, confused. Why is this stopping? I don't want it to stop. Every bit of her body language says she doesn't, either.

"Hear me out, okay?"

Her tone drives a pang of anxiety into my chest. "You...don't want to?"

She laughs like I just said the silliest thing she's heard in a while. "Are you kidding me? I'm dying to get all up in your business, it's my permanent state of mind! But we still have a shit-ton of work to do and not a whole lot of time to do it, even with your powers. And rewinding sexytimes is kind of a no-no with us. Did I tell you our rules?"

"Yeah, but...we can spare some time, though. Right? Like...twenty minutes? Or...an hour. Or two."

She laughs again, but regret is clear in her features. My words sound desperate even to my ears. How did I get to this position? Just ten minutes ago I was fine letting our flirtations run their course. Maybe something would've happened between us tonight. Maybe in a few days. The possibility was a constant in the back of my mind, but it wasn't any kind of priority.

Right now my every thought is consumed by how close she is and how much closer I want her to be.

She's shaking her head in dismay. "Fuck's sake, this is the worst. I've been looking forward to this more than you know, I can't believe I'm turning you down." She rolls from under me so we are on our sides, facing each other. Her hand is on my shoulder. "Max...I hate to patronize you, but the truth is, we didn't get this far by messing around when there's work to be done. Maybe we can spare whole days, but we need to stick to priorities and prepare first. I need you to be ready if everything goes to the shitter without warning."

She searches my eyes, making sure I understand. I can tell every single one of her words is leaving a bad taste in her mouth. "We can have fun, you know...after. Though...you'll be pretty wiped out, so, uh. We'll just see, okay? But we need to work now."

Chloe is licking her lips even as she says it. The way her mouth glistens is making me stupid.

"No."

She raises an eyebrow at me. My face feels like a furnace.

"I don't think so," I tell her. "You're going to hear me out."

That's two eyebrows now.

"I just listened to all of our adventures together. Want to know what stuck with me the most?" It's a
rhetorical question, so I don't wait for an answer. "I've been close to death or capture more times than I could count. Our lives are a constant downpour of bullshit with occasional breaks here and there. Is that pretty fair to say?"

"I wouldn't say constant, but..."

"Close enough, right? Bottom line is...everything could go to shit tonight, or tomorrow, or who knows. I'll do whatever needs to be done if that happens. But we're catching a break right now and there's no immediate danger, so why not make the best of it?"

She purses her lips and looks at me with a furrowed brow. Her eyes wander to my lips, to my collarbones and beyond.

"Chloe, I'll be damned before you let me die a virgin."

Her laugh is just what I was after—sudden and genuine, with a hint of both shock and mischief. Her fingers leave my shoulder to idly play with the collar of my shirt. "I'm sure this is going to come as a huge surprise, but you've made this very same argument before. BetaMax took over in the middle of the night, she found we were naked, and..."

"And it worked, didn't it?"

"Yeah. It did. But I took a lot less convincing that time."

"You're already convinced, though. Look, you admitted I'm the boss around here, so you're going to shut up and do what I tell you."

"Hah! Is that so? Go ahead, this should be good."

"It will be good."

The words that are aching to come out make my heart pound in my throat. Giving them voice seems insane, a crazy thing I'd only do on a dare.

"Here is what's going to happen, Chloe."

Just say it, Max. It's burning bright in your mind. It's careless and irresponsible and it is exactly what you want.

"You are going to undress me." Tell her everything. Don't break eye contact. "And then..." Don't hesitate. Just fucking say it. "And then you are going to make love to me. And you will do that for as long as you can, until we are too tired to do it anymore."

Her smug smile is gone. Her eyes are slightly wide, her breath is shallow. There's an alluring color to her cheeks that's making my mouth water.

"After that I'll fall asleep in your arms," I tell her. "And because I am Max Prime right here and now, and life will give us a break this once, the memories will be ours forever."

She keeps staring. Her fingers resume their idle play. She licks her lips again.

"Do you have any questions?"

Chloe had no questions, as it turns out. The instructions were clear. She knew exactly what to do and how to do it, in several different ways.
In fact, from that point forward she took charge for most of the time...

But only because I let her.
Jefferson's hand is around my neck, tight enough to make it hard to breathe. His face is uncomfortably close to mine.

"Be honest with yourself, Max. There is a part of you that enjoys being at my mercy. Why else would you keep coming to me?"

I would bite his fucking nose off if I could.

"You're old news, asshole. I have bigger problems than you—"

The rest of my words get choked off by the sudden clenching of his hand. He turns my head and sniffs close to my neck. I'm lying in bed, my clothes are gone, and I cannot move.

"I wouldn't be so sure," he says next to my ear. "I think your biggest problem is still inside you. I hope you remember me when you let everything fall apart again. I would be flattered."

You're nothing, you're dead, I try to scream, but it's just a gasp for air. He presses his thumbs into my throat, looming over me.

"Are you sure I'm dead, Max?" He leans in until I can see my own terrified reflection in his pupils. "Are you completely sure?"

I can't answer. I can't breathe.

"Oh, but I must be dead, right? Your precious Chloe said so. She has no reason to lie to you."

His weight bears down on me with unrelenting finality. He'll crush my windpipe before I suffocate. I can't even try to fight it.

"Tell me, Max. If I'm dead, then who is choking you right now?"

Suddenly Jefferson's voice is coming from the side of the bed. Someone else is straddling my hips, hands squashing my neck with every ounce of her strength.

I can finally move, but it's useless anyway. She's far stronger than me. I claw at her hands, I thrash and push to no avail. I silently plead, squirming, unable to even gasp. I begin to feel lightheaded.

Her impassive features dim and blur behind a black curtain.

Chloe's face is an emotionless mask as she chokes the life out of me.

---

I startle awake with a sharp breath, and for a moment that's all I can do, try to get some air into my lungs. I'm lying on my side, facing dim daylight behind a tinted window. My head rests on Chloe's arm, and she's not-quite-snoring behind me.

I feel gross, far too warm, covered in sweat and sticky. Right now I've a visceral need to get away from her. The thought comes with a pang of guilt, but that doesn't make the urge any less real. Goddamn fucking nightmare.

I peel myself off her skin and the damp sheets, yet she barely stirs. I sit at the edge of the bed, press my hands into my eyelids and rub until it hurts. The digital clock on my nightstand says 5:33PM. It was after 4PM the last time I glanced at it, so I was out for an hour at most. I feel like I
could've gone for twelve. My eyes are full of grit, like sleep is a luxury I can't afford or a pleasure I don't deserve.

Thinking about the dream brings in a tide of self-loathing. Yeah, yeah, I get it, this unconditional devotion to Chloe might end up killing me. Fuck you, subconscious. You're as subtle as a punch to the face.

Looking back at her shrivels the memory of the nightmare to insignificance. She's splayed over most of the bed, nude in all her glory. The sheets are such a mess, mostly on the floor. I don't even remember trying to fall asleep. The last thing in my mind is just lying there, panting, kissing her tattooed arm like it's a sacred idol worthy of worship.

It's possible that we got a little carried away. Or...a lot. I would have zero regrets even if the windows exploded right now in a shower of bullets. To put it in words that are now forever lost in time, it was fucking magical.

It's a challenge to get upright, but I manage—though a bout of lightheadedness has me leaning a hand on the dresser. I'm feeling famished, it's been...what, seven hours since we ate? How many meals do I end up having after all the rewinds? How many hours do my days last, on average? Am I keeping track?

I mean, it's only March and I might have turned nineteen already. It's a weird thought.

I shuffle toward the doorway, careful not to make noise. On the way I try to finger-comb my hair but I give up immediately. It's a disaster zone up there. I step over my top and consider it for a moment—who knows where the rest of my clothes ended up—but fuck it, why even bother. Let's embrace the bohemian lifestyle.

Quietly slide the door shut, enter the kitchen area. Open the tap to a trickle and splash cold water on my face, try to become mostly functional. I notice a tiny spider inside the sink. Why hello there, creepy sleep spider, pleased to meet you at last. I'm sure there's nothing sinister about you at all. I throw water at it until it tumbles down the drain.

Drying with paper towels I check the fridge for something to gnaw on, but I'm soon wrinkling my nose at the snacks on offer. Apples, mandarins, greek yogurt? I just had the most incredible sex ever, I need something far less healthy, please. It's weird to imagine either of us going grocery shopping for our clandestine pantry. Is that a thing that we do? Go shopping together? It seems so wonderfully mundane compared to all the high-stakes hijinks.

A minute later I'm sitting on the couch, stuffing cookies in my face and washing them down with one of Chloe's beers. The combined taste is kind of nasty, but I'm feeling rebellious. BetaMax didn't like beer, did she? Well, I'm gonna get smashed now, just you wait. No-one's going to dictate what I drink. Watch out for Transgressor Max over here, she's gone wild.

I'm rifling through my messenger bag, which Chloe must've been kind enough to bring in from the car. Pens, notes, a tiny mirror, a granola bar...my camera? I thought Chloe had left it on the counter after...

No, wait. That bathroom photo never happened in this reality. Oh, all the headaches that await trying to keep every timeline straight in my head, such fun.

And inside the usual slot for my journal, there's the Death Note. It's what I'm after. Might as well get the reading out of the way, and I admit I'd rather do this alone. I know myself, there is a good
reason I kept this private. I don't know if I truly want to find out what that reason is.

I take another hearty swig, lift the cover and—

Blegh, seriously, this is gross. I renounce you, Chloe's beer. Return to the hella whence you came.

I get some plain old water from the tap, go back to the couch, cram three more cookies into my mouth and crack the notebook open.

Oh yes, I am such a rebel.

Hi, Max.

It's me, your bizarro-world counterpart. Isn't life just grand?

It felt wrong to continue the old journal with something so different, but how to even start this one? I keep rewinding everything I put down. I feel like I'm on my deathbed, writing a memoir before it's too late.

Fuck it, Chloe wants me to vent, so I will. Fuck you. Fuck you for not telling me how long I have. Just a date on the note, that's all I needed. You'll never know the true meaning of "existential dread" until you end up on this side of the equation.

And yeah, you told me to save Chloe, fine, but you're also the scumbag that threw her away in the first place. I wouldn't have. I didn't need your fucking note. You just took the easy way out, let me do all the hard work and now you're ready to swoop in and enjoy the ride. Well, don't come back yet, because everything is still fucked up. I'll let you know when I fix everything, okay?

Shit. Now I keep writing apologies. Apologizing to myself sounds pretty damn insane, don't you think?

I'm just so angry. Fate dealt me a shit hand and I'm taking it out on you. I know I'm full of it, I know we're the same person and you totally saved our Chloe, I know you know that I know that you know AAAH!

Okay. This is starting to look like mental asylum material. But I think I should leave it anyway, you should get to read it. A glimpse of how bad we can get, maybe? A cautionary tale? It's not fun inside my head right now.

I'm not looking for sympathy or anything. You should feel bad for Chloe, she gets to put up with me, which is a load of crap. She's got enough to deal with, what with her being a homeless orphan now. Is that a callous way to put it? I'm being an asshole again, aren't I? Sometimes I'm convinced she'd leave me if she didn't feel like she owes me.

As if we did all this just for her, right? It's not really about her, is it. It's about us, you and me. We're selfish people, Max. We want Chloe in our life and nothing else matters. I don't blame you for what you did, you know I'd have done the same. Since...we're the same person and everything.

Holy shit, is this really how I'm starting whatever this is?

Fuck it

"Still can't believe you went over five hours."
Chloe is idly juggling the rubber ball from one hand to another. We stand in the clearing outside, both clad in lazy sweatshirts and pants. Despite the sunny weather, the late March chill of dusk is settling into our little corner of the woods.

I'm about twenty feet away, nodding at her. "I'm pretty sure I only stopped because I got to the point when I was unconscious. I don't know how far I could've gone, otherwise."

"I really wish I knew what's going on with you. Are you sure you didn't do anything weird with your powers on your side? Did you even use them at all?"

I shake my head. "Only to go back and change everything."

"What did you even do for five months, then? Did you tell me about that yet?"

"No, but there's not much to tell. I tried to move on and failed. I crawled into a corner and cried a lot. That's about it."

"Hah."

I also kind of tried to kill myself, sort of, but never mind about that.

Okay, I should tell her about jumping off the lighthouse, I know. I will. But not right now, she'd freak out on me, we'd probably get all emotional again...I'm pretty tapped out on drama for today, especially after reading the whole damn journal in one sitting. Talk about angst and serious mental issues.

"I attended your burial," I tell her. "It was held the same day the storm would've come."

"Dude. That's so surreal."

"Yeah..."

"You had to watch me die and then put into the ground the same day?"

I just nod, wondering why I would even mention it. Way to keep things light, Max Downer.

She's standing there, chewing on her lip. "Did anyone even bother to go besides you?"

"What kind of question is that? It was small on purpose, but everyone that mattered was there." I'm quickly realizing just how much I don't want to talk about that time of my life. "Are you going to throw or what?"

"Oh, yeah, sure. Here goes, ready?"

Chloe winds up like a pro pitcher and throws the ball as hard as she can at a nearby birch tree. It paps against the bark and bounces wildly out of sight.

"Weaksauce," she deadpans, adjusting her displaced necklace. "I'm so glad I forget the anticlimactic part."

It's funny how each time she'll say something slightly different.

Let's get back to work on fine control. Conscious not to raise my hand I start a very slow rewind, nearly as slow as I can make it. Chloe's words become eerie gibberish, her motions an uncanny scene of performance art. I fix my eyes on the tree she hit, now obscured out of focus, and soon enough the ball flies back in a bubbly wobble. It un-hits the tree and begins to travel back to
Chloe's hand.

I slow down the rewind even more, but don't push it all the way to a complete freeze. Though it's nearly the same in practical terms, it's an important distinction to make. Complete standstill is way tougher to maintain, the difference between a shoddy stopgap and a perfectly hermetic seal on the passage of time—no, no, no. That's the wrong way to think about it. A rewind is turning around and walking the other way down the timeline. A standstill is reaching perfect equilibrium with the normal speed of time, no going forward, no going back. It's not what we're after right this moment.

What we're after is endurance, and so I start walking within the rewind. It's the fourth time by now, and I'm tired, but not exhausted. Each step is an underwater slog, space thick around me like an ocean of pressure between me and the little red sphere slowly floating backwards—which is another faulty way of thinking about it, according to my journal ramblings. What I feel is the combined effort of traveling in all available dimensions at once, as well as moving against the anchor that keeps me glued to Earth's high-speed journey through the cosmos. Pretty sure BetaMax was just pulling things out of her ass, how the hell would anyone know this stuff for sure?

I reach the ball and pluck it out of its weightless spin. Grabbing it for the first time was yet another learning experience: it may look like it's lazily drifting in mid-air, but it still carries every bit of its momentum. Taking hold of it transfers that energy to my hand, which means a pretty hard smack against my palm the moment I touch it. Note to self: never grab speeding bullets mid-rewind.

Ball in hand I fight my way back to where I started. I'm panting by the time I make it, damp with cold sweat, weak in the knees—yet I don't feel any of the wear in my muscles. The strain is all deeper inside, in my mind, all along my spine, in the core of my bones.

I return to the normal flow of time and plop my butt down on the grassy dirt, completely pooped.

"Woo! And it's gone! You got it again?"

I hold it up between thumb and forefinger.

"Awesome! You feeling okay?"

Words are a bit hard to come by at the moment. I settle for a nod.

"Well, it's official, you're just as good as you ever were. Maybe better."

The words fill me with an absurd sense of pride. Congratulations, Max Prime, you can break reality the hardest of them all. Yay?

"Got one more rep in you?"

I shake my head. She starts walking over. "That's fine, don't push yourself too hard. You look like you could pass out, how long have you been awake now?"

I have to think about it. About two hours of jumping through temporal hoops, a rewound tutorial on handgun handling and shooting practice—I'm still carrying it under the sweater, gotta get used to the shoulder holster—an hour of packing decoys after she got up, rewound shower and reading time...

"About six hours?"

"Are you counting the nightmare nap as sleep? Because you really shouldn't."
"Alright, then...ten, I guess. I'm doing okay, I promise. I'll rest if I need it, I'm not like before."

She eyes me suspiciously, trying to determine whether I'm just putting on a brave face. I raise my hand, three fingers up. "Scout's honor."

"Fine, alright. I have to keep close watch on you, you're an untrustworthy individual."

"I do like to keep you on your toes." I feebly toss the ball back at her. It falls short and she has to bend down to grab it. "Oops."

"Maybe give up on your softball career."

I snort at her. "Alright, so...I'm still the amazing timelord or whatever. What now? Can we just drive back and...you know. Finish what we started?"

I cringe as the words come out of my mouth. You are talking about murder, Miss Caulfield. Get used to the idea, keep it clear in your mind. Using euphemisms doesn't make it any less of a heinous crime.

Chloe is shaking her head. "It was a short time window. Prescott would've been completely alone in a bathroom, no bodyguards, no witnesses and no cameras on the whole floor after you made a stop in the security room. You would have had twenty minutes to subdue him, learn whatever you could, do the deed and get out. There can be no proof that we did it, the whole point is being able to put all this behind us."

I mull over her words for a moment. "Did we really plan to take him out while he's sitting on the toilet?"

She smiles and shrugs. "Strike when your target is most vulnerable, right?"

"I suppose..."

Chloe squats in front of me, elbows resting on her knees. "It's actually a pain in the ass to find a time and place to do it. The main problem is that he needs to be somewhere he considers safe, without his super-bodyguards, and you need to be able to get out without rewinding the kill."

"Super-bodyguards? You didn't say anything about super-bodyguards!"

"Huh. Are you sure? Come on, I must've mentioned the other spirit-touched at some point, it's part of the reason it took us so long to get here."

"Oh, um...maybe in passing?"

"Or maybe you didn't pay enough attention, huh? The man is paranoia incarnate. He usually keeps Helen close and she will sniff you out from a mile away. She won't take the risk of pretending you're not there, so she needs to be gone somewhere else. For muscle he's got the Oxen Twins, they're practically his shadow. They'll shrug off a bullet like it's a BB pellet. And on top of that is his usual security detail."

"The Oxen Twins."

"Aw, you don't like the nickname? Their names are Carlo and Remi Laurent. Let's say they're way stronger than they look. Excellent shots, too, according to Helen."

"Awesome. And that Derrick girl?"
"Never anywhere near him. I don't even know what she looks like."

The image of this woman leaning over Chloe with knife in hand flashes in my memory. It's enough to put me in a far more murderous mood. "Tall and lanky, pale blond hair in short waves, skin pasty white like she's a cave dweller."

Chloe just gives me a clueless shrug.

"So what can we do?" I ask her. "We need to use this card before they figure out it works, right?"

"Yeah. What we'll do is go with the original plan. Olympia was actually a detour, Helen tipped us off three days ago and we took the chance to get it done. Original idea was to steal into the Prescott Estate, snoop around for all the intel we can gather and go from there. There's no way he doesn't keep files somewhere on all the supernatural stuff."

I nod thoughtfully. It sounds sensible enough: if there is someone with solid answers out there on all this nonsense it's bound to be Sean Prescott, Evil Overmind of the Superslaves.

On the other hand...

"Chloe..."

"Yeah?"

"Do we want to know that badly?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if...what if we don't give a damn about getting answers? What if we just kill him do the deed and that's it. Wouldn't it be way easier? I mean, it sounds like he travels a lot, we could jump him in transit or something. Rewind to wherever he was, shoot, freeze time and get out."

She blinks a few times. "Don't you want to find out what the fuck is going on?"

"I'm kind of used to the idea that I'll never know. I'd much rather get this over with so we can build an actual life together."

"Well, I can relate to that, but...we really should know as much as we can before we take care of him. There'll be fallout of some kind, we should be prepared. And all this spirit world bullshit won't simply go away when he dies, Max. You...you get that, right? We can't just ignore it. I thought you'd accepted that by now."

"I've accepted I need to fight this man, not that I should spend the rest of my life making a mess of reality..."

She tilts her head to one side, brow knit in a fretful mien. Chloe kneels so she can rest a hand on my shoulder.

"Max..." Her thumb caresses my neck. "I think you need to be honest with yourself."

I press my lips together, biting back the irritation. Her patronizing makes me want to throw a hissy fit right now. I am being honest with myself, I just want to have a normal life at her side without worrying about paradox space and weird fucking spirits meddling with everything I do. Is it so much to ask, after everything that's happened? Bring on the mortgage. Bring on the professional rat race. I'd give up in a heartbeat all this superpower crap in exchange for leaky faucet woes and Date
Nights on Friday.

But no, Chloe wants me to embrace it all, complete with whatever superhero fantasy she's conjured up in her head. She is not afraid that I might turn out to be Max, Destroyer of Worlds. Gee-whiz, which version of the future is more level-headed, I wonder? Hers or mine?

I'm about to give her a piece of my honest mind when I notice a rustle of branches among the trees. It takes me a moment to make out the big round black eyes among the foliage.

It's a doe. It's staring at me.

Chloe follows my eyes. "What? What is it? Oh."

The doe breaks eye contact and runs back into the woods.

"Yeah," she says with another shrug, "it happens."

"Seriously, what the fuck is up with the damn deer?"

"You tell me, Super Max."

"Oh, I'll tell you, alright."

Is it a spirit again? I don't even pause to think about it: the rewind happens by instinct, zero conscious effort. I swear, I'm chasing after the stupid thing if I can't make it come back.

Beyond the blur I watch the doe move in reverse and once more fix its stare on me.

It's just a plain old deer.

Chloe follows my eyes. "What? What is it? Oh."

The doe breaks eye contact and runs back into the woods.

"Yeah, it happens."

That was so fucking precious, Princess Maxine.

The voice in my thoughts is distinctly my own. It's accusing, caustic.

I can't tell whether you're a hypocrite or a total chicken-shit. Probably both.

Staring after the doe, I am reminded of the panic I felt when the rewind didn't seem to work right anymore. The frustration of glaring into the butterfly photo day after day, regret crushing my lungs like I was being buried alive. The desperation that drove me to do the unthinkable in the stormless reality and the sense of pride that swelled in my chest just a minute ago.

You are willing to use this power when it suits you, then drop it the moment it becomes too much to handle. You are so full of shit.

Pride. Chloe was so proud while telling the burning building story, her voice was bursting with it. Under me her body was practically vibrating with joy. When is the last time I've seen her like that? Have I ever seen her like that before? I can't even come up with a recent memory. Certainly none after William's passing.

Oh, the calculus test. She was in eighth grade, I was in seventh. William got stern with her slipping
grades so she worked really hard and got an A+ for it. She rubbed that test result all over my face for months, the most I ever got in anything math-related was a B. We both hated math so much...

"Hey."

Chloe squeezes my shoulder, bringing me back to the present. She gives me a tentative smile. "Remember all the times you told me it was destiny that we'd met again? That it was fate for you to save my life?"

I roll my eyes. "Big fat cruel joke that was..."

"But you did save me. Not just from dying—you saved me from myself. It was you who pulled me out of the hole I was in and loved me until I got a fucking clue; you punched all my bullshit insecurities in the throat and showed me I'm worth a damn. You did that, isn't that a good thing?"

"Of course it is, you are worth the world to me..."

"See? You actually mean that, it's crazy. You make me want to live up to it and be everything I can be. And here's the thing: you couldn't have done it without your powers. Can we agree on that?"

She's pouring her heart into this pep talk, but I can't keep the bitterness from my voice. "Yes, the powers make me great, I get it."

"No, no, listen to me! I'm saying you're fucking incredible, okay? I'm saying you got these abilities because you're incredible, not the other way around."

I raise an eyebrow at her. "I didn't...I'm not the source of these powers, if that's what you mean. I know that much for certain."

She shakes her head. "No, what I mean is..." she looks away for a moment, frustration clear in her features. Chloe's mouth quirks down at the corner and subtly squirms, as if words are pushing against her lips and she's trying to hold them in.

Finally she blows out a deep breath. "Okay, I'm gonna say something I never told BetaMax because I knew she'd be mad, but I've been thinking about it so much. Just keep an open mind, okay?"

"I can try, but I'm out if you start talking about mutants, the speed force or gamma rays."

Her serious expression cracks, and she gives me a good-humored shove. "It's actually about aliens, smartass. You're a secret envoy from planet Asswipe."

"It explains so much..."

Horsing around, Chloe needlessly leans all over me as she moves to sit at my side, ending with one arm draped around my shoulders. I stoically put up with it and then burrow into her a bit. It's getting chilly out here.

"Max."

Her free hand idly plays with my fingers. Her nose is buried in my hair, which can't smell all that great by this point. I'm waiting for her to get the words out, quietly tracing the contours of the two rings on her right hand.

Only recently it dawned on me that the glossy black ring she always wore was William's wedding
band. The new one, a plain golden ring, belonged to Joyce. Apparently a few months ago David sent Chloe a package with a few things that Joyce would've wanted her to have.

"You know what I honestly believe?" she finally says.

"I'm dying to find out, why don't you tell me?"

"I'm trying to, if only you'd stop being a wart about it."

"Jeez, so sensitive..."

Still it takes her a bit longer to start talking.

"Okay, the thing is...I think your real fate is something that hasn't happened yet. You have these powers for a real big reason, I just know it. I mean, how could all this be random? There's no way. Saving me and everything that's going on is only...a build-up. Trials by fire."

I don't want to hurt her feelings, but I have to shake my head. "Chloe, fate is a load of bullshit. I thought I was surrendering to fate, but I was just letting you die for no reason, I ended up going back and changing it anyway. I'm never thinking in those terms again. There are only choices and consequences."

"Yes, exactly! And you are the one making those choices, don't you get it? You have the power to make them, no-one else. Whoever or whatever picked you for these powers...it knows you are fucking amazing. It knows you are the right person for the job, whatever that turns out to be."

There is something deeply chilling about this line of thought. "So I'm...what, the Chosen One? Am I going to bring balance to the force now? I hope not, because I'll straight up barf if a prophecy turns up somewhere."

"No, look, all I'm saying is...maybe it wouldn't hurt you to feel good about yourself, to feel a little bit of pride in what you're capable of? Just the fact that you've made it this far...maybe you're literally doing the best anyone could, because someone else would've simply fallen apart, or gone to the dark side. Shit, I dread to think what I'd have done with time travel on demand. We'd all be so fucked."

"Are you serious? I deliberately killed hundreds of people, how could anyone ever be proud of that?"

"Yeah, whatever, and what happened then? It set you on this path, didn't it. A reality where you're mastering your powers and learning all this mystical crap, opposing evil incarnate instead of leaving it all behind. What a weird coincidence, that the hard choices you've made have led you here." She wraps both arms around me, squeezing like she wants me to become a part of her. It's nice, sure, but it makes the holster dig painfully into my side. It's a bit hard to get air into my lungs.

"You're special, Max," she says close to my ear. "You are one of a kind. I wish you could see it the way I do."

Oh my god. She talked about hero worship before. I didn't think she was this serious about it.

"Chloe, you can't think about me this way..."

"Why not?"

"It just sounds like...worship? Don't you think that's super unhealthy?"
"I don't worship you, butt-face. I believe in you. Somebody has to."

"Well, maybe...I...nhhh, I can't breathe..."

"Shit, sorry!"

She immediately eases her grip. I take in several breaths, perhaps a bit more theatrically than is necessary. "Damn, have you been wrestling bears or something?"

There's a smile in her voice. "What can I say, I take the sidekick gig seriously." She brushes my hair out of the way and kisses my neck. "You like to watch when I work out."

"Probably because I still need to see it to believe it."

"I think you just like to watch in general..." Her playful nip on my ear makes it pretty clear what she means.

"Not even gonna try to deny it."

She laughs softly, and we fall into a comfortable silence. The whole conversation keeps running circles in my mind. She knows it, she's giving me time. The small talk and playfulness and affection are all part of that. The longer I spend this close to her, the more I understand there are always two conversations going on when I'm with Chloe: there is what we say, and there is what we tell each other without saying.

I think about losing these powers. Truly think about it. Is there no part of me that would forever regret giving them up?

I consider everything that's happened, every part of the stories she's told me, every weird incident and vision I've experienced. If I don't make an effort to know more, won't I forever wonder?

The answers are painfully clear.

I kiss Chloe's hand and gently disentangle myself from her. I reach into her sweater pocket, grab the red ball and drop it on her open palm.

"I can go for at least two more," I tell her.

Chloe's grin is eager, fierce and proud.

---

I guess you're my therapy. You're the only one in the world that will believe a word I say, besides Chloe. It helps to think of you as a different person.

There are some things I can't bring myself to talk to her about. She says she wants me to, but I could watch her heart break the one time I tried. She feels so much for me...telling all the awful shit doesn't help either of us, it's just painful all around.

So that leaves you. Where do you think I should start? Right away with the horrendous stuff, or should I ease you into it with some bullshit insecurities?

Maybe I'll just skip right to the identity crisis. You should relate to this one, right? You grow up into this person you think you are, with your hopes and your dreams and your scoffing at make-up made with animal products, just trying to make it through school without embarrassing yourself every day. And then everything blows up, it gets completely destroyed. All that is left is Chloe. All your life has become...is Chloe.
It wasn't so immediate for you, I know. Did you stop the storm from happening? Or did you go back and let her die, just to watch Arcadia Bay get razed anyway? No, then it would make no sense for you to wait like this. I have to assume that letting her die saved the town.

That's what is taking you so long, right? You are trying to make it work. You are trying to let her go.

Well, we both know how that turned out.

It isn't normal, is it? To feel this strongly about someone? I abandoned her for five years. It took me five days to lay everything I am at her feet. It sounds so dramatic, but it's true. I gave her my life, just like she gave me hers. Anyone on the outside looking in would say we are crazy, and if they knew the power I won't hesitate to abuse just to keep her safe, they would probably want me dead.

But they don't feel it. This isn't just love. I don't even know what to call it, but I will never let it go. In fact, you are proof that I actually can't.

I try to remember what it was like before, and it feels like a dream. I was passionate about photography, right? I feel the itch so often, to grab a camera and capture a moment. But it's all tainted. By what Mark Jefferson did, by the time powers. She's already encouraging me, but these days taking a selfie always brings dread to my gut. The wonderful irony is that now I do it because I have to do it. How can I ever grow to enjoy it again?

Maybe with time. Maybe when I no longer have to fight for our lives.

This all sounds like I'm having second thoughts, but I'm not. She's worth it all and more. I'm just trying to figure out who I am now. Am I living for anything besides her? Do I want anything beyond revenge? What happens if we win? What will I be then?

Fuck, why do I bother? It doesn't even matter. In one day or in one year you'll take over. I'll let you worry about all this fluffy nonsense.

For now, ruthless retribution suits me just fine.

It is an hour past midnight, and Chloe is leaning into the laptop's microphone like she's about to start gnawing on it.

"It's just a goddamn simple question, can you track him tomorrow night or not?"

"And for what? So you and your master can do nothing at all again? If he finds out I'm deliberately following false trails then it's my arse on the line, yeah? But why should you care about that."

Wish I could attach a face to the voice, but the call is only audio. Helen Briar's Scottish accent is subtle and rather pleasant. I'd enjoy listening to it far more if it didn't carry such contempt for the woman I love.

Chloe's mouth puffs out with hardly contained outrage before replying.

"We're not even asking you to take a risk here. She'll rewind the whole thing, just like before."

There is some crackling that eats a part of Helen's angry reply. The satellite connection is spotty sometimes.
"...my neck for ya daft fuds for too long, I can't keep stalling like this, he's damn near suspicious if he isn't already tracking me. Keeping quiet about the trail to Olympia could cost me a niece if he finds out."

"You're just paranoid. He's trying to capture a time traveler, of course we're always one step ahead."

"Except for when you're just standing still doing nothing, that is. Did she have to babysit you last morning, that it?"

"For fuck's sake, will you let it go already? Can you do this for us or not?"

"Let it go she says! How I'd love to let it go, darling—it was supposed to be over by now, and you didn't even give me a good reason! I've a mind to say it was pure shite, she was not sick, if she got sick then I am the sodding Queen of England! I say she backed out. I say in the moment of truth she din't have the gumption and fled to the past. She won't even give me the courtesy of an apology, she keeps sending her pet to talk instead. Teach me to trust a wee pair of middle schoolers, it does."

"Listen, you damn harpy, you can believe whatever you want, I don't give a flying—"

I lay a hand on Chloe's arm, and she bites back the rest of her colorful reply.

"You're right," I say out loud, "I was not sick."

Chloe shoots me a look, dismay and an urge for caution at once.

"And there she is! Listening the whole time, I should've known. Are you here to lie to me as well? Or will you be skipping right ahead to the manipulative mind-fuckery?"

"It's all my fault, Helen. I'm sorry we failed you. I would like to tell you everything, if you'll listen. Could we maybe talk without all this anger getting in the way?"

"Max, what the fuck are you doing?"

"I think we haven't treated this woman as an equal, and I want to do things differently. Miss Briar, the truth is that I have never met you before. It's complicated, but—"

"I don't know what you're on about," Helen says, "but it sounds like you're ready to give me another mouthful of rubbish so I'll do what you want."

"Will you please listen? I honestly want us to be friends and allies."

Chloe is rolling her eyes, shaking her head. Helen lets out this high-pitched laugh full of mockery.

"That's golden, it is! Mayhaps try not to put a gun to my back next time! Right fast drove the friendliness out of me."

Chloe immediately leans in. "What a load a shit! You were already being a total bitch, and you had every intention to play both sides!"

"Will you silence your lapdog already? Or put her down, why don't you, she's pure useless."

"Whoa, guys, come on—"

"Fuck you, Helen! We'll do it without you, I don't give a shit! Go right ahead and warn him too,
we'll wreck whatever new ambush bullshit he wants to pull, like we always do!"

"You mean like she always does, ya worthless dead-weight. I say, if you're going to leech off someone's greatness at least do it quietly, it's right pure tiresome to deal with—"

I reach for the mouse and end the call. Chloe's exasperated groan is nearly a roar. She looks ready to punch the screen.

I'm leaning back on the chair, staring at the "end of call" window. "Holy shit, I didn't expect it to be that bad."

"What the hell, Max?"

"I know, I'm sorry."

"What, you think we haven't tried to be friendly before? You've spent hours rewinding, trying to figure out a way to win her over. She's a fucking nightmare."

"I read as much in the journal, but I just couldn't believe it. Why does she hate you so much?"

"I don't know, she's a bitch? I've tried to make nice with her, she's not interested."

"Are you sure? I mean, I've seen the way you do diplomacy..."

"Wow, thanks, fuck you too. I've honestly tried. She simply thinks I'm this sub-human lowlife mooching off you and you're too young and blind to see it. There's no getting through to some people. You can only outsmart them and make them think you mean business."

"Building trust takes time, though. She might not listen now, but maybe if we keep at it every time we talk..."

"Max, I get the way you feel, but listen to me. She does not respond to kindness. She will only think that you're weak and that it was a mistake to throw in with us. And if she believes you're weak, she'll decide you can't pull this off, and she will betray us. That's why BetaMax did what she did. The only thing stopping her right now is this 'ruthless killer' façade you've got going—and you heard her, she's starting to have doubts. Remember, she didn't give a shit about us until she watched you kill eight trained goons in ten seconds."

I look away from Chloe, lips pursed. The Death Note's entry on Helen Briar had been chock-full of bitterness and hostility, hardly an unbiased account. It made me feel queasy, like my past self hadn't really tried not to be a douche.

"I don't want to be like that. If we're going down this road, I want people to work with me because they want to, not because I have some sort of leverage on them. We should all be banding together to do what's right."

She gives out a mirthless chuckle. "Yeah, you're right, and everyone should always help each other, and criminals should all stop what they're doing, and world peace should've happened by now. Your heart's in the right place, but that doesn't change reality."

I don't want to say it, but I have a feeling Miss Briar might be far more receptive to an actual conversation without Chloe's "enthusiastic" input. She was right, we don't strictly need Helen's help, but it'll be great for our peace of mind to know Sean Prescott's exact whereabouts at all times while we search his inner sanctum.
I squeeze her forearm. "It might be different this time. I have to at least try."

She rolls her eyes again, but there's a reluctant smile at the corner of her lips. "Of course you have to try, because you'll always have a kind heart. I can't get mad, it's good that you don't stop trying." She brings me into a side-by-side hug. "Unfortunately, there are exceptions, and my alternate self will be right there to say 'I told you so' when you give up."

"I can always count on you. I'm going to rewind, okay?"

"Knock yourself out."

I kiss her goodbye. "See you earlier."

"Dork."

I concentrate and go back, careful to stop a little while before the conversation starts. Once more Chloe is double-clicking the icon, setting up skype to call Helen's burner phone.

"Hey there, beautiful."

She snorts out a laugh. "Oh boy, sweet-talk. What do you want?"

"I just rewound. First time."

"You rewound a call with Helen Briar? I am shocked beyond words. She's such an easygoing gal, whatever might have gone wrong?"

"I was wondering if I could speak to her alone this time."

"Pff, come on, did I piss her off that bad? Wait, don't answer that." She bites the inside of her lip. "I suppose I can stay out of it, but you've never even talked to her before..."

"I just did, that's the whole problem. Will you please wait outside?"

"Seriously? You're kicking me out in the middle of the night?"

I raise my eyebrows at her, half-smiling. "Can you honestly promise me you won't start yelling at any point, no matter what she says?"

Chloe gives me a blank look and considers it for maybe three seconds. Then she gets up, grabs lighter and cigarettes from the table, her hoody from the armrest, and starts for the exit. Every one of her movements is despondent and oozing displeasure.

Before going out she digs out a cig from the pack and holds it up for me to see. "Just so you know, I'm smoking this one purely to spite you."

"Duly noted. Thanks for indulging me."

"I'm getting out of talking to that dickwad, can't really complain. Have fun."

The hum of the generator barges into the room for the brief moment that the door opens and closes. The solar panels embedded in the roof can keep up for only so long after sunset, I guess.

After a deep breath I tap in the number and hit call. Let's get this conversational puzzle over with.

Just like before she answers on the second ring and says nothing.
"It's Max Caulfield. Are you safe to talk?"

"I wouldn't have answered if I weren't, 'Max Caulfield.' I am so flattered that you finally grace me with your personal attention, 'Max Caulfield.' The talk with your beloved burden this morning was enough to last me the lifetime, 'Max Caulfield.'"

"Listen, I know you're upset. It was totally my fault, okay? We had a setback and had to change plans. I'm sorry."

"I don't care about your sodding apology! It was supposed to be over now, but here I am still, trapped between a tyrant and a ditzy bint that can't hold up her side of a bargain."

"I know, Helen, please. I really just want to talk to you about some things. Could we please be civil to each other?"

"Aye, let's talk about our emotions, that's just what we need, yeah? Go ahead then, waste my time some more."

"Holy shit, do you need to be this abrasive all the time?"

"Oh, I'm so very sorry, am I hurting your feelings? Is the wee lass going to start crying now? Maybe go fetch your pet and see—"

No, no, go back. Don't lose your cool, Max. Never resort to swearing, it sets her off.

"...Go ahead then, waste my time some more."

"Aren't you tired of this dynamic between us? I'd love to work with you without all this anger getting in the way. Tell me what I can do to make that happen, and I will do it. I sincerely mean this, I would like for us to be friends."

Her tone becomes scathing. "Aye, pure simple, how about you return to when we met and never press a gun to my back? Right fast drove the friendliness out of me, it did."

Okay. It's time she knew the truth. It's all about building trust.

"This is what I wanted to talk to you about. I am not the same person that threatened you. Please let me explain."

"I don't know what you're on about, but it sounds like you're ready to give me a mouthful of rubbish so I'll do what you want."

"I'm only telling you the truth. I can turn back time, but I can also time-travel through photos. I can focus and go back to that moment, changing things and creating a brand new reality. That's what I did yesterday, I went back to five months ago and created this timeline, and now I'm learning everything that's happened in it. Do you follow me so far?"

"That all sounded like gibberish, but nevermind."

"Well, the bottom line is, I literally just met you. I don't have any of the baggage or animosity I used to have. In fact, I'm kind of lost right now, this is all new to me and I'm trying desperately to adjust. I could really use a friend as knowledgeable and experienced as you, I want us to work together beyond this whole Prescott mess."

There is only silence on the other side. I hadn't planned to go quite so open with this sincerity plus
sucking up approach, but I have a good feeling about it. There is empathy in this woman, deep down at her core. I'm positive I can reach it one way or another.

"Are you daft?" she finally asks.

"I swear it's all true! I know it's hard to wrap your head around it, I've been grappling with it myself..."

"No, I'm asking why in the world you would tell me this!"

"It's a show of trust, Helen. I'm trying to let you know——"

"Trust? Ya harebrained clown, you've no idea what you're doing! I'm at the brink of compromised, and you tell me all your time traveling secrets? Do you think I'll even try to keep my mouth shut if I get caught? Any damn fool would understand that the less I know about you, the better!"

"Uh..."

"Is this supposed to be reassurance? That now you've become a softhearted dweeb with no common sense? Aye, sure calms me right the fuck down that you went from blind to downright stupid."

Well, shit.

The worst part is that she actually has a point. Better go back and try a different tack...

I might end up doing this so much that I'll become able to understand the backwards speech.

"...return to when we met and never press a gun to my back? Right fast drove the friendliness out of me, it did."

Explaining is far too complicated, anyway. Let's try going with events as they are.

"I didn't want to do that, but you betrayed us, Helen. Try to see it from my point of view, I had to do something drastic. Isn't it obvious by now that I've no desire to do you any harm?"

"What's obvious is you're feeding me a mouthful of rubbish so I'll shut up and do what you want!"

Boy, she loves that line. "I swear I'm sincere. Come on, you have my apology and my trust. We can help each other without all the threats and posturing."

"Right, sure." She makes a pause. "You must truly believe I'm stupid."

"Oh my god, I'm just trying to make amends here!"

No, come on, don't raise your voice. Take it back.

"...truly believe I'm stupid."

"All I'm trying is to make amends, is it so hard to believe? Why are you this suspicious of me? We're on the same team."

She lets out a bitter, disdainful laugh. "Not even remotely, princess. That's the rub, innit? You actually believe as much. I've never met someone so capable of self-delusion, you're downright precious."
"What the fuck are you—"

Keep calm. Take a deep breath. Don't let her get under your skin.

"...self-delusion, you're downright precious."

"What do you mean? Believe it or not, I'm willing to listen."

"Right you are. You say we're on the same team, but that's not true. I'll be your friend, sure, until suddenly I'm not. You would not hesitate one second to throw me and everyone I care about under a bus if it means saving your skin, or especially your beloved parasite. Go right ahead and tell me that's not the truth."

"Will you stop talking about Chloe like that?"

"Why? Will you 'erase me from existence' if I don't? She drags you right down into the mud, just like my sister suffers from her useless husband! You'd be a hundred times better off—"

"You don't have a fucking clue what you're talking about, Chloe makes me the best I could ever be. Leave her out of this."

She's actually still going, talking over my words. I can take the abuse, but the Chloe-bashing really pushes my buttons. Maybe try to avoid talking about her altogether.

Let's back up a bit, this might still be salvageable.

"...right ahead and tell me that's not the truth."

"Oh, please, Helen—as if you wouldn't do the same for your sister. That we have personal priorities doesn't mean we can't work together to keep everyone safe."

"Feich! That's exactly what we were doing, right up to when you failed to do a damn thing last morning! And now you come to me like this? Will you propose a rosy friendship to that madman as well? Maybe put all this behind us over a cup of tea, yeah? It was all a misunderstanding."

"I will take down Sean Prescott. That has not changed."

"Are you sure? I've had my doubts for a good while. I say you got cold in the gut and couldn't do it. I say you fled into the past and you're making excuses. I've a mind to say you're downright soft and useless and it was pure mistaken to ever come to you, so feking desperate I was!"

"Wow, maybe you should do it yourself, if it's so damn easy."

There is a short pause. I can see my probably far-off-the-mark visualization of this woman moving the phone away from her ear and looking at it in disgust.

Then the line clicks, and the call ends.

"Oh, for fuck's sake..."

I don't even know how far back I should go from here. I can't tell where everything went wrong, it's more like the conversation was doomed from the start.

Well...nobody said it would be easy. Best to simply start over. Blast fast to the past and have patience, Max. There is a way to do this, there is always a way.
Just like before she answers on the second ring and says nothing. Alright, maybe go a bit more solemn this time.

"This is Max Caulfield. Let's talk."

~~~

"Oh my god, for the last time, stop talking shit about Chloe, you even saw her save my life!"

"But of course she would do as much, she knows she's less than nothing without you! I bite my tongue with my sister's no good husband, but I've no such reservations about your precious burden. Aye, tell you what! Do us both a favour and dispose of her useless carcass, I'll be right cozy and friendly in return then."

"You're projecting on her whatever crazy baggage you have. She is nothing like you imagine, what Chloe and I have is far beyond—"

Her contemptuous laugh drowns out my words. "Oi, you are precious! Tis true love indeed, how could I be so ignorant? You're, what, all of eighteen years old, and you have your soulmate forever, of course! It would be golden to hear what you have to say about her ten years from now, if you're still alive."

"You're just a bitter old hag, aren't you?"

~~~

"No, all I'm saying is we're both willing to go to certain lengths for someone in our life, we have that in common."

"Aye, except my lil' sister is a pristine hard-working angel that never did any wrong, while your parasite is the good-for-nothing loser that was ever so eager to put a bullet in my leg."

"Really? Is that why you hate her so much? You asked us to do it, and she volunteered only to spare me. You can't seriously think she enjoyed it."

"I don't hate her, she isn't worthy of hatred. She's a lost soul clutching at her saviour, like a noose around your neck. I know her type well, she carries no value of her own and will leech off yours till there's nothing left."

I clench my jaw, holding in the knee-jerk retort. This is almost a conversation. There might be useful information at the bottom of it.

"That's not what's happening with us. It sounds like you had some rough relationships in the past, Helen."

"That may be, but it doesn't make my words any less true. I admit you remind me of my own sister, trapped with a parasite in a doomed marriage and not even aware. At least her kids all take after their mother. She's got your same blue eyes, too. She's a looker."

"Do you get to see her often? She's not, like...in a dungeon or anything, right?"

"She's oblivious to my plight and I will keep it that way. She's back in Glasgow still. We talk now and then, not that it's any of your business."

"Hey, I get it. I know a few things about keeping safe the person we love."
"You do, don't you? Say, such an open heart-to-heart we're having, it's almost as if you knew exactly what words to choose at every point to get this far. Isn't that curious, Maxine?"

"What? I thought we were just...talking."

"Are those the magical words, Maxine? You can do better than that. Mayhaps improve your delivery."

"Oh, come on, I am trying so hard to work with you. Why are you like this?"

"I should tell you all about my sister and my own life now, right? I should open up to you and realise we could be such good friends, aye?"

"I sincerely wish you would."

"Well, I sincerely wish you would piss off, you and your sodding time-travel mind-fuckery! Here is a wonderful revelation for you: half the things I've told you have not been true. Go ahead and try to use any of it after you go back, it will be good fun to tear your schemes to shreds."

My laugh is short and bitter. "What a crazy surprise. It's not like I have pages of notes on you, telling me what's true and what isn't."

There's a snort on the other side of the line. "Well lass, I believe you just made my point for me."

~~~

"You keep putting words in my mouth, that's not what I meant at all."

"It's not what you want me to believe, you mean! Do you truly think I don't see what you're doing? Digging for any information you can get your grubby conniving hands on?"

"I'm just trying to know you better, how terrible is that?"

"Nothing you say is genuine, Caulfield. It's the bane of your existence. Case in point, how many times have I called you out on this?"

"Not even keeping track at this point."

"I very much doubt that, you're keeping track of everything I say. But there's the rub, innit? Truth or lie, it doesn't matter. I could never trust a word that comes out of your mouth, fer I'm aware I'm being manipulated. I know you have much of it, but that's still no reason to waste your time like this."

"You know what? You're right, this is a massive waste of time."

~~~

Nearly gnashing my teeth I start talking the moment she answers the phone.

"It's me. We had a setback and had to change the plan. I need you to keep track of Prescott tomorrow night, 9 PM to 2 AM."

"Oh, if it isn't the princess herself, making demands without even giving a sodding reason why—"

"I've had the worst day, I'm not in the mood to deal with your shit. We had a setback, that's all you need to know, deal with it. Unless you've suddenly come up with a plan of your own to kill that
asshole without killing your sister too, you'll do what we ask without giving me any of your fucking attitude. Or do we have a problem?"

A stretch of silence.

"What are you up to now?"

"You don't need to know our plan. The less you know about what we do and how we do it, the better. Keep detailed notes and deliver them like we said before, you know how this goes. Do what I'm asking and your Prescott problem will be over soon. And you better not get caught tracking him, I don't want to waste a rewind on saving your ass. Don't make me regret sparing your life."

More silence, followed by a curt reply: "March 9th, 9PM to 2AM. Understood."

I hang up and blow out a deep breath. I feel gross, like I just bullied my own mother into doing my laundry.

My own deranged, hyper-abusive mother.

"Chloe's going to be so smug about this."

Time to go outside and apologize to her. She was right, if there was a way into the heart of that woman, I sure couldn't find it. Not today, at least.

I guess you can't win them all.

---

*I refused to rewind exactly once.*

*He had his minions set up the remote connection to Chloe's cell. They slit her throat open in front of the camera without a single threat or warning. Her blood gushing out all over the floor is an image that will haunt me to my last day.*

*I'm afraid there is only one way to undo this," he said.*

*I learned the lesson. I didn't say no to anything after that.*

*Whatever you do, Max, whatever happens...don't ever let them catch you alive.*

I was spent beyond words before I lay down, yet now I keep staring at the near-darkness on my side of the room, wide awake. I'm so sick of the nightmares. They only got worse since I got here. I don't even give a shit about Jefferson anymore, but still he keeps turning up in my sleep like a persistent gnat I can't swat away. He gets mixed in with all the new fears of an uncertain future and memories of a reality I never experienced. It's a terrifying cocktail I don't want to swallow again, and so my eyes remain open.

We go back to Arcadia Bay tomorrow. A seven hour drive, we leave at ten. I'll be rewinding before taking off just so I'm tired enough to sleep for most of the trip, since I need to be somewhat fresh awake come dusk. Chloe will catch a nap some time in-between.

She's right next to me, since we finally arrived at a joint bedtime. We're not snuggled up, but our legs are touching. She's not yet asleep, but it feels like she's getting there.

"Max."
Her whisper isn't a tentative call. She must know I'm awake.

"Hm?"

"Tell me about my funeral."

I look back over my shoulder. "What?"

"I've been thinking about it since you mentioned it. Do you mind?"

"That's so morbid, Chloe."

"So?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I don't know, I keep thinking...who else in the world gets to hear about their own funeral? Wouldn't you be curious if you were me?"

I don't answer. I've been avoiding those memories. They belong to a reality I destroyed. Maybe with enough self-delusion I can some day forget that I simply sat while Chloe died.

Her hand touches my arm. "It's okay, you don't have to. I get it."

I remain quiet for another minute.

"Father Matthews still looks like Larry David," I finally say.

Chloe laughs under her breath. She wriggles her arm under me and draws closer until I'm wrapped in her embrace. She does like being the big spoon.

"Must've been a long-ass eulogy," she says. "He wouldn't shut up with dad. Or...I guess it felt like it at the time. Oh, shit, did they put me next to him?"

"Yeah."

"Fuck my life," She buries her face in my neck. "Tell me more. Who showed up?"

"David and Joyce, of course..."

I try to remember all the names and faces. I was somewhat distraught at the time.

"Everyone you knew from Blackwell was there, and some of my friends too. The principal, Warren, Kate, Dana, Trevor and Justin...even Victoria."

"Seriously? What the hell. She was such a bitch to Rachel, we couldn't stand that skank."

"She was actually nice to me then. She even approached me the day after, acting as if it wasn't the first time. I think she had talked to the clueless version of me before I took over. I kind of...I went off on her. She looked so confused and hurt, but I was so angry at everything..."

"Good for you. Mean Max is the Best Max."

"No, don't say that. She didn't deserve it that time, she was hurting about Nathan and actually trying to be a real person to me. And we wasted so much energy with our petty little war before that...who knows, maybe we could've all worked together if I'd tried to connect with her back
I feel Chloe shrug behind me. "She wasn't worthy of you. Bitches get stitches."

"Hah. We sure seemed to get along in the alternate reality. I told you about that, right?"

"Sure did, super bizarro-land. Reason number one we don't fuck around with photojumping unless we have to." She takes a deep breath, inhaling my scent like it's getting her high. She's big into smelling me, I've noticed. It's a bit weird, but I like it. It makes me feel...coveted.

"You didn't mention your parents," she says. "They weren't there?"

"No. Their flight got cancelled and they had to drive. Didn't make it for the service."

"Aw."

"I didn't mind. They'd have smothered me. I wanted them gone the moment they arrived, I shut out anyone that tried to talk to me. Anyone except...Joyce. She..."

I think better of it and shut my mouth. It's probably the last thing Chloe wants to be reminded of.

"Tell me about her."

It takes me a moment to respond. "Are you sure?"

She silently nods, her chin poking the side of my neck.

"She...she was broken, Chloe. Watching her sob and fall apart felt like cosmic punishment. She was the one person I wanted to talk to, I wanted her to know the real you, but...I was the one who'd let her daughter die. I could never look her in the eye, ever again."

She kisses the back of my head. She doesn't say anything, but she doesn't have to.

"It was killing me. You made this sacrifice, and for what? So your mom could suffer like this? Last I heard, through David...she wasn't doing any better, she didn't bounce back. She blamed herself, and blamed him too. I...I don't know if she'd have ever recovered."

"I think she would have." Though damp, her whisper is full of conviction. "My mother was tough as nails. She would have made it, eventually."

"You would know, Chloe. All I know is...I couldn't."

"You're different. What we have is different. It goes beyond anything I could say."

Our hands entangle together as if they have a mind of their own. I press her arm to my chest. "It drove me insane the way people talked about you, like you were this poor girl gone wrong. A 'troubled child,' that one was the worst. Nobody had a clue what you'd done for them. Who you really were."

She chuckles lightly. "To be fair, I was a complete fuckup at the time."

"Life took a shit on you! Your dad, Rachel, and an abusive home, and me being a self-absorbed asshole and ditching you like that? You were doing alright, considering."

"Don't make excuses for me, Max. I had reasons to act out, but not for five fucking years. I should've been honoring my dad's memory instead of taking a dump on everything he worked to
give me. I was a dumb-ass raging at the world, and I own that."

"See?" I bring her fingers to my lips and kiss them. "You're so amazing, and no-one knew. No-one could know. It kept eating at me..."

"Hey, I totally get it. You're far stronger than me, I'd have lost it in your place. I wouldn't have lasted five months, not even close. Probably I'd have ended up offing myself. No joke."

Well, Max, if you're ever going to tell her, now is the time. Speak now or forever hold your Rest in Peace.

"I...might have tried?"

She tenses after a short while, as though the words took some time to sink in. "What?"

"I, uh...I jumped off the lighthouse."

"You what? Are you fucking with me?"

"No. I was desperate. I...I'd lost my powers, I don't know why. Do you really think I wouldn't have brought you back earlier? I lasted maybe a week before trying, but I couldn't. I couldn't do a damn thing, and it got worse and worse inside my head until I couldn't see any other choice. I wanted to trigger a rewind again, or just...make the pain stop. Either was fine."

Chloe is deathly still. Her breath no longer smolders on my neck, held instead between lungs and teeth. Her arms are limp around me, like my words sapped the strength right out of her muscles.

"On the bright side," I add lamely, "it worked."

It's another second of silence, and then all at once she clutches me in her bear-wrestling hug. "Max."

"Oof."

"Max, I'm so sorry..."

"For what? You didn't do anything."

"I made you choose! I thought so much of you and so little of me that I didn't even consider how much it would hurt you to let me die. I couldn't imagine anyone would care so much about losing me. I thought I was doing the right thing, and I still managed to be a selfish asshole about it..."

"No, no no no." I twist around in her arms so I can face her. "That's not true, Chloe. You were incredible up in that hill, it was your best moment ever. I admired you so much. You were willing to die for our hometown, don't you dare feel bad about that."

She looks down. I cup her jaw in my hands so she'll look directly at me. "I fucked up, okay?" I know there's a frown on her brow and a protest forming on her lips, so I cover her mouth with my hand. "No, listen. I fucked up before all this started. You'd have never entered that bathroom if I'd been there for you all those years. That is the one regret I'll always have, you deserved more from me—and you can't even argue with that, it's the first thing you brought up when we started talking again."

"Mmf," she grunts.

I move my hand to her shoulder. "You know it's true."
"I guess."

"Say it with me. 'You're right, Max.'"

"Oh, fuck off."

"I'm serious! Say that, and then say, 'I'm proud of the sacrifice I was willing to make.'"

"What is this suddenly, a self-help therapy session?"

"Also say, 'I forgive you for being a shitty friend.'"

"You know I forgave you already, I don't even think about it anymore."

"Say that you love me."

Her gruff expression breaks into a smile. "I love you."

I close what little space remains between us and nestle into her, my head tucked under her chin. "Now say you'll keep the nightmares away tonight."

Chloe kisses the top of my head and squeezes me tight. "I wish I could make that promise."

"Say it anyway."

"There'll be no night terrors this time, Max. You'll sleep like an old man on drugs, drool and everything. You'll be snoring till noon and I'll have to kick you awake because I'll be so fed up of listening to it."

I scoot closer still, trying to burrow even deeper. Our legs are entangled, my toes brush up against her ankles and feet. Nothing feels close enough right now, I want her wrapped all around me.

"I believe you."

I'm settling in, getting cozy. Oh, I know I'm being selfish, this can't be all that comfortable for her. I'm big into cuddling all night, she prefers some space when it comes to getting actual sleep. This feels so good, though. I think I'll be a little selfish for a while. Just this once.

It's the last thought I remember. There were nightmares, Chloe said later. They didn't stay with me.

I can only recall this dream with a twenty-foot-tall Hot Dog Man chasing us up to the lighthouse, but then Chloe flew up to his face and used her Mazinger Z detachable fists to shoot him, and he got toppled over, and then we started eating him. Hot Dog Man told us about his captive family and his quest for revenge, and we apologized and became friends. I woke up giggling a bit after dawn.

It was pretty awesome.

---

Here is something I haven't told Chloe. I've died a few times.

Well, I guess it was almost dying. Near deaths? Should have died's? Something like that. I'm not talking about last-second saves, I've had my share of those too. I'm talking about actually 100% dead, foregone conclusion stuff. I went splat against the ground. Burning debris crushed my skull. I took a stray bullet to the gut, I clearly remember it going in. And I don't know if you can die from taser prongs to the face, but it was close enough to qualify.
These are the times when the hard rewind kicks in. It always leaves me far enough back so I can adjust and make changes, be it a minute or whole hours.

I've tried to control it, to find it inside me, but I don't even know how to look. Unlike everything else, it might not even be inside me at all. It doesn't feel like it's me doing anything. It feels external, like...like I'm being saved. And guess what I see every single time it happens?

Here's a hint for you: it has blue wings and an impeccable sense of timing.

I'm not crazy enough to go and test something like this, but I think the pattern is clear here. Congratulations, Max. You might be immortal.

Want to know the weirdest part? I think about it and I don't feel a thing. I'm not grateful, I'm not in awe or even all that intrigued. How jaded is that? I should be making a big deal out this spirit thing, maybe even...I don't know, be praying to it? I've never been much of a spiritual person, but however the hell it works, the butterfly is real, and it's protecting me. Shouldn't I embrace it? Shouldn't I...have faith in it?

Maybe I'd be more willing to believe if I knew what the fuck it wants with me. For all I know it could be an evil ghost, preserving its trusty agent of destruction.

I don't really know why I haven't told Chloe. It would give her some peace of mind, wouldn't it? Something to believe in besides me.

Yeah, okay, I know why I haven't told her. More and more I get this...vibe, from her. I think she believes I'm some sort of messiah. She hasn't outright said it, but it's definitely there. The last thing I want is to encourage that kind of thinking.

And while we're riding the truth wagon, yes, it's also because I'm fucked up and it feels good to have someone worried sick about me now and then. The feeling will be spoiled if she starts believing that nothing can take me down.

Man, I didn't realize how scummy a reason it is until I wrote it just now, but what hope do I have if I can't at least be honest with myself? (Ha, get it? Because I'm talking to you, and you're me, and...never mind. I've been spending too much time around Chloe and her lame jokes.)

I'm wondering whether you will let her know after you read this. I often imagine you as far nicer than me, couldn't tell you why. Maybe because you're the real savior of the story.

I suppose I'll simply leave it in your hands. What choice do I have?

Dye and shampoo wash off in soapy dark streaks running down her skin, slowly revealing the electric blue beneath. She sits in the shower, head leaning back, eyes closed. It's morning in the final timeline, my eyelids are starting to droop and I'm mostly done telling her everything we did in my last ten hours.

It was one continuous rewind. By testing it we risked wasting half of a pretty important day, but I had a pretty big hunch that it would work. I was right. Whatever the reason, my only limit now is me being unconscious.

With one hand I hold the showerhead, with the other I comb through her hair, fingers massaging her scalp. There is a relaxed smile on her lips. The occasional content moan happens now and then.

Yep, she's loving it. I should know, she just did this for me. It's deeply comforting...and so very
intimate, surprisingly so.

Wonder if she ever did this with Rachel. The hair dying part, not the naked in the shower part. I don't think they did that. They better not have, at any rate.

Fuck's sake, Max, don't you dare get jealous of Chloe's dead crush.

"You're awful quiet suddenly," she says.

"Just making sure I get everything out."

"Or you're wondering if I ever did this with Rachel."

I stop what I'm doing for a second. "You're freaking me out now, how the hell do you keep reading my thoughts like that?"

"You already asked months ago, dummy."

"Oh."

"D'uh. Lather up again?"

"Sure..."

I grab the shampoo and get to work. It might be washable dye, but it sure is stubborn. It took four wash-and-rinse cycles for my hair to regain its natural color. Not that I minded. It felt so delightful that I was actually sad when she was done.

Looking at my hands I start to imagine Rachel's hands, parting Chloe's hair this way and that, carefully applying color to each strand. Her perfect little manicured California-model fingers, running through Chloe's scalp, sending tingles through her brain. Did it feel so intimate and personal for them too?

Holy shit, put this possessive garbage out of your mind, what's wrong with you? You've been stewing for too long, say something.

"Oh my god, your skin is so damn flawless, what do you even do? I'm dying of envy over here."

She giggles at the completely unexpected gushing. "I just shower regularly, you should try it some time."

Oh, man, I even made her blush. Score.

"You know, I'm glad you've kept up with the blue. It looks really cool."

"Yeah, we did it together. I know you're really into it."

I smile and nod, a bit self-conscious. She can't see it. "I am, I admit it. It suits you so well."

The blue hair was probably Rachel's idea to begin with. Not that it matters. God, why can't I get this out my head?

I try to make it sound casual, just curious. That's all I am, curious. "So did you do this with Rachel?"

"Hang out naked in the shower? I wish."
The white-hot ball of sheer jealousy that flares in my chest is positively disturbing. "You wish?"

"I wished, I meant I wished, back then."

"Hm."

Just cool it, you damn nutjob. She's allowed to have had other relationships, there's nothing wrong with that. She's with you now, she loves you more than anything.

She pinches my thigh. "You're so damn cute when you're jealous, I love it."

"I'm not jealous! I'm curious, I want to know everything about you."

"Uh-huh. Well, if you truly must know, she did dye my hair, and it felt pretty hot, so then we made out for like a minute. I was way more into it than her, she played it off as ha-ha, kissing, so random. And that was the whole extent of our romance, though it didn't stop her from leading me on. Pretty sure she just felt bad for me."

I stay quiet. I keep working on a good lather, massaging, pressing the soap from root to tips. Don't change the cadence, don't let anything show just how much fucking violence there is in your thoughts right now.

Chloe has this smug, I-know-something-you-don't smile on her lips. "Before you keep pretending whatever it is you want me to believe, I'll remind you that we've had this conversation before."

I take the showerhead, turn on the water and start rinsing. Squeeze those thick wet strands, wash off the rest of the dye little by little. It takes me about two minutes of largely unnecessary work to push out the words.

"I would scratch her eyes out if she were here right now."

She grins from ear to ear. "That's more like it. Is it weird that it's a huge turn-on to hear you say that?"

"It's not cool, Chloe. I don't want to be one of those girls. Next thing you know I'll be searching your drawers and snooping through your phone..."

"Don't you always do that anyway everywhere you go?"

I spray some water droplets at her face. "You know what I mean."

"Doesn't bother me one bit. A little jealousy is good."

"Feels like more than just a little."

She shrugs. "You value what's yours and you're willing to fight for it."

"You're not mine, Chloe."

"I'm not?"

"I mean, I don't own you or anything."

"No, not like that."

She turns, takes the showerhead from my hand and puts it down. She shuts off the water, her eyes
never leaving me. Chloe takes my hand and stands up, gently pulling so that I follow.

"But I am yours," she says, "and you are mine."

She steps in, pushing me against the wall as her mouth easily finds my own. Soon her tongue slips past my lips with confidence, with familiarity, and I’ve no issues with it. My back is against the cool tiles, one of her hands pressed to my chest as if holding me in place. Her other hand is at my nape, fingers clutching my hair tight enough to make it interesting.

She stops kissing me and pulls just a bit harder. I gasp and moan without meaning to. Warmth is rushing inside me to all the right places.

"You're my Max," she breathes into my mouth, "and nobody is going to touch you but me."

Holy shit.

There is no gentle way to put it. This feels fucking hot.

Chloe leans in to resume what she started. Gone is her awkward uncertainty and all the tentative banter. I'm no longer a stranger in her lover's body, she knows me again. She knows I'm tired, but not too tired. And she knows I've been thinking nearly non-stop about what we did in bed yesterday.

Her hand travels down my chest, past my navel, reaching ever downwards. I get on my tip-toes, eager to shorten the distance. Her fingers make my breath catch in my throat.

This is the woman I obsessively love. She has been my girlfriend going on five months. She knows exactly what I want, and she knows exactly what she's doing.

---

**Chloe's Pet Peeves**

For your safe navigation of life together and/or your occasional entertainment:

- **Readjusting her mirrors or her seat or the wheel or basically anything to mess with her driving.** *She is The Driver, no ifs or buts about it. Especially with the RV, oh god. Kind of anal-retentive, but I don't mind, I'd rather not drive this monster anyway. I mean, she will "let you" if you ask nicely, but she will definitely hover and watch your every move. Just be sure to leave everything back the way it was. Or not, if you want to irritate her.*

- **Using her toothbrush.** Apparently "we're not kids anymore and it's gross." *I thought it was cool to share everything, but I guess there should be boundaries somewhere. I don't really get it, she pushes her tongue in my mouth often enough, what's the difference?*

- **Hogging the covers.** *I call this one fair, she hogs the bed all the time. Not my fault that I get so cold huddled in my corner. Pro tip: it's a good way to get her to snuggle up when she's half-asleep.*

- **Emoji.** *Yep, still a thing.*

- **Self-loathing.** *She still has sympathy but these days it mostly drives her nuts if I wallow in my shit. She'll engage in "aggressive praise." Kind of...bullying me with kindness. It's weird.*

- **She's still super self-conscious about zits.** *Don't make fun of them if one shows up. Seriously, even if it's extra funny, even if it's at the tip of her nose. You'll regret it. BTW: compliment her utterly flawless skin, she's secretly proud of it, you'll watch her blush. Yes, she's proud of it even when she*
does absolutely nothing to maintain it. Lucky bitch.

- Nagging her about smoking. This is more of a "don't be an asshole" tip. She's doing her best. She
didn't smoke for that long, but she smoked a lot. I've grown to hate the smell but I have to remind
myself to be supportive. Word of warning: she fully intends to 420 blaze it on the regular again
once / if we ever get out of this mess. She promised not to overdo it. I might join her, haven't
decided yet.

It's not that much. We make a fucking awesome couple, after all. Like two matching jigsaw puzzle
pieces, cut as opposites yet fitting together seamlessly. Ish.

I'll let you discover your own pet peeves. She'll probably annoy you on purpose with them. It's
what we do for fun.

♥Max&Chloe 4ever♥

I'm watching the digital clock on my dresser tick backwards, gleefully counting down to the exact
time I left the bedroom about three hours ago. I can't believe getting away with this is going to be
so easy.

These powers wrecked my former life. Time travel is a constant headache, both literally and
figuratively. Guilt and self-doubt regularly come to visit, and every possible future ahead of me
ranges from complicated to godawful. All these things are still true.

On the other hand, sneaking out and getting Chloe her birthday gifts without her knowing a damn
thing is undeniably awesome. I asked her unabashedly incriminating questions, I drove for over an
hour there and back—from the outskirts of Littlerock to Centralia; manual transmission, how I hate
thee—and roamed shops for longer, I made absolutely certain that the one fits her and the other
suits her...and now it's three hours ago. I'm still lying in bed pretending to sleep while she's out
there, prepping the RV for departure. She has no idea.

Yeah, it was a stupid risk even with the precautionary selfie I took, and temporarily-ditched Chloe
was far from pleased. It was also totally worth it. I'm wondering now if I should give one of them
early, since anything might happen tonight...but no, that's just an excuse so I don't have to wait.
Besides, that's no way to think about the future. We'll do this thing and the day after tomorrow
she'll have a proper birthday.

I hide the bulky present box under the bed and make sure no part of it is visible. Time to leave the
bedroom and go pretend I didn't just get her a surprise I already know she'll love. Oh, I almost feel
bad for cheating like this. There's no way she could compete.

Alright, that's not true. This is hideously unfair and I'm loving it.

They must have thought the system was time traveler-proof. A cell with a cot and a toilet. Food
and water dispensed remotely, no human interaction. An IV locked tight to my hand, no chance of
removal. If they needed to move me for more torturous power-leveling or set up anything in the
cell, they'd just crank up the dose and knock me out.

They were right. There was nothing I could've done. This might be the creepiest part, Max: they
were ready to handle a time traveler. They'd planned ahead, built a facility for it. They even put me
in a hospital gown, I guess to drive home just how defenseless I was.

There was no escape...until a mistake was made somewhere.
You can't give any wriggle room to someone with my powers. All it takes is a tiny window of time outside lockout in which I can rewind freely. With enough rewinds, I can clear my head of whatever they kept pumping into me. And then there's no stopping me, motherfuckers.

I don't know whether it was a malfunction of the IV or someone screwed up, but I regained enough focus while they were moving me. Enough to rewind off their claws. Enough to do it over and over until I was myself again, until I could freeze everything in place and do what I had to.

I hope you never have to stab anyone in your timeline. It's an awful dream-like experience, to push a blade into the neck of a person frozen in time. Like sinking a knife into a raw carcass, slowly, forcefully. There is a lot of resistance, you have to put your heart and soul into it. You pull out, and there is this ugly red blotch in the cut, waiting to gush all over the place.

I had to do it. I could barely hold up a standstill back then, I couldn't simply take their keycard and get away. I had no other

fuck you

.

.

Sorry. I had to walk away for a while.

See that up there? That's me lying to myself, making it look like I didn't want to do what I did. I'm itching to erase it now, but I won't.

I don't think I had any other options, that much is true. But I didn't look very hard, because I wanted to hurt them. I didn't see people or minions or whatever you want to call them. I saw the evil fuckers that had done all this to me and Chloe. I was so full of hatred, so resentful and desperate...I wanted payback. I wanted to see them all suffer, and I did, and in that moment it felt good.

You're judging me right now, aren't you? Well, you should. I'm ashamed, of course I am, otherwise I wouldn't be struggling so much with it. But before you judge too harshly, do you remember what we felt sitting there, strapped to Jefferson's chair? Think back on it. Put yourself in that moment again.

Now picture him keeping you for a whole week. Drugging you whenever he wants. Abusing you every day.

Abusing Chloe in front of you.

You feel it now, right? Just writing that made my insides curl.

It's within us, Max. I think the right word for it is 'wrath.' It sounds so biblical. Not that long ago it would have been this pathetic mixture of anger and fear, and impotence and cowering and pleading. But we're not that person anymore, are we.

So yes, those assholes felt my wrath. I'm superpowered, I get to say things like that now.

Roaming through wherever the hell I was remains a blur of quiet violence and near-exhaustion. I know I collapsed a few times, barely hanging on to yet another rewind. I remember my mouth and nose filling up with blood, dripping from my face as my head pounded with each step...and using the powers again anyway, because I knew there would be no other chances. It felt endless at the
time, but I don't think the place was that big, maybe five or six rooms connected by hallways. Very white and antiseptic, well-lit. Cameras on every corner, so I had to constantly rewind what little I could before the other guards ran over with their tasers and tranquilizer guns. There were no windows, so I'm assuming it was underground somewhere.

I never found Chloe. I don't think she was kept in the same building. I did find an actual gun on one of the bodies, which I didn't hesitate to use from that point forward. You don't have to be a great shot when you're firing point-blank at stationary targets.

Never found my bag, either, but my clothes were folded on a random shelf in a tiny room full of lockers. And tucked deep inside my jeans' pocket, the photo Chloe took outside Seattle. She'd slipped it there and I never moved it. Who knows what the timeline would be like if she hadn't done that.

Part of me wants to forget all this ever took place. In fact, Chloe asked me the other day if I ever thought about giving up and simply running. Find some place safe far away and eventually leave the horror where it belongs, forgotten in a reality that never was.

There is no way I could. I'm making a face right now just thinking about it. I live with these memories, I sleep with them every night. They're part of me. Even after you take over, all those moments were real, and they will always haunt us.

I know it, and you'll know it too. There is only one way to put this ghost to rest.

And if I don't get to do it, you will.

The name of the tiny town is Fallow Parks, and it's about an hour's journey from Arcadia Bay. It's four in the afternoon. I'm watching as Chloe works the mechanism that will uncouple the car from the RV's hitch.

"Are you sure you don't want to lie down a while longer?" I ask. "We still have time."

"I'm good. And I'm too wired to sleep now, anyway. I'd rather get there a bit early so we can do some recon."

She keeps turning a large knob on the tow bar until the two sides come apart. The hefty metal shaft clanks onto the asphalt of the local RV park. We'd planned on just boondocking somewhere, but the place is nearly deserted, no reservation needed. It felt so edgy to give one of our many aliases to the random lady behind the counter. My name is Emily Shaw today.

Chloe gets on her back and works a cross wrench under the bumper, on the bolts attaching the bar to the frame of the car. Her well-defined arm muscles flex and twitch in concert with her efforts.

She was so right, I'm totally into watching her work. It's outright ogling when she's showing off her body with one of those flimsy sleeveless tops of hers.

"Do you have to do that every time we want to use the car?"

"Not really. It just looks shoddy to leave this thing on."

"It seems a bit anal retentive to take it off just for a day's ride..."

"It bugs me, okay? Shut up." She puffs and pushes hard on the wrench to loosen the last bolt. "Fuck, I'm full of jitters inside. Aren't you?"
"Yeah, you could say that. I've felt it get worse and worse in the last couple hours."

"It's not even about going into the maw of the beast, it's all about returning to the Bay. Don't know why I'm so nervous to see it. I've kept up with the news, it's Construction City down there. Should be a hopeful sight, even."

"I'm mostly dreading the Blackwell-shaped scar..."

"Well...yeah, there's that."

I want to ask about the state of her house and The Two Whales maybe getting restored, but I just don't have the heart. The prospect of seeing first-hand the destruction I brought upon Arcadia Bay has gathered this dense, cold clump somewhere in my chest. It became more and more real as we cruised down the I-5 and small towns and large cities kept rolling past. According to the on-board GPS: Fords Praire, Centralia—nope, never been there before—Castle Rock, Longview, huuuuge Vancouver-plus-Portland—that was somewhat fun—Woodburn, Salem, Albany...the list went on and on until we took the detour toward the coast. It's been mostly pasture and orchards and wildland since then.

I missed seeing some of those places as I dozed off and on. I slept on the couch, since the rattle of the car hitch was kinda noisy in the back whenever we caught a pothole. Why would a Greyhound bus have a car in tow, I asked Chloe. I don't give a shit, not ditching that ride yet, she responded. Good enough for me.

"I am pretty hungry, though," Chloe says. "I saw a pita stand as we rolled in, looked edible. You game?"

"Always game for food, if you're buying."

"Pfft, moocher."

I watch her roll off the ground with the big metal thing in her hands. I take it off of her and set it next to the RV, mostly to feel a little helpful. "I'll drive you there to give you a break. Just point the way."

She gives me a look. It's the same look she gave me before, when I offered to take her place at the wheel so she could rest. It basically says "I'd rather live to see another day, thanks."

"Jeez, I can drive, you know?"

A smile plays on her lips. "Yeah, I know. Watch out for Granny Caulfield."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing at all! I thought you hated driving a stick."

"I'll endure it just for you, because I care about your well-being for some reason."

"I'm good, Max. Let me lock up and we'll get going."

I follow her with my eyes as she takes the hunk of metal back inside. She does look spry and fresh awake.

Chloe is a serious driving machine, going non-stop for hours. She even seemed to enjoy it. I honestly don't get it, driving is mind-numbing at best, a nerve-wracking nightmare at worst. Yeah,
I'm secretly glad she insists on playing the driver all the time.

She comes back, panda keychain rattling in her hand. We get in the car. She does a double take and frowns while looking at the mirrors. "Did you move these around?"

She begins adjusting them. Don't blush, don't freeze, don't get flustered, you didn't actually do it in this timeline.

I try to put the right amount of bitterness in my voice. "Apparently I'm not ever allowed to drive, so I don't see how I could. They probably got jostled during the trip."

"Oh, come on, don't pout. I just like driving you around, okay? Let me have that." She floors the clutch and starts the engine. "Let's go get some food in our faces."

Ha! The stealth mission remains uncompromised. ShadowMax strikes again.

The pitas were surprisingly delicious. She got an extra one for me wrapped to-go so I could eat it sometime tonight, before rewinding Helen's part of the deal. Chloe cares.

We're both anxious to get there despite the nerves, so we hit the road right away—after one last stop at TimeWarp HQ to get into gear and take with us everything we might need: laptops and phones and headsets and earpieces; my bag with all my crap, camera and wallet and snacks and a few failsafe photos included, inconspicuously tucked away as perfectly harmless mementos; both our guns—it's still so weird to think that I own a gun—and extra clips and tasers and even knives in concealed ankle sheaths for both of us, how badass is that oh god I hope I don't have to use it. The guns are compact .40 caliber G19 Glocks, Chloe tells me as she checks the magazines in the most generic-action-movie way possible. She knows because we looked it up.

We don't say much for most of the drive, together in a silence that rides under the modest hum of the engine and the wind in our hair. Chloe and I are on the same solemn wavelength, not in the mood for banter, or music, or small talk. Just grim thoughts shared through entangled fingers.

The winding road is hemmed by the kind of trees I knew while growing up, and as we draw near I recognize more of the sights and sounds and scents of a childhood spent surrounded by these woods. It's no surprise when the sign finally shows around the bend.

*Welcome to Arcadia Bay,* it says around stylized depictions of the harbor, the hill and the lighthouse. It looks brand new, larger than I remember. My eyes are drawn to the small footnote emblazoned in gold cursive over a blue background: *Made possible by a generous donation from the Empower the Bay Foundation.*

That would be us.

We park in front of the sign and get out. The road is at a downward slope here, revealing a good view of the town. It's far from quiet: trailer trucks roar past often, coming and going. This is our real failsafe photo, right before things can start going wrong...but I know we would take this picture anyway. Yeah, it's a tourist shot, but still it feels special. Momentous. It's even a bit of a thrill to strike a pose next to Chloe, aim the camera just right and press the button.

She looks at me expectantly, then relaxes. "Oh, good, it's still the same you."

"Let's hope it stays that way."

I shake the instant film and we wait for it to develop. Chloe made a face, because of course she did. It's quite the contrast with her muted black-and-brown outfit. She looks like she's ready to
attend a business-casual job interview.

She's smiling at the picture. "You'll never lose your touch."

"Could've framed it better."

"Oh, shut your mouth and take the compliment."

I jostle into her with my shoulder. "So...do you want to visit David while we're here?"

Chloe shakes her head. "He'll ask me what I'm up to and I'd have to lie. Anyone you'd like to see?"

I think for a while.

"No. Not really."

"Yeah. Figured. We'll just roam and hang out until night."

I'm nodding at her. "In fact, we better rewind if either of us gets recognized at all."

"What, with these foolproof disguises?" She digs the baseball caps out of my bag and crams mine onto my head as carelessly as she can manage. "No need to worry, we're going completely incognito!"

"Thanks, Chloe, you're so very helpful."

"Always happy to." She dons her own, daintily tucking hair strands behind her ears. While I busy myself fixing the hair and the hat she walks up to the welcome sign and leans a raised elbow against it. She sighs deeply, looking down at Arcadia Bay. "You know, it doesn't feel like returning home at all."

I walk up to her and wrap my arm around her waist. "I know what you mean."

She pulls me in to her side and continues looking in silence. Another eighteen wheeler zooms past, carrying a fat load of raw logs to the lumber mill. At least they got a ton of business out of this mess.

I've been avoiding taking in the view. The trees obscure half the inland housing, but there is the lumber mill, and the harbor, and the shoreside drive that goes from one side of the bay to the other. There's a brand new patch of asphalt toward the middle, pitch black among the faded grey, shiny new traffic lines painted on it. The damage is impossible to miss: a three-block-wide swath from waterfront to hilltop that divides the town straight through its center. Yet within the divide there is a swarm of activity, and new roads laid down, and the skeletons of new houses reaching up for the sky. Cement mixers and cargo trucks make their slow tread up and down the strip like they have far too many places at which to stop. And up the gentle hill, where before you could see Blackwell's stately outline presiding over the bay...there is absolutely nothing. My eyes refuse to look in that direction any longer than they have to.

On one side of the gap, the Prescott Estate looms. It seems untouched, unblemished. On the other side I can make out the Two Whales sign. It shines neon blue, blinking from one position to the next, as if the big whale is inviting in newcomers. The smile that creeps onto my lips might be a tad bittersweet, but it's a smile nonetheless.

And there is the lighthouse. Always the lighthouse. I know we'll be heading there before the day is over. We've been drawn to it since we were kids.
What happens next, I don't know if I can even call it a vision. It's there for only a moment, painless, seamless, huge and sudden.

The sky becomes darkness. The sun becomes lightning. The horizon becomes a storm, while hail pelts onto the ground around me like raining marbles. Before my eyes the lighthouse is swallowed into the funnel of a gigantic tornado.

Then the image is gone, replaced once more by cloudless blue skies and breeze-touched leaves.

"What the fuck."

"What? What's going on? Max?"

"No way, no fucking way..."

Whatever Chloe sees on my face, it shifts her expression from surprise to serious concern. "Talk to me, Max."

"I saw a storm. Another fucking tornado, on the lighthouse itself. It can't be a vision, it can't."

"Did it hurt you at all?"

"No, it was just like...like the reflection in the mirror. Like a hallucination." The idea enters my thoughts and burrows deep into a new kind of fear. "Chloe...am I losing my mind?"

"No, no, you just...you saw a thing. You're returning somewhere that was very traumatic for you, and you saw a thing, that's all. You're okay, everything's okay, there isn't gonna be—"

We're startled by a loud thump behind us. Chloe and I look back in unison.

There is a bloodstain on the windshield. A spattering of red trails down to a motionless lump.

A white-and-brown bird lies dead on the car's hood.
We're in the car. Chloe doesn't seem capable of turning the ignition key. Her grip is white-knuckled on the wheel as the windshield wipers move back and forth, back and forth.

"It was a coincidence. Just a coincidence. Birds do that sometimes. It happened to die right above us."

I glance at her, then look back down. I don't say anything. I'm waiting for the panic attack to hit. So far I just feel empty, and not even words form in the void.

"You saw a thing because you have severe PTSD, and then a bird died. They're not connected, okay? It's not all happening again. Okay?"

I'm just looking at my hands, listless on my lap. The tension in every one of her breaths shrouds the space between us like stormclouds. Like there's a bone-wrought scythe hovering above our heads.

"Max. It was a coincidence. Are you listening to me?"

"I'm listening."

"Well, then say something."

I stay quiet a while longer. I look out the windshield, past the remaining bloody specks that the wipers can't seem to scrub off. "We should try to warn them this time."

"So you're not listening. There's nothing to warn anyone about. It's not gonna happen again."

"Though probably we don't even have to. They'll all run for the hills when they notice the signs. It's not the kind of thing you forget."

"Why are you ignoring me? It's not going to happen again!"

There it is, the tremor in her voice. It's what finally brings a sting to my eyes.

"We need to assume that it will, Chloe."

"No, why? Why here, why now? It doesn't make any sense, there's no reason at all!"

Her voice becomes more damp with every word, more desperate. She's drowning. I lay a hand on her leg, and she suddenly punches the wheel. "No, fuck no! This isn't happening." She turns to face me, glaring. "And why the fuck are you so calm about it!"

I shrink back. I don't have an answer. The anticipation to get here was killing me, yet now I keep waiting to feel something besides this void inside me. I want to start crying, I do feel that much, but I think that's only because I'm watching her fall apart.

Her anger fizzles away as quickly as it came. She looks ahead, at the town below. Her voice is a strangled whisper.

"Shit. Shit, Max, I can't deal with this again, I can't..."
"You're actually right, you know. We don't know for sure yet. Let's not jump to conclusions."

She looks back at me. There is hope in her gaze, but also the knowledge that I'm saying it mostly for her benefit.

I keep going: "If it's the same timeframe as before, we still have five days. We'll know before then if another storm is coming."

"Why would it happen? Tell me a reason. There has to be a reason."

*Because it's what I deserve,* I want to say. *I got out of it the first time, and I deserve to watch first-hand Arcadia Bay's destruction.*

Somehow I don't think she'd agree.

"I know as much as you do," I tell her. "We'll just keep our eyes open and figure things out as we go. Maybe if we do what we came here to do and leave, nothing bad will happen. And maybe you're right and it's only an awful coincidence."

The words ring hollow even to my ears, but it's all I've got right now.

"Okay." She wipes at her cheek with the ball of her hand. "Okay. Stay focused. Keep your shit together."

Chloe starts the engine. "Where to?" she asks.

The answer comes without needing to spare a thought.

"The lighthouse. Maybe another vision will trigger there, like it did before. Then we'll know for sure."

Chloe nods, shifts into gear and takes us into Arcadia Bay. As the scenery rolls by and memories blend with sights a hundred times seen, the gaping void inside me remains. The panic never hits. My heart is quiet and steady.

This numbing-cold pit in my chest seems to have swallowed whatever it is that I'm supposed to feel.

Finding a group of teenage boys at the base of the lighthouse is like a personal offense, like they're intruding in my most private memories. To add insult to injury they keep throwing furtive glances from the bench, like we're invading *their* territory. I have this perverse impulse to pull out the gun and scare the bajeezus out of them, then rewind it away...but that's something maybe old, beanspilling Max would do. This Max right here knows to treat the powers seriously.

Chloe doesn't hesitate a second to stride up to them. "Get the fuck out of here, kids. We need the place."

"Whoa, who the hell you think you are, bitch? We were here—"

Chloe doesn't respond with words. She grabs the boy by the collar of his dumb lettered jacket, lifts him off the bench with one hand and pulls him around until he's hardly an inch from her face. "I said get the fuck out!" She shoves him away, sending him staggering down the slope.

The other four teens are staring with blank faces. I watch their expressions change as they take in the pissed-off stare, the badass look, the ripped frame and the ready-to-explode stance. Perhaps
they notice the suspicious bulk beneath her jacket. I'm pretty sure a hint of her gun holster is showing.

"Are you deaf, or just stupid? Get out before I throw you shit-stains off the cliff. And leave the booze. Pour it into a soda bottle next time, you dumbasses."

The boys all look at each other like they're in a comedy sketch. All it takes is for Chloe to take one menacing step forward; they get up and scurry around her, hands up and giving her wide berth.

"Crazy hoes," I hear one mutter as they hurry past me. I raise an eyebrow but remain quiet. It's just not worth it.

Chloe watches them go, then meets my eyes, then turns around to look down at the bay.

With quiet steps I walk up to her side. She glances my way but says nothing.

"I know you're having a hard time right now, but you didn't have to bully them like that. They were harmless."

For an answer Chloe fishes out her smokes and lights up yet again. We counted three dead birds on our way here. They might have been roadkill...

"Chloe."

"I'm trying, okay? Mind giving me some space? I'll be real sorry later, but not right now."

I watch her take a drag and blow out the smoke. The sun paints her lines in bold strokes and stark contrasts, drawing shimmering hues in the contours of pissed off features. I get the wholly inappropriate urge to take her picture. I don't think she's in the mood to be my model right now.

In a weird way I'm thankful she's freaking out so much. She's showing emotions for the both of us.

I take a step back and sit on the bench. The scene is so similar to our first day back together, though the problems we had then seem quaint in comparison. I sigh and try to clear my mind, let the warmth and the breeze and the sounds of the sea seep into my bones. Maybe in this place I can rekindle the sense of belonging that I seem to have lost.

The last time I sat here, I listened to her tell me how she was almost a Dark Room-Lite victim at Nathan's mercy. Shortly after I was choking on fear, realizing Arcadia Bay was headed for disaster.

On second thought, maybe the problems weren't so small.

Why can't I feel that fear now, the anxiety? Have I changed so much since then? Am I that jaded already?

It's simple, Max. In your mind, Arcadia Bay is already gone.

As usual, the voice in my thoughts is my own. It never feels like an intruder, yet neither does it feel entirely...mine.

It's not that you don't care. It's simply something you've already accepted as a consequence of your actions.

"So no visions so far?"

Chloe is still standing there, gaze lost somewhere in the waterfront. I notice she put out her cig
without finishing even half of it.

"Nothing so far."

She goes quiet again.

"Come sit next to me," I tell her.

She looks back, jaw clenched tight. "I still want to punch the Universe. I don't want to blow up at you."

"I'll risk it. I won't take it personal."

Chloe puffs out a heavy breath, somewhere between irked and stressed. She sits so tense and stiff, like a living mannequin that hasn't quite learned yet how to bend her spine.

Soon her leg is fidgeting up and down, her brow knit with that "my life sucks right now" frown that so easily drives thorns into my heart.

"I know what you're thinking."

Chloe glances over and cringes. "Did you really bust out the time travel info-gather with me?"

"What? No, jeez, give me some credit. I'm on board with the whole 'keeping it real between us' thing. I just know."

She has the gall to look at me with poorly veiled suspicion.

"Oh my god, you read my thoughts all the time, can't I do the same? I'm still your best friend, you know?"

"Fine, sure. So what am I thinking?"

"You're trying real hard to somehow blame everything on yourself."

She blinks for a while, and looks away, and leans elbows on knees. I'm almost offended she's so damn surprised.

"I don't know what to think anymore," she says in a harried voice. "I could deal with this happening once, but if it's going to keep hounding us..."

"It doesn't even make sense, how could it be your fault now?"

"Everything is fucked up because of me. You know I'm not really supposed to be alive, Max."

Her words stir something deep inside. It tightens the tone of my voice. "Do you really feel that way still? Like you're not supposed to be alive?"

She simply shrugs.

"No-one's 'supposed' to be anything," I tell her. "You're alive because that's what happened in the end. That's it."

"Yeah. 'Cause you made it so. It wasn't the way it was meant to go."

"So then what, keeping you alive ruined the timeline forever? I'm so tired of that bullshit. There's
no set path to go against, fate is whatever ends up happening. We're not defying destiny. We are *shaping* it, together."

She snorts. "Together. Sure."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Do you even have to ask? You shape reality, Max! I'm nobody, I drive you around and make you lunch sometimes. And I'd be fine with that if it were just about you and me," she angrily gestures at the town below, "but I'm not worth all that death and suffering all over again!"

"Um, did the whole story change overnight? Because you've worked your ass off to keep me safe, and went into a burning building to save perfect strangers, and constantly bail me out whenever I randomly faint—wasn't all that true? I mean, what the fuck, you talked me into throwing money at the Bay. I didn't even think about it, that's the kind of hero I am." She looks like she wants to say something, but I lean closer, my hands curling on her clothes. "I need you, Chloe. It's been only two days and it's already obvious to me. And I'm not talking about the mushy 'I love you so much' stuff, I mean I literally need you, I *depend* on you. In the journal I kept gushing and saying how you were the only thing keeping me sane. You *have* to know that by now, right?"

She's still looking away. What little I can see of her mouth quivers like she's about to start yelling—she's tense under my grip as if ready to snap. There's this anti-impulse inside me to stay quiet, to wait and watch and hope for the best because telling her what's on my mind might make things worse. I recognize this feeling, I know it well. I'd have let it cripple me not that long ago, but I'll never again regret truths left unsaid.

"You know what? I refuse to think you've been pretending to be proud of yourself all this time. Right now you're afraid and you're letting it take over, as simple as that. It's okay if you want to feel sad or pissed, but don't you dare put yourself down like this, I'm not going to just sit here and watch it happen."

Her fingers are spread taut, digging into her legs. Her frame quakes subtly with every breath. When it finally pushes through, her voice is raw and threadbare. "You're so full of shit..."

"I am not! You said you believe in me, didn't you? Then you being alive needs to be a good thing, because I could never handle this huge time travel mess by myself."

She's shaking her head. Tears drop off her cheeks and catch the sunlight as they free-fall onto the grassy soil.

"No, I meant you're a fucking liar, there's no way you didn't rehearse that whole speech a bunch of times..."

I think she means it as a compliment. I take the plunge and put my arm around her shoulders, pulling her to me. She tilts to my chest among quiet sobs.

"I don't need to rehearse it," I tell her, "I only need to speak from the heart."

She's wiping at her face. "Holy shit, you're so corny, it's unbelievable..."

I hug her close, thinking of the pride she's shown me, the wonder and conviction. I want them back. This shitty new wrinkle in the fabric of reality is not going to break my Chloe.

"I can do way worse." I crank the ham right up to eleven. "We can accomplish anything as long as
we're together, my love!"

She chuckles half-heartedly and sniffles again. "I don't know what I did to deserve you."

I kiss the back of her head the way she usually does. My fingers skim the line of her jaw, brush the
hair away from a moist cheek. "Beats me, but you're stuck with this curse, so get used to it."

Chloe laughs in breaths, thick and soft. It's weird to be the one holding her. I hadn't realized how
often she's the one comforting me.

We stay quiet for a while. She's putting herself back together. I'm running everything I just said
through my mind, swimming in thoughts of belief, and self-worth, and the threat of hopelessness,
and the reasons that might exist behind everything. Kate pops up among my memories, along with
the familiar twang of guilt. She was so easy to talk to about this stuff.

Like our first actual conversation. She must have gotten a spiritual vibe from me, because she
invited me to come to church shortly after meeting in the dorm. I nervously declined, and she was
super cool about it, zero preachy nonsense. It led to a pretty awesome talk about beliefs and
organized religion. The whole thing felt very...college-like.

Now Chloe has shuffled around until she's lying on her side, legs tucked in, head resting on my lap.
Her hand gently strokes my leg in slow patterns. Eyes half-lidded, skin bathed in light, gold
reflecting off her damp cheeks like she's the sun itself.

I stare at her profile in something closely resembling awe. My kingdom for a camera.

"What are we going to do, Max? There has to be something we can do."

There is no real hope in her voice. It's mourning. It's a plea for mercy.

There is something that might help her. The reasons not to bring it up are still there, but Kate might
have been right. Faith is always better than despair.

"I don't know. But I have a confession to make on behalf of BetaMax."

She glances my way, mildly intrigued. "Sounds...serious. Journal stuff?"

"Yeah. How much have I told you about the hard rewind?"

Chloe thinks about it. "Not that much," she says.

So I tell her everything, including every reason why I never mentioned it, as upsetting as it is to
explain them. It's painfully clear now that I haven't done enough to make her feel like one half of
our team, and that ends today.

"So if I jumped off the cliff right now and actually hit the ground," I conclude, "everything would
turn back to the way it was and I'd be back here, not a scratch on me. In theory."

She blows out her held breath. "In theory, thank god. I will lose my shit if you tell me you tested
it."

"Well, I haven't on purpose, but...it's exactly what happened when I jumped off from up there."

"Still can't believe you did that."

"So, you see, there is a reason for all of this, Chloe. I don't know if it's a good reason, or if it'll
make sense at all in the end, but...there's a reason. You were right. I was...chosen by this thing, whatever it is. We both were, I think."

Do I truly believe in the words coming out of my mouth right now? I honestly can't tell. On one hand, I often feel like a toy at the whim of a force I can't understand. On the other hand, these powers gave me a life with Chloe, as fucked up as that life might be. That alone is worth the benefit of the doubt. I'm open to the idea of faith in my "guardian spirit," or whatever I should call it. I'd just like to know a bit about the agenda first.

Her gaze is errant and unfocused, lost in thought. If telling Chloe all this helps her deal with things...well, I'm willing to drink some of the Kool-aid for her benefit.

"Have you ever seen the butterfly?" I ask her.

She shakes her head after a moment. "I've seen butterflies, but they were just...butterflies. Can you even tell it apart from a regular ol' bug?"

"I think so. Maybe. It looks just like the ones in your tattoo, but...I don't know, you have to be there to feel it. Uh, there's no weird mystical story behind your tattoo, is there?"

She shakes her head again. "Rachel and Frank and I were all buzzed, Frank was friends with this tattoo artist chick that was cool with a free all-nighter, so..."

"Hah. I did wonder how'd you afford it. Doubt Joyce was eager to shell out the cash for that kind of ink."

"Fat chance. She freaked out pretty hardcore, though later she admitted it was cool. And you're right, my broke suspended ass couldn't afford even the shittiest tramp stamp. I actually wanted something like Rachel's badass dragon, but she fell in love with this design so we went for it."

"Are you serious? You didn't even want it?"

"I do now, it looks awesome. It just wasn't my idea, is all."

Well, there's no arguing that Rachel and I had similar tastes. I love the tattoo, and I have her to thank for it.

Chloe turns so she can lie on her back and look at me. Her eyes are still puffy and red. "So am I supposed to forgive you for keeping a secret like that?"

"I, uh...if you want to, I guess? I'm sorry, for what it's worth."

She frowns as if she just noticed something, and fingers reach up to delicately dry the hollow of my eyelids. I lean against her hand when she cups my cheek. There is no world in which I could see her cry and not shed my own tears.

"I forgive you."

"That easy?"

"Yeah." She cradles my hand in both of hers. "You forgive me for being a whiny bitch and falling apart on you?"

"Whoa, I wouldn't put it that way..."

"Of course you wouldn't, apparently you're the second coming of Jesus now."
"Oh god, please don't—"

"I'm kidding! But you gotta admit, this totally confirms what I said. You're not doing too badly if there's this god spirit thing keeping you alive. Right?"

"That depends on what it wants, though..."

"Oh, yeah, the Evil Butterfly of Doom, a well-known avatar of destruction."

"You never know!"

"Man...it feels good to have backup, at least. Keeping you safe is a twenty-four-seven job."

"Yeah, well, it only needs to fail once, so don't relax too much." I caress her forehead and twine a strand of her hair around my fingers. "Are you doing okay now?"

She smiles, a bit self-conscious. "I'm not freaking out anymore, if that's what you're asking."

"We'll get through it, Chloe. No matter what happens."

"Yeah. That's what we do." She reaches up with her hand and gently pulls down on my neck so we can meet half-ways and kiss. It's uncomfortable and awkward and brimming with love. She gives my ponytail an affectionate tug before getting up. "Come on, let's get back to the car. This place has too many bad memories floating around, anyway."

"The lighthouse is kind of ruined forever, isn't it." I get to my feet and link my arm to hers. We start walking down the slope like a proper couple on a stroll. "There's somewhere else we can go."

"Point me to it and I'll drive you there."

"You'll definitely know the way."

It's a fifteen minute hike down the cliff. Our car is the only one parked by the fence. We both abruptly stop, staring at it.

*Whore dykes* is scratched in huge letters from trunk to hood. The rims are all the way down to the ground. Every single tire got slashed.

We look at each other.

"Those...fucking...*assholes!*"

Chloe runs up to the car and bends down, inspecting the damage as if she could do a damn thing about it. "I should have thrown the fuckers off the cliff, god fucking *dammit*! Fucking little *dickheads!*"

She keeps cursing in an F-bomb-laden string of threats and insults. Whatever pent-up rage she still had spills from her mouth in an uninterrupted river of filth.

It would be amusing in different circumstances. I heave a deep, deep sigh. "So how about this one, Chloe? Was it supposed to happen?"

"Oh, don't you start with me, I'm so not in the mood for an 'I told you so' right now."

"It's a serious question, though. Was this our fate? Or should we make a different one for ourselves?"
She looks back at me, her murderous scowl lessening to a brooding frown. "We need the wheels, Max. We can't walk around hauling all this shit."

"But we kind of earned this, right? Some might argue that we should live with the consequences of our actions."

"Yeah, but some don't have a target on their backs and a literal deadline to get out of this town. I fucked up, okay? I was too angry to think anything through, and now you get to pay for it." As the truth of her words sinks into her, Chloe seems to deflate on the spot. "Shit. You'll have to redo the whole thing and deal with me all over again. What a fucking dumbass..."

"If you start with the self-flagellation again I swear I'll scream. We made a mistake and now we'll deal with it, alright? I'm just asking you which reality you prefer."

"You keep saying 'we' as if you had anything to do with this mess."

I shrug. "We're a team. Whether you screw up or I screw up doesn't really matter. We'll learn from it and work it out together."

"Fuck's sake, how can you be so zen about everything? Are you just holding it in? Come on, throw a fit, call me names! I deserve it right now."

"What makes you think I didn't already do all that and then took it back?"

It was meant as a tease, but I immediately regret saying it. I am annoyed, and the words come out all wrong—far too smug, acerbic and bitter instead of coy. They cut right through her.

She's blinking at me like I just became a different person. "Did you really?"

I'm shaking my head, cringing. "No, I was just being a dick. I'm sorry."

"Oh." A brief yet intensely awkward pause. "Well...you gotta take it all back anyway, so..."

I want to think she believes me, but her doubt is there, firmly planted. I imagine that doubt growing and growing unchecked, eventually becoming an impenetrable tangle of thorny vines between us.

*I'll start worrying when you don't feel bad anymore,* I remember her saying. No matter how much both of us try, the rewind can easily become a strain on the relationship. Especially if I'm an ass about it when Chloe is in an emotionally vulnerable place.

At least I can take this one back.

"Okay then, it's decided. I'll...see you earlier, Chloe."

"Actually, wait!"

Chloe forcefully tries to pull the car door open and of course the alarm goes off. Well played, Gods of Irony.

I can nearly hear her teeth-gnashing over the honking as she digs out her keychain and unlocks the doors. She fishes out pen and journal from my bag and gets busy writing.

"What are you doing?"

"Shush."
Takes her about a minute to finish. Then she rips the page, folds it twice and walks over.

"Give me this." I start to open it up; she stops me. "Don't you dare read it!"

"But what is it?"

"None of your business is what."

"Come on, really?"

"I'm serious, I never read your journal, don't you go reading my personal correspondence. I'm just telling myself a thing." She closes my hand around it and leans in, looking into my eyes like she knows every one of my thoughts and impulses. "Don't. Read it. Promise me."

"Okay, okay, I promise! Jeez..."

"Go now and fix this mess. I'll 'see you earlier,' you dork."

I kiss her goodbye without a ton of conviction and tuck the note away. Best to leave it out of sight to reduce temptation.

Another deep sigh escapes me before I start the rewind. Chloe begins moving backwards, undoing contrition and rage, then walking back up the path. I think of the moments we just shared up there, of every genuine, heart-felt word that is being deleted. I was so damn proud of it all. I said the things I wanted to say, and I said them well on the first try. It was so candid and full of love. Authentic.

I will try to remember them all and say them again, because she needs them...but they won't be the same.

And there are the teenagers, un-running off from a crime scene, un-slashing our tires, un-scratching their gross slur. Two of them did the actual deeds. Two looked on with different degrees of anxiety, while one more stood guard further up the path. As I watch the switchblade erase the scratched lines in weird, stilted movements, dejected resignation quickly gives way to something else. Something dark and wrathful and somewhat righteous, too. It's also pragmatic, and there's a hint of mischief thrown in. It's a complex feeling.

I was going to simply turn back the clock to when we first got here, explain what happened and take us elsewhere, but you know what?

Fuck it.

Within the ultra-slow rewind I walk up to the car. I gather a bit of information from their wallets, because I want this to really stick. Then I work my way up the hood and vault onto the roof. Before I go back to normal timeflow I take off the hat, undo the ponytail, finger-brush my hair so it's a bit wild, with bangs obscuring part of my face. Then I tug my gloves on because why the fuck not. I'm squatting up here, hands dangling between thighs, long coat fanned around me, and I watch until the boy Chloe manhandled is first pressing blade to paint, then take it a little bit farther back.

It's go time.

"Are you sure you want to do that?"

"Thffuck!"
The kid stumbles back, nearly falling on his ass. Ha, "kid." He's maybe a couple years younger than me.

The five of them are staring at this girl that's suddenly perched on top of a car they were about to ruin.

"'Whore dykes.' Not very imaginative, Jonathan. I mean, did you really have to go there?"

I jump down, micro-rewinding it just right so that I float to the ground at the last instant. It's one of the few awesome sensations that come with these powers; feels like suddenly entering a low-gravity zone. From their end it must have looked like I blinked from mid-air to soil.

"Shit!" Jonathan does fall this time, switchblade tumbling a few feet away. The others step back, except the guy up the slope. He's just frozen in place.

"You shouldn't mess with people you don't know," I tell them. "They might turn out to be more than you can handle."

I casually walk to the knife, pick it up, and then step toward Michael—the other hands-on perp. Three out of five scramble further away from me like they're in a horror movie and I'm the serial killer creeping forward. Good ol' Mike turns around and starts running into the woods.

He's a whole head taller than me. Funny. He seems so small right now.

I stand next to where he used to be and rewind again. From his standpoint I just appeared next to him, knife held low to the side.

"Some of the people you mess with might not even be...human."

He wails in abject terror and jumps a couple feet into the air. Once more each one staggers away in a hurry to put more distance between them and me—except boy number five, still shackled to the spot. While the others are busy cursing incredulously he watches me all the way as I come closer and closer, and go around, and stand there behind him. Sweat pearls his forehead, droplets are running down his temple. His breath sibilates back and forth as it collides with his teeth. Maybe he thinks I'm like a T-Rex and won't see him if he doesn't move?

Another rewind. Another jump through time and space. I lean close to his ear.

"Boo."

"Aah!"

He throws himself to the ground, turning as he crawls in panic. I stand over him, grim and solemn and motherfucking terrible.

"Listen to me, children. Find shelter or get out of town. Tell whoever will listen to look for the signs. Another storm is gathering."

It's like casting a spell. They're all staring at me now, stupefied. Easy to come up with the right words when you have infinite time to think about them.

Number five twitches and babbles a bit. He tries again.

"Wh-who are you?"

I almost feel bad. Chloe was quite the bully to them, without provocation. That's hardly excuse
enough to vandalize someone's car like they did, though.

Speak of the devil, thumping strides are coming down the path. Damn, my girl can run.

"Max! Where'd you go, Max!"

I beam wide at my audience. Actually, I think I'm just showing teeth.

"You heard the lady. I'm Max."

I reach inside my coat and pull the gun out of its holster. The smile vanishes.

"Now get the fuck out of here."

It's one thing to stick around through the fear to see what the freckled forest imp might be all about. It's quite another to face the very real threat of a gun wielded by a pissed off stranger. The teenage boys clench hard, turn tail and nearly trample each other getting out of my sight.

I holster the gun, watching them go. How about this? Was this fated to happen?

Right now I don't give a damn.

"Max..."

Chloe catches up to me and almost tackles me to the ground with her embrace. "What the hell happened? One moment you're talking, the next you were gone."

"The kids messed up our car so we decided I should go back and scare them straight."

"Who? The little fuckers I shoved off?"

"Yeah. Did you catch any of it?"

"Just...you putting the gun away."

"Aw. It was awesome, you'd have been so proud."

She holds me at arm's length, mulling over my words.

"So you're saying I fucked up again and you had to fix it. What a big fat surprise that must be for you."

Don't groan, don't sigh, don't blow up in her face with frustration.

"We fuck up now and then, Chloe. We're still human. And I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy what just happened, so...uh, anyway, here, take this." Before she can go deeper into her self-loathing mindcave, I bring out the letter she gave me. "You wrote it for yourself."

She takes it, one eyebrow raised. "A note to myself now? I've been hanging out with you too much."

Chloe unfolds it. I see her big bold writing, upside down. I could read it, if I really wanted to...

No, no, no, I promised. I watch her face, instead.

Cynical curiosity moves to a frown, morphs to anguish. She looks up at me once, then back at the paper. She's blinking back tears and sniveling snot by the time she turns away from me, looking up
"Whoa, are you okay? What does it say?"

She looks back at me, a look flushed red and stripped bare. She pulls me into a hug, and kisses my forehead and tucks my head under her chin. Her heartbeat thrums skin-deep, a tactile sensation on my nose and brow. Her lungs bellow from the run. Her voice is choked-faint. "Among other things...don't you dare let her read this."

"Oh, come on!"

I hear the paper crumpling to a ball in her hands.

"It's something I somehow forgot. I won't forget it again."

"You're really not going to tell me."

It's a resigned statement by this point. She's shaking her head, cheek bumping against my temple.

"I'm sorry I lost it on you, Max. I just couldn't deal with things."

I look up at her and for one irrational moment I feel...envious.

Not of her, no, but of my previous self, of the person that would probably know what that note is all about. That other Max, now alive only in memories and scrawled pages and a too-thin frame, who fought through disaster alongside the only survivor that she ever cared about, who sunk into Chloe's lowest moments and traded hatred not meant and heaved desperate sobs at the real consequences of her actions. That Max who would trace Chloe's lines in the black of night and know she'd earned it through blood and despair. That Max, with a spool of dark raveled through her thoughts and a furnace-tempered force of will. Her tragedy was real. Her pain was one in the same with that of the woman she loved. How much closer did they become in the time I spent trying to break away from sorrow?

For months I mourned a death that never happened, embittered by an almost-perfect world that couldn't find purchase in my heart, because it was flawed in the only way that ever mattered to me. I made a horrifying choice, and before that the choice that I actually regret. Chloe carries the scars of those choices. My wounds...my wounds never healed. They are simply gone, like severed limbs.

And now I'm here, thrust into a problem disconnected from anything I've ever feared. Right this moment it feels like I'm still in a space in-between, going through the motions until the true final reality kicks in, a reality where I'm not the ghost of someone else.

Is that why I look at this town full of innocent people and don't feel a fucking thing?

"Max?"

I startle in her arms.

I'm...in her arms.

"Uh..."

"I said I was sorry."

Be careful what you wish for, the thought comes. The grass is always greener.
"Just be glad you got what you wanted."

"I love you, Chloe."

"O...kay? I love you too. Wherever that came from."

"It came from my heart, because I love you with all my heart. You are the sun itself."

She snorts out a delighted laugh. "Holy shit! You're so corny, it's unbelievable..."

The way she says it brings a ridiculous jolt of joy to my chest, because those are the exact words I was after.

I sidle to her side and link arms with her.

"Alright," I begin, "what's the last thing I said up there?"

The conversation unfolds in familiar ways. Her note, whatever it was, makes it lighter—the knowledge that I can reach her and just talk makes it not as dire. And as we talk, a thought that should have been obvious from the start brings a recurring smile to my lips. I share it with her, because I'm deciding today to share everything from now on. Everything.

These retreads don't have to be a dreary trudge through a beaten path. They're a precious privilege. A chance nobody else gets to relive memorable moments, to cement them in my thoughts like the treasure they are. And sometimes, an opportunity to make something good even better. As long as she knows it, as long as she's part of it...I can revel in the differences.

Maybe it's true, and these powers are mine for a reason. A good reason.

Maybe, with enough time and experience, I could learn to love them. They gave me a life with Chloe, after all.

However fucked up that life may be.

I kick at what I'm pretty sure used to be one of the rungs in the rope ladder. The metal thumps hollow against a tree trunk.

"Well, this sucks."

I had great hopes. Neither of us had been to this neck of the woods in almost six years. Our dads, burly manly men that they were, helped us build it and then were promptly banished forevermore. (Okay, they built it, we mostly pretended to help while being generally obnoxious.)

Not much remains of our super secret pirate treehouse hideout aside from splintered logs and crude graffiti. It was never all that fancy to begin with, not like those perfectly built log-cabin-in-a-tree clichés so common in movies, but...it was ours. We discovered new land atop that crooked mast up there, from Mad Squirrel Island to Old Man Smell Cave. We plundered and pillaged up and down the coast and made up naughty sea shanties and got drunk off apple juice, yarr.

And it had a rope ladder, how cool is that?

The tree tattoo in front of me used to say Max & Chloe's Pirate Cove. Now it's overwritten by something I think even Chloe would blush to say out loud. And of course our carved stick figures with hats and eyepatches weren't spared. Someone sprayed oversized dicks on both of them,
crossed like swords.

Classy.

I suppose it makes sense that it wouldn't stay secret for long—I mean, hell, Chloe marked it on the lighthouse map, genius that she was—but I wish actual kids had put it to good use instead of it getting destroyed by fucking teenagers. Though maybe the tornado had something to do with the damage, too.

Ew. Fucking teenagers is literally right, going by the disgusting trash littering the place.

Chloe is standing at the bottom of our tree, looking up with long-suffering resignation. "If this isn't a kick-in-the-balls metaphor for our whole lives, I don't know what is."

I walk over to her and curve fingers on her shoulder, looking up. Jagged wooden beams jut out above us like the splinters of a broken bird nest.

"Our ship foundered, Captain Price."

"She's only flotsam now, First Mate Caulfield. At least we got to the life boat, right?"

"Aye, just barely." I join hips with her and pass my arm around her waist. "I'm sorry. I thought this would be cool."

"S'Alright, I thought so too." She glances at her phone. "About an hour till first rewind. You should've slept more."

"I'll just drink lots of coffee at the diner. You...still want to do that, right?"

"Yeah. After we do...you know. The thing."

"I'm with you."

She presses lips to the crown of my head and tugs me away from the disaster zone. We walk with pinkies twined all the way down the slightly overgrown path, sparse woods of oak, pine and birch sending whispers at our passing. Each step feels a bit too heavy. Probably because we carry our hearts in the soles of our feet.

Yeah, it's childish, and we shouldn't care, but still...it feels like betrayal. Betrayed by our own hometown.

Then again, I drew first blood, didn't I?

I think that makes this into rightful retaliation.

I watch as Chloe uses her thumb to push the rings into the earth. She sobs quietly, with composure. With respect. It's the beautiful sort of crying, with sun-kissed trails down her cheeks and a slow burn in her lungs. I have to blink the blur away, because there is no world in which I could see her cry and not shed my own tears.

Clumps of dark soil rain down the hole we dug between the graves. She pushes the dirt deliberately, like she's burying her demons between the layers. I'm kneeling at her side with my palms as stained and my fingernails as dirt-black as hers. We could've used a tool. It felt right to do it by hand.
"They should keep these," she mutters. It's not the first time she says it.

I want to ask if she's sure. I want to tell her she's doing the right thing in order to move on. I want to say it's okay to keep the rings forever, if she wants to. None of it seems all that helpful at the moment, so I simply slip my hand down her wrist and tangle fingers with her. She holds on fiercely, while her free hand continues pouring dug-up dirt until the hole becomes a modest mound. She pats it down thoughtfully, reverently. Light fingertips linger on the hallowed soil.

"Hey," I whisper.

"Yeah?"

"I want to tell you something, but I don't know if it's what you need to hear right now."

"Just say it. I'll know what you mean if it doesn't come out right."

I smile, and sidle closer. "I just wanted to say...every version of them that I met loved you above everything else. Every one of them. They...they would've wanted—"

"I know." She wipes at her nose with the back of her hand. "I know it, Max. Thank you."

"They'd be so proud of you, Chloe. I know it for a fact. I want you to know it in your heart, too."

She closes her eyes. Her tears wet the fresh soil.

"I want that to be true."

"I know it to be true."

She leans over so her head finds mine. I hear a tiny smile in her voice. "My dad would be so stoked with the RV. He'd be poking around in it for weeks, just figuring out how everything works."

"Hah. You think he'd have been okay with, you know...us? Together?"

"You kidding? He'd have been a total hard-ass on some random dude trying to bang his little girl, but you? He'd have been so happy—and I mean sigh-of-relief, just-dodged-a-bullet happy. He adored you."

"Aw. You really think so?"

"No doubt in my mind. And my mother, too. I got the vibe right away when she saw us together again, she was all like 'oh god, please, let Max stay forever and fix this disaster of a daughter I got.'"

I nuzzle up to her, kiss the underside of her jaw. "Nothing needed fixing."

I feel her breath under my lips as she snorts out a laugh. "You lie to me so good..."

We kneel in the cemetery, leaning against one another. Our fingers, soiled and sore, are tangled together. We kneel and stay quiet and listen to each other's pulse through our skin, the silence only broken by the breeze-borne rustle swaying through the trees.

A carefully planted vine is perched on a frame between the headstones, and violets are starting to bloom among the leaves. The plant bridges the stones together, embracing both. Each tiny branch is thoughtfully trimmed so no part of the inscriptions is obscured.
The tombstone next to William's reads Joyce Price. Not Madsen. I don't know exactly why, but I find it the most romantic thing David could've ever done.

The impulse comes suddenly and takes over completely, and I'm pushing the words out before I can change my mind.

"Chloe, I was going to wait, but I don't think I could time this better if I tried."

I'm digging into the inside pocket of my coat. She's giving me a curious look, eyes red but strangely serene. "Time what better?"

Out comes the tiny box, carefully wrapped in glossy paper and a blue satin bow. I offer it up for her to take. "It's for you."

"What's this?" She holds it up, turning it this way and that like it's a completely alien object. There's even some apprehension in her eyes.

"That's for you to find out, isn't it?"

"But Max, what is it?"

Her voice quivered a bit. Why is she so nervous, suddenly?

"I'm just giving you a present, what does it look like? Happy early birthday."

She stares at it blankly for a moment. "Fuck, my birthday's in two days, isn't it?"

"You forgot? Seriously?"

"Hey, there's a lot of stuff going on right now!"

"Alright, come on, open it."

I thought she might tear into it in the usual Chloe-don't-care fashion, but instead she carefully undoes the ribbon and picks at the little bit of tape with her brown-and-blue fingernail until the wrap is undone. The paper falls away, revealing the fanciest of velvet-lined jewelry boxes.

"Max...you bought me this? When the hell did you get it?"

"Yesterday. I cheated. And now that I think about it, it's technically stolen property."

"Pfah! Wouldn't have it any other way." She pries the box open. There's a moment of silence as daylight catches on black gold and intricate silver patterns. "Whoa."

Not the stereotypical rom-com gasp I was hoping for, but I'll take it. Chloe picks the ring out of the plush little slot and takes a good admiring look at it. "It's so cool."

"It has an inscription inside."

"Oh?" She holds it up to her eyes. "Max & Chloe. Aww." She keeps turning it and laughs softly. "Partners in Time. You cheeselord. I love it."

"It's not meant to replace anything..." I caress the now-naked band of flesh on her ring finger, so pale and soft. "I just noticed you were carrying the past in your hands, and I thought...maybe you'd want to carry your future, too."
She looks up from the ring, lips parted and eyes full of wonder. Her brow is quirked like the words burrowed somewhere deep and she's making sure they stay there. Her speechless bubble pops with a smile. "How long were you working on that line?"

"I've been dying to say it since it came to me yesterday. Too cheesy?"

"No, fuck, you kidding? Not at all." Chloe gives me the ring and holds up her hand toward me, fingers spread with obvious expectation. Sliding the band in place is a pleasure far more delightful than I could have anticipated.

She's shaking her head. "Only you could make me feel this way after what we just did."

"Is that...that's a good thing, right? You mean that as a good thing?"

She rolls her eyes. "I don't know, you tell me. I'm kneeling in front of my parents' graves and somehow I feel happy right now, is that a good thing?"

Is she deliberately not smiling just to mess with me?"Y-yes?"

She answers by leaning down and kissing my lips, brief and gentle. Her forehead rests on mine. "Yes, you doofus. You're incredible." She holds both my hands. "You are my future, Max. I want to carry you with me all the time. It's what I wanted, remember? Be an action girl and bodyguard you all over the world?"

"Hah. Yeah, I remember."

"Except now we're here, and...you know, for a wild moment before you mentioned the birthday I thought you were about to propose in a graveyard. I didn't know whether to ask if you were for real or just scream 'hell fucking yes' anyway."

"Uh, propose? As in, uh—"

"As in 'let's get hitched,' yeah—'cause I'm totally into you but I keep forgetting I've only been your girlfriend for two days on your end, so it's not like I can expect—and hell, we couldn't even use our names anymore, so what's even the point? You know, since we're officially dead and all? It's just—there's something about it, right? Like, yeah, I'm Max's wife. She's my wife. It's cool to think about, it sounds kinda awesome to me—which is so weird, because I used to scoff at the whole thing before you came around. But hey, no, it's cool, alright? I'm just letting you know what I...fuck, I'm making it super weird again, aren't I?"

Like any time Chloe gets flustered, I can't help but laugh. "It's more like four days from my perspective, actually. That's pretty long term, we should start looking into lowest property taxes and best schools for our kids."

"Yeah, laugh it up. Look, I just meant to say I'm crazy in love with you and thank you for the ring, you fucking nailed it. Okay?"

I give her a fond smile. She has a way of making serious issues fun to talk about. "Okay." I burrow into her. "I'm crazy in love with you too."

"Well...good." She puts her arm around me, though careful for her hand not to soil my coat. I really don't give a damn about that right now. "It better stay that way, 'cause it's already 'til death do us part for me. Not to freak you out or anything."
I huff out a chuckle. I don't know whether to call her choice of words unfortunate or beautifully appropriate.

"No, Chloe. Not even death will keep us apart for long."

She holds me a bit closer, because she immediately understands what I mean. She knows. I haven't told her, and she hasn't asked, but she knows. I've knelt here before, eyes burning like embers and lungs crushed by grief. I've knelt here in this exact same spot and wept before a headstone that did not read Joyce.

Her head shifts subtly, lips drawing close to graze the tip of my ear. "I will always be with you," she whispers.

I cling to her, breathing her scent, nearly tasting the dry sweat on her skin. It fills me with something I can't even describe, there is something...alchemical between us. It isn't normal. Perhaps for the first time, what BetaMax wrote a long time ago truly dawns on me. What Chloe and I have isn't normal.

Remember this moment. Always remember this moment.

"Forever."

Deep in Neverland I'm filming Chloe wolf down a burger like it's her last meal ever—which, in a weird relative way, it is. She smiles at the camera with grease glistening off the corner of her mouth and then goes back to stuffing her face.

I'll never get used to recording something on a phone. The framing seems constantly off, the images going by too fast and fleeting. I'm so not a child of the noughties. That's what the cool kids call it, right? Gosh, I'm lame.

Another shadow is cast across our table. I look up, polite smile fraying at the edges.

"Miss Frost, I'm sorry to bother you. I only wanted to thank you for everything you and your people have done. We have a roof over our heads thanks to you. It's so amazing that someone so young could do so much."

The fifty-something man is offering a rough hand with fingers like knots in wood. I put some effort into shaking it with as much assurance as I can muster, because my dad's there in the back of my head saying that nothing is more off-putting than a limp handshake. "Arcadia Bay deserves better," I tell the man. It's become my go-to line in the last twenty minutes.

"Thank you so much. Enjoy your meal."

The man returns to the family at his table. His presumed wife regards him with gentle eyes and gives his arm a squeeze that's surely been given a thousand times before.

And that's why Chloe is smiling. That's half the reason she insisted we record the whole thing. My constant mortification.

"I wish you hadn't told everybody like that."

"Yuno yuwubbe," she responds.

"What?"
"Ah ghed—" she swallows, "I said, you know you love it. You didn't really believe I'd drag you in here just to bum you out, did you?"

"No, I just thought we were...you know, facing our demons and all that."

"I'm the demon. This burger is afraid of me." She brandishes a fry like an accusatory finger. "Your pancakes are getting cold, don't you dare offend the All-Day-Breakfast gods."

I smile behind the phone's camera. "But I must capture the devouring of the sacrificial flesh, O' exalted she-devil."

Chloe takes the phone from my hands and aims it at me by propping it up against the salt-and-pepper holder. There's now a large grease smudge on the screen.

"There. Give me proof you had dinner, minion. I'll be checking for it."

"Your wish is my command, I suppose."

Wonder how long it'll be until she stops worrying about my eating habits. If anything I've been noshing far too much these past eighty hours, sometimes just to see the satisfied approval in those sparkling blue eyes of hers.

She wordlessly offers me a bite and I take it. I cut half a syrupy pancake and leave it on her plate, arranging it neatly so it won't touch the ketchup. She immediately folds it in half with her fingers and crams it in her facehole. She's looking like a hamster hoarding corn in its cheeks, and I'm giggling as I record her for a whole minute while she tries to hold it in and chew it down to size.

"You better not choke on that, because I'll refuse to rewind it."

"Gn duh newoh," she says.

"Yeah, you're right."

I'm trying hard to ignore the smiling glances that keep coming our way. I'd have never expected the place to be so full at nine in the evening, but there are even people standing around without a seat. And they're all aware of us, of course they are. We've been the main attraction after the freaking standing ovation I got. Chloe was acting awfully cheery, and I just figured she was happy to see the Two Whales so beautifully restored. Then she got up with the pretense of using the bathroom and the next thing I know I'm getting clapped at, because she quietly arranged for the bartender to announce who just happened to walk into their diner. Talk about surreal moments in my life.

I don't know any of their faces. The cook I vaguely recognize, but he either can't tell who I really am or he never cared to begin with. And I'm sure some know Chloe, but not this Chloe. Because she's got a businesslike bun with pins sticking out and stylish shades that she just took off. Because she's wearing the kind of pantsuit a Successful Person would wear—or a bodyguard, I guess—and because she doesn't brood or slouch or tell anyone to go fuck themselves, she's not that Chloe. And if she's recognized, well, that would explain so much, wouldn't it? She's close friends with Lauren Frost (like, um, really close friends, have you seen the way they look at each other?), and the girl's supposedly the CEO-heir-apparent-or-whatever of Something Other Incorporated, parent company of the Empower the Bay Foundation, and she's the one that made all this happen. Everything makes sense now.

"Fuck," Chloe says between mouthfuls, "I missed these burgers. As good as ever."

"I'll get one to-go so you can have it in the final timeline, how about that?"
"My minion, you know how to please the mistress." She starts licking her fingers, then gives up and makes a crumpled mess out of a napkin. "You know what I like best about going into Neverland? Everything’s free."

"Seriously? You showed me the numbers, we could buy a thousand diners if we wanted to..."

Her smile is devilish, like she was waiting for that exact cue. "Yeah, you're right! We should live it up some more." She grabs the phone, scoots out of her seat and stands up. "Hey everyone! As a big show of appreciation for all the hardship and hard work, the boss just said she’ll cover every single penny spent here tonight! So go ahead, order whatever you want and have a— " The rest of her spiel gets swallowed by cheers and applause. Chloe's grin has way more teeth than it has any right to as she records me shrinking in my seat, timidly waving, cheeks beet-red and fingers curled under the table.

She sits back down, smug and carefree and ever so pleased with herself.

"I'm going to kill you," I tell her through a rictus of a smile.

She turns the camera on herself. "You hear that, Price? She's going to kill us, heads up."

"It'll be too late by the time you could see this."

"I better make the best of what I've got left, then..."

She takes another bite of her half-eaten burger and chews with cheeks perked up like a total goof. I'd kick her shins if she weren't so damn adorable. She's enjoying herself in a place where I expected her to crumble and weep in consolably, and that's worth a hundred mortified conversations. Apparently Chloe finds her freedom in the dead-ends of time.

A part of me knows that she's trying, just like I'm trying so hard, because we could be huddled in a corner, sobbing, wallowing in sorrow. This is way harder. To be lighthearted. To focus only on the good, to keep talking and stay in the moment. She's not pointing out how my gaze sometimes lingers on the memorial wall above the jukebox. I'm pretending not to notice how her eyes skim over the portrait on the far end on the diner, the one simply labeled *In Loving Memory*. What we're doing is not an act, but...

Look, the truth is that I don't deserve to be here, let alone be here smiling. Any other version of Max Caulfield would deserve it, but not this one. I'm the one that caused all the suffering and did none of the fixing. If I listen too long or too closely to the murmur of the crowd I will hear all the ghosts that lurk in my nightmares.

But I'm not that person in her eyes. I'm all at once every Max she's met through our crazy adventures—and in fact she's right to think that way, just like I think of Chloe as the sum total of every facet of her existence. She's the same vengeful girl that went into a high school party with a gun and murderous intent. She's the same considerate, kind, studious, terminally injured friend that begged me for death after one day of cherished memories. She's the twinkle-eyed goofball in front of me right now, liberated for the time being of every traumatic burden that's piled up on our backs. We're the scions of a multiverse collapsed upon a straight line.

"You spacing out on me, Laurie? Better get a refill on that coffee or you won't even make it half-way."

*Stop thinking so hard,* she's telling me. I give her my best condescending smirk. "I was just pondering life, the universe and everything. You wouldn't understand."
"If in the end it turns out we're fighting an evil league of space dolphins, I'm gonna be pissed."

"It would explain so much, though."

The new bell on the door rings again as another customer rolls in. Mom and pop and their teenage son, is the assumption. The kid is ever so familiar.

He happens to look my way. Our eyes meet, and his widen. I'd read about people blanching in the face of horror before, but I'd never seen it in person.

The waiter ushers them to a table on the other side of the diner, and the boy follows his parents in a fumbling trance.

"What, what is it?"

I tilt my chin at the new arrival. "A friend from the lighthouse. Teenage Boy Number Five."

"What!" Her head whips so fast to look behind her that I'm surprised it didn't fly off her neck. "Time to have a talk with his parents, I think."

"Hah." I address the camera. "Look at the punk rebel over here, she's so ready to go give a parenting lecture. Kids these days need boundaries, am I right?"

"Oh, go fuck yourself."

"Rather you did it."

Chloe stares for a moment. "Okay, did we reverse roles recently and nobody told me?"

"We rub off each other, is all." I wag my eyebrows at her the same way she always does after a double-entendre. Maybe I too should embrace the freedom of Neverland once in a while.

"More like I worked my magic on you and now you can't stop thinking about it."

"That's not so far from the truth. Even with everything that's going on."

"Good, I plan to keep it that way. Anyway, as pointless as it is I'm gonna go over there and give him a good—"

"Oh wowser, he's actually coming over."

Face ashen and eyes downcast, Number Five shambles down the aisle like marching to the executioner. He's visibly shaking by the time he nears our spot.

Chloe is tap-tap-tapping aquamarine fingernails on the table. "Some balls you got, kid."

He darts a glance at her like she might devour him in one bite. "I- I just wanted to..."

"Tell me your name," I interrupt him.

He shifts in place. "I, uh...it's Raymond. Uh, Ray. I'm Ray."

"Okay, thanks."

I go back about ten seconds or so. Chloe is tap-tap-tapping aquamarine fingernails on the table. "Some balls you got, kid."
"Hello there, Ray. What brings you to our table?"

He starts breathing faster, eyeing me like I could set him on fire by snapping my fingers. Chloe brings a hand to her lips to cover a smile, as if she can tell what I just did—and she probably can, after watching me rewind a billion times.

"I wanted...I just wanted, uh...earlier, I didn't..."

Chloe smacks the table, startling the poor guy. "Speak up, boy!"

"I wanted to apologize! I didn't even want to hang out with those guys, and—" He glances at his parents' table and lowers his voice in the most comical way possible. "I hate drinking, anyway. That stuff tastes like piss."

She leans back on her seat. "Seems like you'd know what piss tastes like."

It's my turn to hold back a laugh. Oh my god, we're being such assholes.

"Are you apologizing for what you were about to do," she asks, "or you're just sad you got caught?"

"I didn't want to do it! I'm not...I'm not like that, you know? It's the peer pressure thing, I hate it, but you can't just..." He keeps fidgeting like his shoes don't fit. "I just...I can't explain..." His face scrunches up as if he fought a battle inside his head and lost. He leans hands on the booth, intently staring at the remains of my pancakes. "Look, can you please just tell me how you did that? I've been freaking out so much, those idiots keep saying there was something in the drinks, but that's not how mass hallucinations happen, I know what I saw, and it just doesn't make sense!"

His words would be echoing across the place it if weren't so noisy. There's a wild cast around his eyes and his fingers curl on the table like they might gouge eight separate tracks on the laminate. It dawns on me that Raymond isn't just rattled. He's shaken. He's struck by lightning and lying there with his mind split open. It isn't all that funny anymore.

I notice his parents taking an interest on his demeanor, his body language. Maybe suspecting that this isn't their son saying hi to some friends. I trade a glance with Chloe, eyebrow raised in question. She nods, because she's seeing what I'm seeing.

I scoot over to make room. "Sit with us, Ray. I'll tell you a story. You don't think there's any harm in telling Ray our story, right Lisbeth?"

She takes a swig of her beer. She's totally doing it for dramatic effect. "I sure don't, Laurie."

"Ray knows me as Max already."

"Oh, my bad, my bad. It's all the same, though, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is." Raymond is still standing there, hesitating. "Are your parents okay with you sitting with us, Ray?"

"Y-yeah, uh...yeah, I should ask. Yeah."

He starts shambling back to them in a blank stupor, perhaps surprised we agreed so readily. Doubt mom and dad will be all that willing to let him go if he keeps the same shell-shocked face all the way there.
"Now I feel bad. He seems like a good kid. I might have broken him."

Chloe raises her bottle. "Welcome to our broken world, RayRay. Thanks for helping us make time until Helen pipes up. How much you gonna tell?"

I shrug. "Everything?"

She shrugs in return. "Knock yourself out. We could make up a story too, might be fun. Anything goes in Neverland."

"I feel responsible, though. I'm thinking about letting him keep a note or something. It's just one guy, it should be harmless, right?"

"Moral Max strikes again. You'd be such a terrible criminal, babe." Chloe shuffles to her feet. "While you get that started I'm gonna go breach the dam."

I catch her hand and bring her fingers to my lips. They smell delicious. "Miss you already."

"Wow, clingy. Give me some room to breathe, woman. Have fun with our new friend, I'll be right back."

Despite her words she gives my hand a good squeeze before letting go. Raymond, coming back to us with tentative steps, watches the exchange with bashful curiosity. Before walking off toward the bathroom Chloe makes the whole I'm watching you hand sign thing at him, properly priming him for awe and apprehension. I pat the seat next to me. "Don't be afraid, we're the good guys. Kind of."

Raymond sits next to me as if the faux-leather cushion is full of thumbtacks.

"Just relax, Ray. We're nearly your—" Chloe comes up from behind us and leans one hand onto the table.

"If it wasn't clear enough," she says while staring him down, "if you touch even one hair on her head I will put you through the wall. Got it?"

"Y-yeah, uh, yeah. I got it." Chloe stares some more. "I got it, ma'am."

"Good."

She takes off again. I track her with my eyes, itching to flock to her side. It's as if there's always a tether stretching the distance between us, pulling me to wherever she may be.

"Don't mind Lisbeth, she's very protective of me. She won't hurt you without a good reason."

(Why are we still using Chloe's alias? I don't know. It's fun, I guess.)

"Uh, okay."

"Are you hungry, Ray? Should we order you something?"

"N-no, I...there's no way I could eat anything right now."

I smile kindly. Well, I hope it's a kind smile, at any rate. "Listen, earlier today I was putting on a show to scare you guys. I'm not a weird monster, I'm just a girl with some...abilities. Remember five months ago, when the birds started dying and the snow under clear skies happened?"
"Oh. Yeah. Of course."

"That is the day she died in front of me, and I discovered I could rewind time."

He's staring and blinking like I just asked him to give me the square root of four hundred and thirty two. "Wait, time travel?" He lowers his voice. "Not...teleportation? Or telekinesis, maybe?"

"Just looks that way from your end. Here, look at this salt shaker. Are you keeping track of it?"

"Y...yeah?"

"Are you sure? Don't take your eyes off it."

"Uh, okay."

I wait a few seconds, then grab it and put it in my pocket.

"Forget now, my child."

"What?"

I bust out a short rewind. From Raymond's end, the little salt container has simply vanished. I wish I'd thought to do this back then, way easier of a demonstration than counting pocket change.

"Yoink."

"Whoa, what! How'd you do that?"

"I grabbed it in the future, then traveled back to this moment." I bring it out with a flourish. "Ta-da!"

"You have got to be shitting me!"

"Lower your voice, Ray. People are trying to have a peaceful meal."

"S-sorry. Sorry. But holy shit. Holy shit, this is so heavy..."

"Tell me about it. Want to hear the whole story now?"

He's nodding as if he's lost in the desert and I just offered him a gulp of water. So I go ahead and start telling, all the way back from childhood friendship, William's passing and the move to Seattle. Wonder if Chloe knew that's where I'd start.

There's the vision, and the first rewinds, and the screwing around until shit got real. There's Rachel and Nathan and Victoria and Mark Jefferson—yes, that Mark Jefferson—David Madsen and even Alyssa, she gets a mention too. Fun fact: David pulled Ray's younger brother from under wreckage and got him to safety. Small town.

The migraines, the nosebleeds, freezing time and how I miserably failed Kate Marsh. Jumping through photos—no, still no idea why I can do that, I'm open to ideas—alternate timelines, the beach and the barn all the way to the Dark Room and beyond.

It's weird how context can change the tone of a story so much. How it can wholly shape the way it's told. Imagine telling it to my parents, or to a therapist. Implied or not, there'd always be the desire for comfort, understanding, kinship. I know I'd tell it with loads of guilt and unspoken apologies crammed between the lines.
There is none of that now. Feels weird to even think it, but I'm a figure of authority here. I speak of it all with a certain sense of detachment. I answer questions as if it happened to someone else. Once Chloe gets back she sits there and listens with a strange shine in her eye, that spark of amusement that happens before a smile. She lets me do all the talking, and as I talk about everything we went through back then...I realize it's kind of an amazing story.

"In the end we had a choice." Without thinking my hand reaches out flat on the table. Chloe's fingers find mine, like magnets pulled from opposite poles. "I could go back and let her die, and maybe that would stop the storm. Or we could just...watch it happen."

Raymond still looks like he's working on some serious math problems.

"I don't get it," he says. They seem to be his favorite four words. "How could stopping one death make a tornado? It's weather, it doesn't care about what we do. Going back would've made no sense, you chose the only thing you could have."

"Except I didn't choose to stay. I went back and let the gun go off, and because Nathan Prescott got arrested, Jefferson soon followed. The whole plot was discovered, Kate never climbed to the roof, and the storm never came. My powers disappeared and I was left to bury the person I loved."

"What? But..." His dark eyebrows are knit with so much confusion that they might soon twist into a question mark. "But you're here. I don't get it."

"I changed my mind in that reality. She died alone, angry and afraid on a bathroom floor. Her family was broken. She was my hero and everyone talked about her like she was a criminal." At some point I stopped talking to Ray and started looking into Chloe's eyes. "I couldn't live with it, I loved her too much. I found a way to get my powers back, and that's why we're all here right now."

I've told her this before, haven't I? Did I end up rewinding that part, just like I'll be taking back all this?

Well, it doesn't matter. I'll say it again. I could say it a thousand times and still wrap my heart around the sounds.

Chloe's "smug hard-ass" attitude drops like a cheap disguise, revealing so much—so much love in her gaze that I can't hold even one tiny bit of guilt in my breast right this moment.

"So...you could have prevented the tornado?"

And just like that Chloe the hard-ass is back. "Say one accusing word," she snaps at him, but my fingers curl on her hand, holding her back.

"It's okay, it's fine. It's a fair thing to ask."

I turn to him again. "I've thought about that a lot, you know. Really beat myself up over it. But...in the end, the truth is that I really couldn't. I mean..." I tip my chin at the table where his parents are finishing their meal. "I don't know your family, but you seem close. Look at them, and say you could let someone murder them in front of you to prevent that storm."

I didn't know how he'd react, but I'm not going to lie, watching his features change gradually is a satisfying experience. From the verge of judgment to the eve of understanding, to even...sympathy. It's a nice bit of validation that I didn't know I craved, though his reaction might have been different if he'd actually lost his parents to the storm.

He's about to say something when the first ice pellet hits the window.
It's followed by another. And another, and another, until it becomes an incessant drumming that gets everyone's attention in the diner. The clatter of plates and silverware stops, conversations come to an abrupt end. Some stand from their stools at the bar to stare outside, at the watery splotches all over the glass, at the marble-sized hail bouncing hard on the pavement.

In the cloudless, moonlit night, a torrential hailstorm is happening in Arcadia Bay.

Chloe and I stare at each other. The conversation happens without words passing between us. Meanwhile dread is like a tangible cloud rising throughout the diner, permeating the air we breathe—because very few have failed to notice the dead birds, and now...this. It's a pattern not easily forgotten.

Raymond is gaping at the glass pane in slow-creeping horror. "It's happening again," he says, features haunted by far too recent memories. "You were saying the truth up there, it's all going to happen again..."

Sitting up straight Chloe speaks over the roaring noise, her voice self-assured like a bell's peal at midday. "Tomorrow we'll become doomsayers." She looks first at me, then over at Ray. "And you are going to help us, kid. You and everyone we can convince."

"What?"

I lay a hand on his shoulder. Chloe is right, we've been going at this alone for far too long. "You're our first recruit, Ray. You're going to hear the rest and then you'll write your past-self a note, and I'll give you the note two hours ago. We need to figure out what it should say for it to be the most help."

Chloe sighs. "Looks like it's time for David to know everything, too." She says slightly, as if the prospect of explaining already weighs on her shoulders. "Shit, this is gonna be a ton of work."

"Should we abort tonight and focus on this?"

She thinks about it, though I can see the answer pretty much immediately after I ask. "Hell fucking no. This might be Prescott's fault. If anything we need to know more than ever what he's up to."

"You've got a point."

"This is so surreal," Raymond mutters. His eyes toggle back and forth from me to Chloe, to the hail-battered windows, back to me. He looks lost, shell-shocked...and, honestly, pretty useless for the time being.

Poor kid. I don't mean to brag or anything, but I'd like to believe I did a much better job back then at dealing with my world getting turned upside down. If I were anything like Chloe, I'd be telling him to—

"Hey, snap out of it, buddy. Keep your shit together, not gonna help anyone by pissing yourself."

"S-sorry..."

Well, maybe she went a bit too tough on the tough love, but yeah, what she said. We will not cower in fear or sit on our hands. If we had tried to do something from the very first day, how many people could we have saved?

Deep in Neverland, we plan for a supernatural disaster returning to this town. Sleet beats against the glass in thundering waves, as if the sky itself is crumbling over our heads.
Deus Ex Somnia

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The guard on duty shoves through the hasty blockade. Chloe is already pointing a gun at the woman; she shoots without a second thought, because she knows that nothing sucks more for me than watching her get hurt.

Rewind.

"You already searched the shelves, the first two cabinets and the desk."

"Alright." Chloe heads for the third cabinet and starts browsing through file after file, one by one. It takes a while.

"Business stuff. Home accounting."

"Twenty seconds till the guard breaks down the door. Only the PC left."

Her pace is brisk, but not tense in the least.

"Password protected. You can come in and take the hard-drive later, but I don't think this is it. Too open. Too easy."

Rewind.

"Done with the obvious stuff. Search the walls and floor for a safe."

"Alright."

Chloe does. Nothing. Rewind further, back to the hallway and not yet being detected.

"Office is a bust. Master bedroom next, door down the hall straight ahead. It's unlocked."

"Alright."

I don't want to make this comparison. I really don't want to. This stuff is serious, life-or-death serious, you-have-terminal-cancer serious.

But honestly, yeah, it feels like a videogame. A voice-controlled FPS where my actions affect the outcome of what happens on screen. What Chloe sees and hears is streamed through the tiny camera in her earpiece, pretty high-res but shaky and somewhat choppy most of the time. Like trying to play Dishonored at Blackwell—my laptop might have been new, but game-ready it was not.

I'm save-scumming just as often, too. Breaking in was a constant save-and-reload to get the optimal outcome, because anything else would risk an estate-wide lockdown and high alert. Get spotted? Rewind. Find a better route? Rewind. Chloe says she can be quieter or faster? Rewind. At least we haven't died yet.
It helped that the Prescott Estate isn't a fortress. On the outside, it's just your regular five-million-dollar mansion overlooking a huge lawn with a somewhat tall perimeter fence. It's got private security, but it's just a bored guy in a suit at the gate and another at the front door. It's got motion-activated cameras, as we found in an earlier rewind, but once you find them they're no match for Chloe's all-black outfit, night-vision goggles and careful use of blind spots—or a well-placed wire clip. After getting through she quietly climbed up to a balcony and cut a hole through a glass pane like a fucking superspy. If they have an anti-burglar alarm system, it's either silent or it didn't trigger with her careful work.

The loud and crazy recon tour she did once inside revealed only the housekeeping staff and one more guard downstairs. Helen's info checks out so far: the Prescotts are supposed to be attending some sort of gala or fundraiser or whatever in Olympia, then staying at their fancy hotel room all night.

Now I watch Chloe barge into the master bedroom, turning on all the lights and not giving a damn about noise. She convinced me to do it like this, since it's much faster. A few minutes past my second midnight, turning back time is proving far easier than staying awake. I'm really hoping Chloe finds something we can photograph so I won't have to go in myself.

She's busy pulling drawers out of their rails and throwing everything on the floor for inspection.

"You're having far too much fun trashing the place, Lizzy."

"I take my laughs where I can get them. It's just clothes and normal bedroom crap so far." She goes over to the nightstands and starts tearing them apart. She stops at the bottom drawer on the left side of the bed. "Ooo, locked. Whatcha hidin', Mrs. Prescott?"

"How deep do you think she is in all this? Wonder if she even knows."

"I've no doubt she—"

The guard barges in and charges my girlfriend, the careless burglar.

Rewind.

"Go for the left nightstand, bottom drawer."

"Aw, I don't get to trash the place? Past Me always gets all the fun."

"Don't whine and hurry, Pink Panther."

"Wow. How hipster-retro can your references get?"

"Shush, you. Guard in four minutes."

Without one bit of hesitation Chloe kicks the shit out of the bottom drawer until it breaks open. Pretty impressive, considering she's wearing sneakers right now.

"I'm still a pro at picking locks."

"I'm in awe of your skill. What are the spoils?"

"A bunch of splinters and...hmm. One beautifully embroidered diary, looks like. Jackpot, maybe?"

"Depends how much Mrs. Prescott is part of the Evil League of Evil."
The notebook sure is beautiful, with a silver web-like pattern covering plush mauve in intricate embroidery. Chloe cracks it open wide on the first page and holds it slightly to the side so it's centered on the camera. "Screenshot away."

"It's pictures, actually."

"You're such a n00b."

It feels goofy to take pictures of the laptop's screen with my phone, but it's simpler this way for time traveling purposes. She turns the pages on my cue, not bothering to look at the contents. We'll review it later. Or earlier. Whichever.

Except...huh.

"Dear diary," I read out loud, "today I saw a tree. Here is a depiction of said tree. It's just...a stick figure?"

"What?" She takes a second to actually read it. "What the hell?" Chloe goes back a bit. "Dear diary, today I feel sad. I will now describe how sad I feel."

Very sad.

Terribly sad.

Inconsolably sad.

Eternally sad.

Somewhat sad.

And then a stick figure with a sad face. Funny, it looks a lot like your stick figures."

"Uh...okay? Is it all like that?"

She flips more pages, skimming through.

"Dear diary," she reads, "I saw three birds today. I was so excited that I drew them on a two page spread." Chloe turns the page. "Uh. Are you seeing these drawings?"

"Are those...toasters with wings?"

"They are definitely toasters with wings. Is this woman nuts?"

"I think...this is an ironic diary?"

"Who the hell keeps an ironic diary?"

"Dianne Catherine Prescott, apparently. Maybe she has a very private sense of humor. Let's capture the whole thing, anyway."

There are a good fifty pages of the stuff. That's some serious commitment to a private joke...or she really is a few cans short of a six pack.

"Wait, go back. There was an actual sketch of someone."

Chloe looks for it. "This?"
"Yeah. Is...is that—what the hell? Is that Kate?"

There is an intricately detailed depiction of a girl falling, drawn from the perspective of someone looking from below. Her limbs are spread every which way, like she's desperately trying to find something to grab onto. Terror is clear on every line tracing her features.

She looks exactly like Kate Marsh. It's dated October 8, 2013.

"Dear diary," I read out loud, "today an angel fell from the sky. Her blood now stains our name, but it will wash off soon. Along with everything else."

"What the hell is this supposed to mean?"

It keeps going. We read it in stunned silence.

Bluewing's chosen is dreadfully inept at this time. I can obviously see her potential (obviously!) but there's still so much work ahead of us. If only she were inclined to listen to her catalyst more often, she could get some actual practice under her belt before Sean steps in. Sometimes I feel bad for these girls. They didn't ask for any of it.

Such grave thoughts I indulge again. I better draw some more flying toasters.

"Max...this crazy bitch is in deep."

"This is nuts. It means...she knew everything as it happened. Maybe before it happened. We have to read every word she wrote in this thing."

"Is that your official title? 'Bluewing's chosen'?"

"I don't know, I guess? I don't think she could be talking about anyone else."

"You'd had the powers for two whole days at that point, and she's moaning about you not knowing what you were doing? She can go fuck herself."

The guard barges in and immediately gets shot because Chloe's in no mood to mess around.

"Fuck's sake, can't work in peace around here." She flips to the next page. "Take all the pictures so we can move on for now. We'll read it all together when we're done, alright?"

"Okay..."

I briefly skim over the text and drawings as we go. I miss a lot of it, but seeing the utterly ridiculous doodles fly by, my hopes for more useful information are not terribly high.

Now rewind that poor woman's death, for the love of dog. Something tells me she's going to die a couple dozen times before the night is over. The first death was horrifying. Now it's mostly just...bothersome. How long until this innocent woman's demise is nothing but a nuisance?

"Only the closets left, now. Check under the bed too."

Chloe finds great joy in flipping the whole bed over, frame and bedposts and all. She finds nothing else of note, and so we go back to the hallway, before all the messy ruckus.

"Found something promising in the master bedroom," I tell her. "Only Nathan's old room left up here."
We know it's Nathan's because of the very subtle message carved into the wooden door: *Nate's Lair – Fuck off.* Yes, actually *carved* into it with some sharp object. "Do you think we should even bother? His sister's room was a total waste."

Chloe suddenly perks up. "Ooh, can you do me a favor? How tired are you?"

"I'm doing okay. Anything for you, my sweet love."

"Pfft. Could you record me trashing his room so I can watch it later?"

"Seriously? The guy was mentally ill, Chloe. He was more a victim than anything else."

I don't exactly see the shrug, but I can tell it's there.

"He killed Rachel," she says simply.

"Yeah, I know. But he's gone now. He paid for what he did. I mean...it's probably a shrine to their dead son in there, it would feel kinda wrong to go in and fuck it up, don't you think?"

"I guess."

"Well, we can still do it if you think it'll help you. Catharsis and all that. If I'm honest, after what he did to you...I wouldn't mind watching."

"Nah, it's fine. I wasn't really serious. But we should look anyway."

I can't blame her for feeling this way. All the rational explanations for what Nathan Prescott did go out the window the moment I remember the photo of Chloe in his dorm drawer. My Chloe, all alone, drugged and helpless. I can understand the reasons behind his actions, but I don't think I could ever forgive him.

The door opens with a gentle turn of the knob. Memories of his dorm room flash into my mind, and I'm expecting to see disturbing artwork, expensive equipment, cold lines and sober furniture. Maybe a blow-up doll, somewhere.

Chloe walks into a room that's bare from floor to ceiling. There is nothing to search once she hits the light switch, and in fact it would seem like the space was never inhabited: no flaws on the lavish green wallpaper, no furniture marks on the wood laminate floor, no stains or litter or a mote of dust. The lone built-in closet by the corner is as barren as the rest.

"Wow," Chloe breathes. She's standing in the middle of the room, looking around in dismay. "So much for the dead son's shrine."

"It's, like...aggressively empty. Like they erased him."

"What kind of parents do this?"

"The kind that requires appointments for father-son interaction?"

"Dude, that's right. I'd forgotten about that. At least it's one less room to search, right?"

"I guess..."

"Where to next, Oracle?"

"Wait, let me tell this to the Chloe that will remember."
"Alright. Blast fast to the past, Max."

"You know you got me saying that now? I hope you're proud."

"Now I can die happy. Fly back in time for more crime."

"Goddamnit, Chloe."

Back to the hallway we go.

"All done up here," I tell her. "Mostly crapola so far except for a weird diary in the master bedroom. Downstairs next. How much have I told you of the layout? I forget."

"I've been on need-to-know so far, boss. Just doing whatever you say. Hopped in through the balcony and snuck down the hall."

"That's right, we had to redo everything because of the cameras. It's getting a bit confusing to keep track."

"Time travel, confusing? Naa-a-ah. You sound tired, how long have you been rewinding all this?"

I look at my wrist, at the cool little watch she made me start wearing. It's the only thing that keeps Max-time straight. "Says 3:20AM, so that's...four hours, I guess."

"You poor thing. Let's wrap it up, tell me what's left."

"Well, besides the mundane stuff that we can safely ignore, we have a library with a million shelves, a media room, what I assume was Nathan's photography studio, and another office-slash-workshop that probably belongs to Dianne Prescott. And then the Mystery Doors."

"Mystery doors?"

"They need keycard access. One is labeled Art Room, and the guard is stationed outside of it. The other is a blast door going into the basement level. We agreed to leave them for last."

"A blast door? Dark Room-style?"

"Let's hope it's nothing but a simple storm shelter."

"Yeah, right. Are you sure you want to leave those for last? I doubt it'll be worth going through everything else, and that could take hours."

"I'd rather be thorough. Don't worry about me, I'm ready for the long haul. My bloodstream is basically all caffeine at this point."

"Ha. Someone will be peein' in the bushes pretty soon..."

"Good thing I'm parked out of sight, then. Let's get through that library. You'll have to climb down the side of the stairwell so the guard won't see you."

"You know, this would be way easier if I just killed her quietly before we even start."

"Chloe, no."

"What? It won't be real. You'll take it back in the end. And that's 'Lizbeth' for you, remember?"
"I feel silly calling you that, and it is real. We're not murdering anyone like that, okay? Holy shit, talk about a slippery slope."

"It's not like I want to do it, but I'll have to deal with her at some point, right? I bet I already have, actually. And the longer it takes and the more rewinds, the more tired you get. I'm just thinking in four dimensions, Maxfly."

"I'll survive. You're not killing anyone unless provoked. Alright?"

She sighs, and I can hear an eye-roll in her whisper. "Fine, I guess. It just seems an arbitrary line to draw now, especially since—"

"Well, we should draw it somewhere. The library is down the hallway closest to you as you drop down."

It feels like she wants to argue the point some more, but Chloe gets moving instead. There is a lot of ground to cover.

I know she's right. It's an arbitrary distinction. Nevertheless, I would like to hold on to our humanity as long as I can, if you don't mind.

The next two hours of careful search through the Prescott Estate yield a big fat load of nothing. Sean Prescott enjoys crime procedurals, be it movies, TV shows or novels. Dianne Prescott is a talented, if whimsical, sculptor. Nathan was a damn decent pencil artist on top of photographer, and it wasn't always of the disturbing sort. Browsing through his increasingly dark artwork and subject matter was like a timeline for the progression of his illness.

That being said, we found some seriously messed up collections in his studio. There was no need for his doctor to warn his parents—they had to be aware of his dangerous mental state. They just...chose to ignore it. How would things have gone if Nathan had received the help he needed?

It's now 11:34PM again. Chloe stands by the entrance to the dining room, the closest she can get to the woman standing guard without being seen. It could be said that I'm a bit familiar with her procedure by this point: if Chloe makes enough noise, the woman will report leaving her post to the guard outside and then go investigate. If Chloe lets herself be seen, the woman will immediately request backup and engage while threatening deadly force. They report an all-clear to each other every half hour, sharp on o'clock and thirty. This must be the most boring job in the universe, but she sure takes it seriously.

This is why Chloe is now sprinting from her hiding spot, hand already raised and aim adjusted according to my pointers (she has missed four times so far, it's a tough shot with a weird weapon.) The prongs of the taser fire from the gun before the woman can even process what the charging shadow could be. The electrodes hit her square in the chest for once and deliver their insanely painful jolt, and Chloe is on top of her the moment after.

Out comes the roll of duct-tape, and round, round, round it goes on hands, forearms, ankles, knees and mouth. I can barely understand what I'm seeing on the camera, but it seems to be going according to plan so far. No upsetting head-butts or awkward wrestling this time. For god's sake, let it work flawlessly so I don't have to sit through this awful tension again.

The woman is still twitching by the time Chloe is done. "Should be good enough," she tells me, voice pumped with adrenaline. It doesn't have to be a permanent takedown, it only needs to last long enough for us to have a working window. We can stretch the same twenty minutes for as long as we please.
"I hope I remember to tell you in the final timeline that you're a fucking badass."

"I know it, babe. Are you seeing this?"

The entrance dips a few feet into the wall, forming a large ornate archway. Though made of wood as far as we can tell, the double doors look several inches thick and extremely solid, built to withstand anything short of a battering ram. Pretty sure not even one of our trusty pipe bombs would do it. To the left of the door, there is a small LED screen with a card-insert slot, and right under it...a numeric pad.

I can't hold back a groan. "Please, let our precious card be enough. No more four-digit code hunts."

"This looks pretty advanced. It might have...a six digit code."

"The stuff of nightmares. Let's see if BetaMax's adventures were worth it."

Chloe takes off her tiny backpack and fishes out the card. She holds it up to the slot. "Moment of truth."

"Stop being such a tease and just put it in."

"Teasing is half the fun." She inserts the Prism card like she's paying at the gas pump. There's a muted beep, the panel lights up green, and the doors make a somewhat loud clah-clack. They swing inwards in a way that's almost...majestic.

Beyond the doors, a short passage. And the end of the passage, another set of doors, also swinging open. Chloe looks at the floor, and I can see the ever-so-polished parquet under her feet giving way to gorgeous marble tile beyond the second doorway. Chloe looks at the ceiling, and I can see the very much noticeable motion sensors installed on every corner of the corridor. She makes a displeased sound. "You think the card took care of those too?"

"Go in and find out, I guess. I got your back."

"If I suddenly explode, don't tell me about it."

"Deal."

The indisposed guard is starting to groan back to life as Chloe steps forward, past the first threshold. She's not two steps in when the sensors light up, the alarm blares awake, and the doors thunder shut in barely an instant. Chloe tries to run out, but it's far too late. She slams a fist against the immovable barrier. "Shit!"

"Chloe? Can you still hear me?"

"Yeah! Barely!"

She needs to yell over the sudden noise. The damn thing is so loud that I have to turn down my volume.

"I'll take you back, okay?"

"Wait, let me try a few things first! Useful information!"

She winds up for a running start and throws all of her body behind a kick to the doors leading into the room. "Fuck you, door!"
She bounces back like she hit a solid wall.

"Ow! Dammit!"

"That looked painful."

"It was painful, smartass!"

She recovers somewhat quickly and thinks for a moment, then stretches on her tip-toes and claws at the motion sensors, but they are firmly embedded into their sockets. After another half-second of thought, she steps back, pulls out her gun and aims at one of the tiny opaque lenses.

"Maybe you shouldn't—"

Chloe fires. The bullet ricochets wildly and lodges into her leg.

"Fuck!"

"Oh my god, okay, let's try something else."

"Fuck my life and all the fucking—"

I rewind mid-tirade before she can hurt herself any further. I'm shaking my head here, curled up in the back seat of our car. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

The panel lights up green. The doors swing open.

"See the motion sensors?" I say. "They'll trap you in the moment you enter."

"Oh. Is this round two, or more than that?"

"Round two."

"Suggestions?"

"Well...I suppose we should assume the keypad controls the alarm. So maybe we need to find out the code, somehow."

"Oh. Yay." The camera immediately swivels toward the half-unconscious guard. "Someone around here might be able to provide that information."

"Huh. You think she'll just...tell you, if she knows?"

"No. Obviously not."

There is something in her tone that makes the pit of my stomach go cold. "So..."

"So let's first see what she says."

It takes the woman a few more minutes to look fully there. She's staring back at Chloe, dark eyes seething with resentment. With her tight ponytail and pantsuit, she's rocking that Generic Bodyguard style so in vogue these days.

Chloe squats next to her. "Hey. Hi. I've a bit of a problem. I don't suppose you know the code to disable the alarm, right?"

Her mouth is still taped shut. She makes no effort to nod or shake her head.
"Maybe we could have a conversation? I'll warn you, though. Start making lots of noise and bad things will happen. I have your gun and I've got one of my own. We understand each other, right?"

No answer. Chloe sighs and takes a little while to tear at the tape so she can peel it off. "Now, let's—"

The woman immediately spits in Chloe's face.

"Ew! What the—"

"You made me piss myself, you bitch."

"What the hell, man! You're lucky I'm wearing the mask, I'd be far less forgiving otherwise."

"I was aiming at your eyes, let me try again."

The tape goes back on in a hurry. Chloe pulls out her Glock. She presses it to the woman's knee.

"Look, I'm trying real hard to be friendly, here. I got nothing personal against you. I'm going to try again, and maybe this time you'll behave. Okay?"

"Chloe, don't hurt her."

"My partner here," she taps the earpiece, "she's telling me to stop playing around. I'm listening to her. Let's get serious."

She peels the tape off again. The guard doesn't spit this time, but the animosity is intense enough to thicken the space between them.

"Well? Do you know the code, or not?"

"Yes. It's alphanumerical. Get ready."

"Really? There's only numbers on—"

"It's One-eight hundred-Foxtrot, Uniform, Charlie, Kilo, Yankee, Oscar, Uniform. You got that?"

There's this pause in which I can perfectly imagine Chloe blinking, laboriously processing the military initials.

She stands up and turns away, talking to me instead. "We're supposed to be the good guys, why is everyone such an asshole to us?"

"We did tase the piss out of her, Chloe."

"Good point."

The woman speaks up. "I didn't make it through two fucking tours to be intimidated now by some idiot with a death wish. I am curious to know who the fuck is stupid enough to mess with the Prescotts, though. They're the kind of folks with the power to ruin your life on a whim, can't imagine what they'll do to your dumb ass when they find out whatever the fuck you're up to."

Chloe turns again. "Look, Miss Potty Mouth, there's no way you can stall me for a whole fifteen minutes until your bud outside checks in, so don't even try. Her hand obscures the camera for a moment, so I can only assume she just pulled down her badass ninja mask. "I've a bit of a secret weapon backing me up."
The guard's battle-hardened expression cracks for the first time, if only briefly. "You're that Price girl. Goddammit."

"You hear that, Max? We're famous."

"Yes," the woman agrees, "dangerous mass murderers tend to gain notoriety."

Chloe's response is sudden and immediate. She surges forward, one hand shooting out to clamp on the woman's throat and pin her against the floor.

"You're forgetting the part where you people jumped us in the middle of the night, bitch. Everything we've done has been in self-defense, so don't you dare play the righteous card on me. You assholes sold your soul to the devil for a fucking paycheck."


"The balls on these people! Can you believe it? We wanted nothing to do with all this, they've ruined our life, and she dares throw this bullshit at your face? What the hell is wrong with the world?"

"Just let go of her, Chloe. You're killing her."

She takes one heavy breath, then eases her grip. The guard sputters for a while, heaving through gritted teeth. "Yes...this certainly looks...like self-defense..."

Chloe is staring at the woman.

"She's not going to talk. How averse are we to torture these days, Max?"

"Whoa, no, no no no—we're extremely averse to torture. Come on, we're better than that. Right?"

She makes a pause. A way-too-long pause.

"I don't know. It seemed to work for you."

"That wasn't me. You said it yourself, I was broken, too far gone. Don't be like that, please."

"It won't be real, you know. None of this is real. I don't think you've internalized that yet."

"It's real to me! I'll remember it all, and I don't want to remember you doing anything like that. I know you've...gone through a lot. But we don't torture people, no matter what. Okay?"

Chloe takes a moment to think about it. The woman is quiet, watching, listening.

"Okay. You're right, I'm sorry. It's...good, I'm happy you feel that way. You should talk to me about this when we're done tonight."

"I will, and I'll make sure it doesn't get rewound away. Thank you for listening."

"I try. So...do-over, I guess? Do you think she even knows the code? This is supposed to be top-level access stuff. Bitch is obviously just trying to stall, and I bet she's loyal like a dog since she's posted inside their house. Hold on a second." She nudges the guard with her foot. "How much does Prescott tell you, anyway? Do you know we can time-travel?"

The expression on the woman's face is all the answer we need. She looks like someone that knows she's being mocked.
"Sure," she says. "It's all part of standard training. We've superpowers of our own, backup will fly in any moment now."

It makes me chuckle, despite it all. "You know, I kinda like her."

"That's because you're weird."

"Dig through her pockets. If you find some leverage I'll rewind and we can ask her a few questions, just to make sure she won't be any help."

We find her wallet, an ID badge, a cell phone, an extra clip for her gun and a pack of nicotine gum. We agree that it might be good enough.

Let's go back to...yes, the face reveal. That was a good spot.

"...Secret weapon backing me up."

The guard's battle-hardened expression cracks for the first time, if only briefly. "You're that Price girl. Goddammit."

"Chloe, listen, I just rewound. Tell her Lauren Frost wants to talk and put the earpiece on her. Call her Sarah."

"Alright, cool. Sarah, right? Miss Frost says she wants to talk to you. Hold still a moment."

The puzzled frown on the woman is ever so satisfying. She doesn't even struggle as Chloe transfers the gear to her head.

"Sarah Marianne Dawson? This is Lauren Frost. I apologize for my colleague's treatment of you. She had to act decisively so you wouldn't summon help."

A couple seconds go by. "How the fuck do you know my name?"

"We have a lot of resources at our disposal, Sarah. We know the name and address of every single person employed within the estate. A lot more than that, actually. For instance, your cat's name is...Snuffles, yes? A tabby Siamese? How is Jake doing, by the way?"

People truly carry their lives in their cellphones. She should be locking it with more than a simple swipe.

All I can see is Chloe's reaction to Sarah's expression; Chloe has this smug half-smile on her face, which can only mean good things.

"Is that a threat," the woman asks, "or just...a show of power?"

"I don't know. Which one would be more effective?"

"I don't give a shit who you are or what you want, you can take your threats and shove them up your ass."

"Okay, good to know. Just a sec, let me rewind."

"What?"

Oh, conversational puzzles, how I love you. Hopefully this one will have a solution.
"Is that a threat, or just...a show of power?"

"I'm not threatening anyone, quite the contrary. I want to recruit you."

Another pause. Chloe's features become quizzical.

"You want me to betray the Prescotts and breach my contract?"

"I think you would be an excellent addition to our team. We've watched you for some time. Is double your current salary a good starting point? Name your price, Miss Dawson."

"If you had been 'watching for some time,' you'd know I'm not a fucking mercenary. What kind of moron would hire a turncoat, anyway? It's setting yourself up for betrayal. What are you people really up to?"

Hm.

Well, Chloe did mention that those working inside the house would've been picked for their loyalty.

"Is that a threat, or just...a show of power?"

"Only a way to establish that we're not fooling around. The Prescotts are going down, Sarah. They are going to pay for everything they've done."

"God almighty, I thought you were just some rich kid with a pet charity project. You are backing Price and Caulfield? They're corporate terrorists!"

Chloe frowns, crosses her arms. I bet it's costing her a week's worth of willpower to keep her mouth shut.

I sigh dramatically. "Is that really the story they tell you? How sad."

"Caulfield assaulted an office in Portland last month and killed six people before getting out. Isn't that true?"

"Well...um. How do you know that?"

"That's my business, and it's absolutely true. I don't know what kind of vendetta you've got, but I don't negotiate with terrorists."

"Wait, I call for a do-over."

"What?"

Rewind, rewind, and soon a good answer you'll find.

"...killed six people before getting out. Isn't that true?"

"If that were the whole truth, don't you think she would be a known fugitive? Hunted by the police and Homeland Security and all that? But no, it's all handled in-house, isn't it. The police haven't been involved at any point. Wonder why that is."

It gives her pause, I can feel it. Chloe's gruff expression softens a bit. Wish the camera was detachable so I could read the guard's reactions first-hand.
"I could talk to you for hours about the horrible things these people have done, but I know you're a professional and won't betray your employer or breach your contract. But listen, the door is open, as you can see. We've been through a lot of pain to get this far. All we need now is those numbers."

Time passes by in tense silence. My thoughts go back to the adorable picture in her phone, the one with a Siamese cat splayed on top of a sleeping young man. It was a great picture.

Remember it. Remember her messages to her dad, and her shopping list for the weekend. Every one of the opponents we face is a human being.

Sarah Dawson blows out a breath and shakes her head.

"Even if I wanted to help you, which I don't, I have no idea what the code is. They don't speak it out loud and I don't ever try to peek."

Finally, confirmation. At least we got that far. She sounds sincere.

"Who goes in there, exactly?"

"The Prescotts, of course, who else?"

"Dianne and Sean?"

"And their kids, when they were around. It's only Mrs. Prescott during my shift, mostly. She keeps late hours. She's...eccentric. She might as well live in there."

"Wait, both their kids? Nathan's sister?"

"Yes. Kristine. Just this once that I saw. She stormed out of there in tears, screaming to be left alone. They...argued frequently, it was impossible not to hear them. Her shipping out to a different continent was for the best, to be honest."

"What would they argue about? Typical teenager stuff?"

Sarah snorts into the microphone. "There's nothing typical about this family. It's like they live in an entirely different world. Which I suppose they do, in a way."

"Oh? How so?"

"The same world you live in, right? The world of money and entitlement and rarefied fucked up priorities, because paying bills doesn't ever become a concern. People that struggle to put food on the table don't have time to fight undercover wars."

"My struggles feel alien even to me, so I see your point. Do you know what they do in that room, Sarah? Why would they guard it like this?"

"Why, you're trying so hard to get in, and you don't even know what's in there? So much for your 'vast resources,' what a joke!"

Rethink, rewind, rephrase.

"My struggles feel alien even to me, so I see your point. Do you even know what you're guarding, Sarah? Do you have any idea what you're really protecting? It's no simple art collection in there. I can tell you that much."

"I was assigned to this post, and I'm going to do my job. I don't get paid to ask questions."
considers it for a beat. "Why? How bad could it be in there?"

So she doesn't know anything about it. Information on the Prescotts' daily life might prove useful at some point, though. "I don't think you'd believe me if I told you what they're capable of. But then again, maybe you would. You must have seen enough in that house to have realized—"

The two-way radio attached to Sarah's shoulder suddenly crackles alive.

"Knuckles, are you there or not? Don't make me come in to find you dozed off again. Over."

Sarah's groan is eerily familiar. It's the exact same tone I might take with some of Chloe's shenanigans. "For the love of god, the one time he should've followed the damn protocol to the letter, and he blows it. Well fucking done, Jacob."

"Oh. That's right. So that's why you were so talkative now."

"What, you thought we were friends suddenly? My nipples got fried, I'm duct-taped on the floor and I'm stewing in my own piss. Go fuck yourself, thank you very much."


Chloe squats near, brings a hand to the radio's button and very ostensibly presses her gun to Sarah's other shoulder. "Report the all clear," she says.

"Yeah, you sure are the good guys, how could I ever doubt it."

"Actually," I tell her, "it's time to back out of this dead-end, I don't think I can get anything else here. It's been quite the experience knowing you, Miss Dawson. Stay classy."

"What?"

Not going to lie, I'll shed no tears for undoing these past thirty minutes. The rewind is still smooth, but I'm starting to feel the strain. A dull ache deep between my shoulder blades, something like vertigo thrumming behind my eyes—beneath the grit of staying up through who knows how many midnights by now, gallons of coffee or not. The sheer number of short jogs through time is slowly taking its toll, and with this new development it's looking like I'm nowhere near the end.

Now it's 11:28PM again, and Chloe is creeping into the dining hall from the entrance farthest from Sarah's post.

"Hey, gorgeous. We're back from the Art Room now."

"Oh. Okay. Bunker next?" Her whisper is so quiet that I can barely make it out.

"Yep." She starts heading in the other direction right away. "You might not even be able to get in. There was a keypad-protected alarm at the Art Room, and we've no idea how to get the code."

She stops her slow prowl. "So we didn't go in?"

"Nope."

"Which means..."

"Yeah, it'll be my turn soon if we don't find what we want down there. I could get past the alarm no problem."
"How many times have I told you by now that I hate that idea?"

"First time tonight, actually."

"Well, I hate that idea."

"I know. We'll talk about it."

"That we will."

Chloe is soon skulking through complete darkness as she goes deeper into the mansion. She slips the goggles back on, and I hit the key that enables night-vision on the feed. I could've probably paid for half my tuition with the money we spent on all the gear. I guess we've become the real Blackwell Ninjas.

Down the hall, at the bottom of a split-level stairwell, a vault door awaits. In the black-and-white lighting, "creepy" doesn't quite cut it. The approach down the creaky steps is fucking ominous. The door isn't just similar to the one below the barn—it's the exact same build and model. The only difference is the card swipe slot instead of the keypad.

"Fuck, Max. I'm so glad you're there, I'd be beyond freaked out right now without you watching over me."

"It's not guarded, maybe it's only a storm shelter."

"How likely you think that is?"

"Um, zero chance?"

"Yeah. That's what I thought."

The stairs end in a wide corridor, maybe ten feet of tile up to the vault. There's a subtle hum running through the walls, under her feet. The frame is lit up in dim white, and a glassy dome glows red above the card slot.

Chloe tries the giant wheel handle, but it doesn't budge. She takes off her tiny backpack and fishes out the card. She holds it up to the slot. "Moment of truth."

"Stop being such a tease and just put it in."

She utters a nervous chuckle. "The romance is in the air."

The card goes in. The red glass dome bleeps green. There's a whirr inside the door, and then a muted thunk.

Chloe tries the handle again and it starts turning. She puts more oomph into it. "This brings such awesome memories, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, those were the days. Just a regular ol' psychopath going after us, nothing weird going on."

"Besides the tornado and the superpowers, that is."

"Besides that, yes."

The handle thumps to a stop. There's a cavernous, metallic croak as the door swings inward. Halogen rods all along the ceiling automatically come alight, revealing an all-white hall, doorways
into more rooms, a cross-shaped intersection. There's a camera on the far corner, covering the whole area.

Chloe starts to walk in. "This...doesn't look like a storm shelter."

"No, it doesn't. It's..."

Five or six rooms connected by hallways. Very white and antiseptic, well-lit. Cameras on every corner.

There's this pressure inside my head, this mild discomfort, and then the car melts around me. My eyelids suddenly feel like leaden weights, it's an ordeal just keeping them open. My thoughts walk a mile underwater, ponderous and sluggish. Through the haze I see my hands zip-tied in front of me, a metal bracelet securing a truncated IV plug to my right wrist. My nails are jagged and bloody. It's white all around me, and it's only after a few seconds that I realize it's not my feet that carry me forward. I'm flanked by two men, and between them they sustain my weight like I'm made of styrofoam.

"She's waking up."

"Hurry up, then."

Most of me is deathly afraid in drug-addled stupor. It's the same sensation I felt in the Dark Room, the same terrifying powerlessness keeping my limbs from doing what I tell them to. It's quickly driving me to full-blown panic.

But a part of me...there's a part of me still sitting in the car, aware of what's actually happening. It's another memory-vision-thing, bleeding through the barriers of my multiple personalities. Faintly I can feel the cloth in the seats, smell the cherry scent of the freshener attached to the vents, hear Chloe's increasingly urgent calls for a response. I try to answer, and only the lightest mumble comes out of captive-Max.

"Shit, man, she's my sister's age. How can this girl be so dangerous?"

"She's some kind of super spy, I don't know. It's above our paygrade, bud. Just do what you're told."

"Max, Come on, answer me. The lights are blinking green on the transmitter, the connection's supposed to be still good. You better not be having a vision right now, I'd be super fucked."

It's nearly impossible to think through the cotton stuffing my head, but one notion becomes clear: of all the nightmares I might suffer, leaving Chloe stranded behind that vault door ranks among the worst. Am I even conscious right now? Will I be able to rewind past this? I try to focus on her words, the mounting fear in her voice. Shut out everything but that small fraction of myself that's still in the present.

The memory keeps going. I'm being strapped tight to a chair, thoroughly secured in place so I can't move even an inch. A phone is brought in and left on the desk beside me.

I remember this setup.

"I have to start moving if you don't answer soon. Fucking problems, always with such perfect timing."

"Miss Caulfield. This conversation is long overdue. I would apologize for the treatment you've
received, but I don't think you are very receptive to such a thing at the moment. I'll let you become slightly more clear-headed before we continue."

Shit. I'm trying to leave the flashback, but should I? I might be able to learn more about this place, maybe something that BetaMax forgot to mention, or forgot about completely. But Chloe...she might get captured, or she might have to start shooting to escape. I might pass out completely if I focus on the vision—and if I can't rewind from here, the only way to fix it would be a photojump.

We hate photojumps. We also hate not knowing what's going on.

"Alright, I'm coming to find you. God, please be okay. Wish me luck getting out of here. I love you."

The tremor in her voice. The grim resolve. They rip through my thoughts more fiercely than fear for my own safety ever could.

"Chloe..."

"She is safe, and healthy, though we've had to subdue her a few times. Her well-being largely depends on you now, Miss Caulfield."

I thrash against my restraints. Let me go, I can't stay here, I can't risk her getting hurt, or risk potentially fucking everything up through a photo. I don't know how long this flashback thing will run, but every second—

"Shit, they know the vault is open. They're waiting for me, shit, shit, shit..."

I'm squeezing my eyes shut in both realities. Wake up. This is my mind. I get to choose, I am in control.

A gunshot cracks through the earbuds. "Come and get it, you sick fucks!"

"Oh god, Chloe, hold on, I'm trying to reach you..."

"Max! Max, are you okay?"

I'm back. Everything's back. The screen shows a shaky view of the vault's open entrance from the inside, and Chloe's gun pointing at it.

"I had another weird flashback, but it's over now—are you okay?"

"I'm peachy." There's movement on the screen, and Chloe shoots again. "Go for another peek and see what happens, you assholes!" She huddles behind the corner for cover. "Fuck, you passed out, then? We're stuck here?"

"I...I don't know. Maybe. How bad is it right now?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure they're covering the only way out, and I don't know if I could get out of here guns blazing no matter how many retries I get. You saw what the entrance looks like, there's nowhere to hide from this end. So, yeah, pretty fucked."

"I'm sorry, I tried to get back sooner..."

"Stop that, it's outside your control. This is why we take the fail-selfies." She takes aim and shoots again; there's an audible gasp by the entrance. "Try that again, I fucking dare you!" She gets back behind cover. "Jump through to the picture in the car, give me very clear instructions for what I should do, and let's just hope nothing crazy happens."
"Wait, let me try to rewind first, this might still be salvageable."

"Go right ahead, but if you had a vision, I wouldn't hold my breath."

"No matter what happens...you're awesome, Chloe. I love you."

"Wow, okay. Thanks for that. I'll see you on the other side, Super Max. Now, if you'll excuse me, there's no way I can stay over here, so I'm gonna try to go Trinity on their asses."

"What?"

Chloe takes off the earpiece and leaves it on the floor, carefully aimed at the entrance. "Enjoy the show," she says. Then she enters the frame, picking up speed toward the wide-open door. She shoots a few times as she runs, bullets clanging against the door, ricocheting against the frame, burying themselves in the wall. Suppressive fire.

Long strides thumping on white tiles, tassels from her mask fluttering behind her, Chloe jumps at the last moment and dives through the threshold like the laws of physics don't apply to her. She turns mid-air, aims behind the door and opens fire, and keeps shooting all through the slide on her back in the most badass move I've ever seen anyone do. A guard, presumably Jacob, screams in pain.

Sarah Dawson, however, is waiting on the other side, further up the stairs. Chloe tries to change targets, but I know it's too late.

Freeze. Go back.

That was glorious, but I don't want to see how it ends.

With my heart in my throat I speed up the rewind. The photo is the absolute last resort. If I can simply go back like I've been doing so far...

The rewind happens for the minute I've been fully in this reality and then it...bumps...against something—

No, there's no it. Stop thinking like that, it's not a "rewind" that "happens," it's just me, traveling back in time—and as I bump against this roadblock, I recognize it, because I've jumped over it before. It happened so fast that I didn't think about it, but I did rewind through the vision I had in the RV bathroom after (before?) I busted through the actual anti-rewind barrier inside my mind. I carried so much inertia at the time that it didn't even register.

And now, as I try to force my way against it, I understand this isn't a roadblock at all, but...a deviation into a different path. That's what happens, isn't it? When I lose consciousness, the road I travel disappears. There's no longer a path to follow into the past. But if I stay conscious in the weird vision trance, the road splits into separate trails, and I can't go into one or the other—I have to traverse both.

As I open my mind to the possibility my awareness folds in twain all on its own, and I get to see both realities warp backwards in the weirdest out-of-body experience I could've imagined. I try to stop the rewind mid-vision, but I can't. It plays in reverse almost by itself, like I've started a process that cannot be interrupted.

I'm left reeling on the other side after I pass through the creepy vision-split, and just like before I find myself speeding backwards due to the sudden lack of resistance. I stop it far more swiftly this time.
Chloe tries the giant wheel handle, but it doesn't budge. She takes off her tiny backpack and fishes out the card.

"Stop."

She immediately goes in high alert, pulling out her gun and looking at the stairwell behind her. "What? What is it?"

"This is where BetaMax was held captive."

"No fucking way. You saw it already?"

"Yeah, and seeing it triggered this fucked up vision going in. It was awful."

"And...you rewound out of it? How?"

"I managed, I'll explain later, but that's why I'm thinking...maybe next time I won't be so lucky. Maybe I'll see something else and get hit harder, and you'll be left stranded. Which is real bad, because they'll know right away the moment you go in."

"Shit. Well..." She looks down at the card in her hand, idly taps it against the barrel of the gun. "Kill everybody?"

"Chloe..."

"Just kidding! But we can't just leave, this place might as well have a sign saying 'big dark secrets inside.' How about this: I'll shut the door behind me, you turn off the video feed, and I'll narrate. Problems solved."

"That's..."

Huh. I didn't think about doing that. And it's likely these guards can't access the messed up prison-bunker, just like they can't go into the Art Room.

"You know, Chloe? you're way smarter than I give you credit for."

"Wow, thanks for that delightfully backhanded compliment."

"You're welcome."

"Good to go, then?"

"Let's do it."

The card goes in, the vault door unlocks, and Chloe moves quickly. I hit the key to disable the video component of the signal. I guess I could simply close my eyes, but the temptation to look would be too great. I let her voice guide my thoughts, and as she speaks images flash in my head like I'm right there as an alternate version of myself. It is thoroughly weird.

"First room on the left. Empty lockers. Some shelves, a gun rack, a counter. Unused and deserted."

*My clothes, folded on a random shelf in a tiny room with lockers. There is a photo in my pocket.*

"Going right at the intersection. One door on either side, dead end with a camera."

*I collapse against the wall. Blood stains my hands, it drips from my mouth and nose. Rewind again,*
I have to rewind again.

"A storage room with tons of empty shelves. There's a lot of dust everywhere. Maybe this was a storm shelter, but was repurposed."

A storm is raging outside. Even in this place, it reaches me in subtle quakes and peals of thunder.

"There's...a chair with straps, here. A table and a large mirror, probably a double glass pane like in an interrogation room. Fuck, Max. This is so messed up."

I can't move an inch. Being capable of turning back time is worthless when you have no control over your body.

"Man, this door looks like it could take a cannonball and not budge. It's open, though." There is a pause. "Shit. It's...a cell, there's a bed and...what the fuck is that machine in the wall? These people are fucked in the head, how could they do this to you?"

I've scratched at it until my hands bled. I've pulled on it until they had to sedate me. It comes out of the wall and into the cuff on my wrist, and I can't get it off.

"These fuckers will pay for this. I don't give a shit it never happened. We're going to make them pay, Max."

I wanted to hurt them. I wanted to make them all suffer, and I did, and in that moment it felt good.

"This room is like...a gym? There's weights, and a small track with distances marked. A clock, another mirror, and a slot under it. Where's all the documents and files, the computers? Something, come on!"

They'll give me a sealed envelope through the slot, tell me to rewind for a certain amount of time and then to give it back. They want me to get better at everything I can do, and they drive me until I can't take it anymore. I don't know why.

"And here's the security room. There's a few monitors and a chair, but nothing has power. Let me try the terminal. Nope. A file cabinet...completely empty." I can hear the kick. "God-dammit!"

They're always watching. Always. How could anyone watch all this with a clear conscience?

I give the camera the finger whenever I use the toilet.

Are these actual memories, or things I imagined as I read my own handwriting? Maybe both? The images in my head seem far too specific.

"Chloe...this place was equipped with only one purpose in mind. There's nothing for us here."

"Come on, I can't leave empty handed after all this..."

"We have the weird journal."

"That can't be enough. Are you sure we couldn't find a way for me to get into that stupid art room?"

I think about it for a moment. "Open the doors and then cut the power, maybe. But even if we managed to do that, the doors opened by themselves and then slammed shut like spring-loaded. I think the power keeps them open when you use the card."
"Worth a try, though."

"I don't know, is it really? I'm ready to call it quits here. You know I can go in without problems, let's do that and get this night over with."

"And you know I hate that idea."

"Well, I can keep at this for only so long. I don't want to add another hour of constant rewinds just to end up going in anyway. I'm really starting to feel it, and we'd have to take down Sarah again, find the breakers and run to them at the right time, then hope to find the emergency generator because you know it won't be that easy, and after all that—"

"Okay, okay, I get it."

I can easily imagine her, arms crossed while every one of her features indulges a petulant sulk.

"You were amazing, Chloe. I'm so in awe of you after all this. I mean, even more in awe."

She blows out an amused breath. "You shameless sweet-talker. You better say that to my face, too."

"Oh, I will."

She heaves a deep sigh. "I guess this is it, then. So anticlimactic, I can't even trash the place. There's nothing to turn over."

"Not everything can end in explosions and power slides, Action Hero. How about those monitors? You can fuck them up, I bet."

"Yeah, I guess I could, but whatever. Take us all the way back, Timelord. Prepare for some moping from my past self, I really thought I could keep you out of this one."

"Alright. I'll see you earlier, my love."

"You are the biggest dork."

I blow a kiss into the microphone, and so begins the long-distance rewind, back to nine o'clock and preparations in the car.

As I travel backwards and mentally review everything that just happened, more than ever I feel the need to continue exploring these powers. I can run up this line of time like Chloe can run through a white-tile hall. I can split my awareness and follow separate trails of remembrance. How about jumping and skipping over? How about cherry-picking which moment I want to go back to? Isn't that what I do with the photos, taking a shortcut somehow? How much control can I learn if I just try hard enough?

Even with the dire stakes and the grave consequences and the ultra-creepy SuperMax-level dungeon, it's kind of...

**Weird Blue Spirit help me, it's kind of exciting to think about.**

---

We're parked out of sight by Frank's old haunt, not that far from the Estate. A blanket is draped over the hood, our backs rest on the windshield. Chloe is eating her burger, I'm eating my pita, and we're staring at screenshots of these journal entries like an alien wrote them and left them for us to puzzle over.
Going back to 2010, it's more a nonsensical sketchbook than anything else. Among the whimsy, 
the ironic and the occasional donger—some pages really should have a NSFW tag somewhere—six 
somewhat serious entries stand out like tax collectors at a clown convention. We've read them a 
couple dozen times by now:

December 12, 2010

Nathan's gift is manifesting erratically. His trances leave him spent and with no memory of what 
happened. Soon he won't even function without medication, and that will basically be the end of it.

I'm disappointed, but not surprised. We knew the risks, the chance of this was never negligible. In a 
way it's refreshing to see some things are still beyond our control.

This outlier reality already shaped up into solid fact, along with all the terrible things that must 
happen in it, but Sean refuses to listen, stubborn man that he is. He thinks Nate just needs stricter 
discipline and the right therapy. It's irrational, but I don't blame him. He's still human. He's still 
my son's father.

Such a shame. There was so much potential. It's odd, isn't it? To be this accepting of my son's fate? 
I didn't ever mean this journal to be anything but idle mockery, but I suppose this is me trying to 
work through it. Mother would scoff at even this, heartless harpy that she was. Good thing she 
doesn't get a say anymore.

Here, have this. The photo below is rife with modern irony.

Attached is a picture of a younger Nathan, bent over a sheet of paper with pencil in hand. The 
photo focuses on Nathan's vacant stare, jaw drooping and lips drooling. He doesn't seem to have 
any idea of what he's doing.

It's kind of heartbreaking.

February 3, 2011

Here I am, journaling again. I suppose I understand why she does it all the time. I need to vent, 
and Sean is off doing my bidding like a good faithful husband is meant to do.

Kristine is so tiresome. I knew these years would be difficult with her, but no amount of 
foreknowledge could have prepared me for this, just like knowing the dentist is about to drill a 
hole in your jaw doesn't make it any less painful. She'll come around once she's done rebelling, but 
there is about a point-two probability I might succumb to temptation before then and strangle her. 
In a very motherly way.

It's doubly infuriating that she insists in shunning her inheritance. It galls me, how far behind 
she'll be once she finally accepts it. I didn't get a choice in the matter, and it was all for the better. 
To have gifted children for this! One is doomed to madness, the other will detest me for the rest of 
her life no matter what I do. I feel sometimes I'm as much a prisoner of the weave as the rest.

Below the lines is a painstakingly detailed close-up of a girl waking up on her bed with delicately 
manicured hands pressing down on her neck. There are balloon hearts all around the drawing.

There's a lot of chaff after that, with the next curious entry happening on March 17, 2012.

Sean can be a frustrating man. He remains wary of Samantha despite my assurances and won't let 
her anywhere near him. I know she's eccentric, and it's ingrained in him not to trust anyone he 
can't read, but this is a special case. She owes us everything and would do anything for this family.
There is no probability attached to her. The moment she walked into the Art Room and understood what we're trying to do, I could see something close to religious fervor in her eye. If only Kristine had reacted the same way.

Honestly, Sam is the daughter I wish I'd had. Why must fate mock me so?

The writing is interwoven through a full-page drawing of a moth caught in a web, with a big spider creeping up from the bottom frame.

Next we found an entry from June 5, 2013. There's a cartoonish blue butterfly, anthropomorphized like one of Kate's characters. Though it wears a graduation cap and a toga, its eyes look off in different directions like it's full of stupid.

Poor girl. She'll think she earned it.

I suppose she did, in a way, but definitely not with that GPA.

Arcadia Bay welcomes you back, Miss Caulfield.

Does it get creepier than that? Well, yes. Next comes Kate's entry, with all its awful implications. And then, shortly after, there's a drawing of the sunset at sea by the beach. Where the sun would be, there is only a warped smudge. Words rest on the horizon, hug the contours of shallow waves.

My son now lies in an unmarked grave.

To make the probable certain / The talent in his blood became his undoing.

He did his part / He suffers no more.

May his troubled soul find in death / The peace we couldn't provide in life.

The sick little man will soon follow.

There will only be pain for him.

The lines that make up the lighthouse are actually tiny words strung together. This is the price we pay, they spell, over and over.

The remainder of the journal is full of abstract scribbles and patterns, the kind that might be drawn by an idle hand. Sometimes it seems like they might aim to mean something, but couldn't quite get there. The only intelligible words we found were somewhere in the middle of all that. This isn't funny anymore, they said.

Now Chloe's last bite disappears into her gullet. I'm still working on my food, because I'm an actual civilized person.

"So," she starts, her lap full of crumply noises as she cleans up her mess of napkins.

"So?"

"So...this is insane."

"Yeah."

"That's some heavy shit in there."
"I know."
"Dianne Prescott. Batshit crazy, or evil mastermind?"
"Pretty sure it's both?"

"So there's about zero chance we're not going into that Art Room now, right?"
"Just about."

"What time? You should have a good buffer so you can escape into the past if you need to. There might be someone waiting for you in there."

I take what I think will be my last bite for now. My appetite pulled a vanishing act as the meaning of what we were reading sank in. "Min-nigh, I guegh?"

"Sounds good." She digs in my bag and finds my thermos, now rattling weightless in her hand. "We can get you some more."

"Ugh, I never thought I'd say this, but more coffee and I might puke."

"Oh. Some Red Bull or something, then."

"Yuck, gross. Did I start drinking that stuff?"

"No, I can just see your eyes drooping, is all." She toys with the ball of tinfoil and napkins in her hand before tossing it at the nearby trash can. She misses. "How many hours have you gone since that tiny nap in the RV?"

I wrap the food for later and put it aside. "I don't know, eighteen? It's hard to keep track. Are you going to just leave that there?"

Chloe rolls her eyes and gets off her butt so she can put her trash where it belongs. She makes a big show of dropping it in, then returns to my side. "You should've slept more, you damn hippie. I'll be real mad if you pass out on me at the worst time possible."

She's cute enough to get my mind off that stupid journal. "I'm doing okay, Chloe." I pat her leg, and she immediately takes my hand in hers. "Do you always get this worried?"

"No, I just..."

"You know I'll be careful, and I'll have you watching my back. I won't be taking any chances. We must have done this a bunch of times before, right?"

"Yeah, and I worried like a whiny little bitch then, too. But it's worse now. You're not...like, battle-hardened. You might have to—you know, do something drastic, if you know what I mean—and maybe you'll hesitate, and that's all it'll take for me to lose you forever."

Gosh, it's awful to even admit it, but...BetaMax was right after all. It feels amazing to know someone as awesome as Chloe is this concerned over my well-being. You're a terrible person, Max Caulfield.

I put on a cocky smile. "Don't you worry about a thing, I'm immortal, remember?"

"Oh, yes, wow, that's so reassuring."
I lean closer. "Look, if it really comes down to that...I won't hesitate. I promise you, Chloe. I know the stakes."

She simply squeezes my hand, kisses my fingers. We sit there for a while, silently keeping each other company as our thoughts churn through Prescott machinations. When she finally speaks, Chloe's soft voice is an echo of the words in my head.

"They got you accepted into Blackwell."

"I thought I'd gotten lucky..."

I remember the excitement as I wrote on my own journal. The all-caps and exclamation marks. Even while I was in Seattle...they knew. They knew it would be me.

On top of everything, my ego would be terribly bruised now if I hadn't won that dumb contest and received a metric ton of praise for it. At least I can rest assured that the artist in me is worth a damn, despite all the bullshit. Small comforts.

"They let their son die, Max. They just let it happen. Why? What could be worth so much? I mean, I know he was a piece of work, but...damn."

"That's what we're going to find out. Hopefully."

How much of that dreadful first week was their doing? How much since then, how much before that? I've kept saying that fate exists only in our choices. How many of those choices were by design? They planned to grab me once we fled to Seattle. What was their plan in the reality I chose to destroy? Was I "Bluewing's chosen" then?

Nothing makes sense. Like trying to figure out a crossword puzzle with only half the hints, all I get out of it is frustration. I'll just get pissed off if I keep going over it—I can only hope we'll have the answers by the end of the night.

Only now I notice Chloe's been thinking out loud still, throwing out questions and running similar rhetorical circles with her side of the story.

"I'm sorry, but could we just...not talk about any of it right now?"

She looks at me for a moment. "You feeling okay?"

"Yeah, I'm just...I'm all coiled up, I spent hours going through that fucking mansion with you and then this crazy journal, and right now..." I breathe out and let myself sag against her. On reflex she throws an arm around me, the gesture as unthinking as a heartbeat. "I want to unwind for a while. I don't want to think. Just for a few minutes."

Without another word she holds me. I only want to have her close and turn off my brain. She gets it. She always gets it.

Her lips rest on my neck. Her breath is in my hair. Waves lap at the shore straight ahead, water rivulets rolling with the moonlight. She rocks me gently, in concert with the back and forth of the surf. Chloe is the sea, and I'm sinking into her embrace.

"Max."

"Mm."
"I can't let you fall asleep."

"I'm not..."

"You're totally falling asleep."

"No way. I had so much coffee."

"Tell that to sleeping beauty over here. I'm gonna start tickling you."

"Nooo..."

"Don't pout. You have to stay awake."

"Talk to me, then. Tell me things."

She sniffs with amusement. "What do you want me to tell you?"

"I don't know. Whatever comes to your head."

"Fuck's sake, I gotta do everything around here..."

She goes quiet for a moment. Then I can sense the new smile on her face.

"In the years we spent apart, I would fantasize about you calling me."

"Oh my god, I didn't mean depressing stuff."

"You said whatever comes to my head! Now you're stuck with this."

"Okay, okay..."

"At first I expected it, you know? Sometimes I'd stare at the phone, wishing it would ring, only to freak out and freeze if it went off, thinking it was you. Even years later, I'd check my phone or fire up my email and the thought would cross my mind, maybe she sent something. And then I'd be all bitter for a while."

"Are you trying to make me feel bad? Because it's really working."

"No, no, hear me out. I had the whole conversation worked out in my head, you see? It kept changing with how pissed I was in a given day, but the gist of it was always the same. I'd give you a real hard time, and you'd do your usual sweet mousy thing, and then I'd reluctantly forgive you. That's the thing: I'd always forgive you. I was thinking right now that it's funny, how rejecting your friendship wasn't even an option. I wanted you back so bad."

"Still waiting for the part where I don't feel like a total scumbag."

"It's just—everything reminded me of you, all around me it was one memory or another. That's why I had to fuck up my room so bad. After you were gone I realized how much my life revolved around hanging out with you, and everything suddenly felt meaningless."

"Oh, no, Chloe..."

"Like, especially at night, I'd think about you all the time. I'd be curled up in a ball, all alone, sobbing to myself, and I'd call your name, real quiet. Just...calling your name."
"Jeez, really?"

"Yeah, there I was, just hoping for my friend to maybe think about me some time. My best friend, who went to the big city and left me to despair in backwater country. I put up a picture of you on the wall, and I'd kneel before it at dawn—I'd tear at my clothes and weep, so desperate to hear your voice, crying out to the skies, 'Max! Max, why have you forsaken me!'"

At some point in the middle of all that my heartfelt sympathy becomes suspicion. I turn in her arms and look up at her. She doesn't even try to disguise it; she's giving me the most egregious shit-eating grin I've ever seen on her face.

"You jerk!" I shove at her. Chloe thumps against the windshield, already laughing her ass off. "I was believing every word, I felt awful!"

She keeps laughing. I think she's trying to say that she can't believe I fell for it and that I really should get over myself, but she can barely get it out. "Stop it, it's not funny!"

Why would I ever think that saying such a thing would work? What a crazy surprise, it only sets her off even more. The heat in my cheeks is going to make me glow in the dark pretty soon.

"You're so gonna get it now."

She wants to laugh? Just you wait. I straddle my legs over her hips and go for the first exposed sweet spot.

She tenses under me in sudden panic. "Whoa, no no noaaah!" Now she's breathless with laughter, as I mercilessly dig into her sides, under the arms. I caught her wide open with the element of surprise, but in her frantic defense she quickly stems the tide, grabbing my hands and holding them in place with ease. With her belly still shaking, we trade a look. She has the audacity to give me a smug smile. Yeah, it's easy to see that there's no winning this, she's too fast and too strong for me, and she knows it.

Too bad I can cheat.

With the briefest of rewinds my hands break free of her grasp and get full range to poke where they please. She can't anticipate what she literally can't see coming.

"What the—oh, what! You're cheating, no, this is cheating!"

Her words become garbled in laughter and high-pitched squeals. It wants to sound like this is so unfair, but it really is just incoherent gibberish as her hands consistently flail at thin air, because no part of me is there anymore. At some point she basically gives up and just writhes in place instead. "Staahp!"

Yes, I finally understand, it has all become clear now. Winning tickle wars is why I have these powers.

She's lucky I'm gracious in victory. Her head tossed back, her body thrumming with all this joyous energy, I'm hard pressed to come up with a moment when she has been more beautiful. I'm grinning, laughing with her. Remember this moment forever.

If only I had my...huh.

In the standstill I fish out my camera from the bag and perch myself somewhat precariously on the car's hood. I rewind ever so slightly, her hair floating back to a picture-perfect frame as moonlight
catches on her damp eyelids.

I feel short of breath for a second. That is...sublime. She is gorgeous. If this isn't worth the strain of freezing time, nothing in the world is.

I take the shot without moving from the moment. I've never seen a photo taken in-between dimensions. Just in case it doesn't work right, I quickly flick the film after it comes out and pocket it so I can take another. I press the button as soon as I return to regular timeflow.

As I stand astride her hips she keeps laughing with the lingering jitters, lying back with abandon, unwound, spent. "You are such a dirty cheat," she accuses between staggered breaths.

"That'll teach you to mess with the Time Master." She's dragging me down to her, pulling at my knees, catching me when they buckle. "Whoa, watch the camera!"

She swiftly takes it from me, snatches the photo and tosses the camera to her side. It thumps lightly on the blanket as I basically fall on top of her, the picture ending up lying between us. With one hand to my hip she holds me steady, with the other on my nape she guides my mouth to hers. I can still feel her mirth shaking under me as we kiss.

"You cheater," she repeats, "why am I rewarding you?"

"You made fun of me, why am I rewarding you?"

"Because I'm irresistible." She kisses me again. And again, and again.

Don't know how much of a joke it was, but there's nothing but truth in her words. This is what drug addiction might feel like.

I slide off to her side, our bodies still pressed close. She turns over the photo and looks at it. The speechless blinks that follow are the highest form of praise she could've expressed.

"Wow."

"Yeah. That's what I thought when I looked at you." I bring out the one I put away and we compare them side-by-side. They turned out nearly identical, but with subtle differences. A faint gossamer glow to her outlines, an ethereal haze in places. Colors a polaroid could never normally capture.

I find myself staring at it, mesmerized. It isn't just her obvious beauty, though I could stare at it endlessly for that reason alone. There is a joy to this image that doesn't seem to belong in our lives. A stolen moment of pure daylight in the storm.

She rests her cheek on my head. "If the superhero gig doesn't pan out, at least you can use your powers to take the most amazing photos the world will ever see."

"I'm pretty sure that's been the whole point all along." I idly fidget with the ring on her finger. I might be biased, but it looks good on her. "What time is it?"

"Ah, shit." She pulls out her phone. "Almost ten. You made me forget all about it for a minute. Let's get all the stuff inside."

"Maybe it won't happen this time."

"Yeah, right, you know better than that. Come on, we can clear the back and cuddle some more in there, you shameless cheat."
She knows how to motivate me. The prettier photo goes in my pocket (at her insistence), the other in hers. The blanket gets folded, the drinks tossed and the camera packed in my bag. We've barely spent a minute nestled together in the back seat when the first pellet goes puk against the windshield. We watch in silence as the hail quickly grows into an uninterrupted torrent.

She holds me a bit tighter and buries her nose in my hair. "It's like going through—"

"A car wash?"

"Yeah. Already said that, huh?"

"Yep."

Just like before, our voices drop to a nigh reverent tone, like refugees huddled in a bomb shelter. The ice is already melting by the time it hits the car. There is nothing but water outside, like the sea decided to rise up and swallow us whole.

"How much of everything that just happened was a repeat?"

"Oh, none of it. Each moment new. Even this: we were in the front seats before, bullshitting back and forth."

Just by the sense of her grip and the cadence of her breath I can tell she's trying to find the right words to tell me something.

"I know I'm not supposed to be selfish like this," she starts. Then stops.

"But?"

"But...I want to keep what just happened. I want to remember it. I know there's always new memories, and everything is special, and you might not get a choice if—"

"Chloe, of course. You don't have to explain or apologize, seriously."

"I'm not even asking you, though. I'm just...saying it out loud. I'll still be pissed if you take dumb risks, so if you have to rewind past ten, don't you fucking dare hesitate."

"I get it, okay? I totally get it. I want to share these memories with you too. How about I go in at one in the morning, just in case? We'll just watch the diner home video twice or something."

"As long as you don't fall asleep..."

"You've done a great job at keeping me awake so far, I have faith in you." I give her a sweet smile that she can't see. "I mean, if there's something you're good at, it's being a nuisance."

"Oh-ho-ho, really? I think I'm about to prove you right," she says, and pinches my butt hard enough to make me jump.

"Ow!"

"Keep flapping those lips, smart-mouth. It'll be a titty-twister next."

"Jeez..."

It's only getting louder and crazier outside. Not going to lie, I'd be kinda scared right now if I were here all by myself. It feels like it's the fucking end-times deluge out there.
Chloe's kissing my head as though she can read my thoughts. Or maybe she just feels guilty about the pinch. "Wonder if David's looking out the window right now and planning an evacuation already. It might save me from telling the whole story."

"You should tell him anyway. I trust him."

"Egh. We'll see. That Raymond kid better get to work right away. You think he'll actually do something?"

"He should. The note was really thorough. I'll scare him again tomorrow if he doesn't, this is serious business. Nobody's dying needlessly this time around, I swear it."

"That's the attitude. Let's just hope we don't even have to do anything. After what happened last time," she tips her chin at the window, "who could ignore that?"

It's the third time I go through this freak hailstorm tonight. Still it fills me with a deep-seated unease that I can't shake off. Only the most hardened skeptic would not see this as a sign of bad things to come.

"We'll make sure no-one ignores it."

Oh god, please. Butterfly spirit, "Bluewing," whatever you want me to call you. Let this be the last time I sit through the storm. Let this night end well. Let me find the answers we seek and put an end to the Prescott nightmare.

And hey, while I'm doing this weird prayer thing...if you feel like answering, please tell me whatever the hell you want from me.

No? Nothing?

Never mind. I guess it was worth a shot.

Poor Sarah got tased again. She didn't even see it coming this time. I'm sorry, Sarah—but don't worry, it's only temporary.

The card goes in. The doors open. I casually go inside, watch the second set of doors slam shut and walk up to them as the alarm blares all around me.

"Yeah, okay," Chloe says in my ear, "don't know how I could've gotten past that."

"We play to our strengths," I respond, though I know she can't even make out what I say if I don't shout.

Rewind, near-freeze, waltz in. On the inside there's a touch-screen with three simple buttons on display: ARM, DISARM, and PANIC. On this side of the now-open doors, there are good old reliable handles and a manual deadbolt.

I press DISARM and it rewards me with an Alarm Disabled message. With some difficulty I haul the doors closed until they latch, then open them manually. Both sets swing toward me all by themselves the moment I undo the lock. "Alright, safe enough, hopefully."

"I'll be storming the place if you can't get out, so if you don't want that to happen you better not get trapped."

"Duly noted. I'm going back now."
"Good luck."

Rewind to twenty-seven minutes ago.

"I'm inside the room," I whisper.

"Holy shit, I barely just kissed you goodbye. You're too cool for this world. Did you make sure you can get out?"

"Yes. Movement outside?"

"Stand by, away team." Silence. "Nothing. Let's do this thing."

The first good look at the infamous Art Room at last. The space is lit in the soft white of waist-high lamps scattered throughout, wide and shaded so they only properly illuminate the exquisite marble tile. The vaulted ceiling is shrouded in near-darkness as a result, with each artwork only visible in ambiguous penumbra. It's larger than I had imagined, divided into several sections separated by stylish wooden bulkheads. The paths and dead-ends take the arrangement close to hedge maze territory. Sculptures and framed images mingle in each section, the details thoroughly obscured in the dim lighting.

Something tells me this is no art gallery with collector pieces and expensive names.

"That's a lot of lamps," Chloe chimes in. "I guess the Prescotts are not concerned about their electric bill."

"It's so quiet here. It gives me the creeps."

"Don't worry, I'll keep you company."

I can take my pick of three different sections up-front. I approach the nearest, soft footsteps the only sound in the stillness. *Scions,* reads the sign standing before me. Automatic lights come alive the moment I draw near, shining upon every piece in the cluster.

"Whoa, okay."

Most of the lighting is the uniform white that's standard for any gallery, but for some artworks it shines different colors or focuses on certain parts of the piece. At the center of this area is a stylized sculpture of a lynx perching on its stand, elfin features so lifelike that looking into its eyes makes me feel like it's staring back. I move up to the closest painting, an illustration of a huge grizzly bear half-way to standing up, raising a menacing paw at some poor bastard crawling before it. *Strength of Ursa,* says the placard on the wooden frame. Tucked into the tiny space between glass and wood is a picture of a copper-skinned man with a shock of black hair. *Sergio DaSilva* is scribbled next to his head. It's definitely Dianne Prescott's handwriting.

The next one over is labeled *Lupine Cunning.* It's a small oil painting of a dark lair, and only golden eyes and white teeth can be seen in its depths. A well-lit and posed headshot is attached to the frame, lush dark waves around a narrow face with sharp features. *Helen Briar,* it says.

"So that's how she looks. I was way off."

"Holy crap, Max. These are totally the other freaks of nature. Start taking pictures."

I pull out the phone and get to work. "You know, the whole 'freaks of nature' thing is kind of offensive."
"Dude, it's literally what you guys are. Just being descriptive here."

"Uh-huh."

*Viper's Venom. Marion Cook.*

*The Ox Charges. Carlo and Remi Laurent.*

*Reynard in His Den. Patrick Sullivan.*

The variety in technique and style is impressive. Either Mrs. Prescott is an outstanding and versatile artist, or there is more than one person contributing to the collection. Probably the truth is both of those things.

There's no title under the next one. It isn't a painting at all, but a black and white photograph of a doe. It's lying dead on the road—at first sight it seems to be roadkill, but there's no blood or broken bones. The poor thing looks eerily peaceful.

I've seen enough of it to know that this is Nathan's work, there's no doubt in my mind. And the picture tucked into the frame's corner...

"Max. No way."

"*Rachel Amber,*" I read out loud. Dianne wrote *(no longer)* under the name. It feels wrong to say it.

"No, there's no way Rachel was a spirit-thing."

"Did you ever notice anything weird with her?"

"It was Rachel, she was weird, but good-weird. Everybody loved her, it was...yeah, okay, I guess it was kind of weird—but she would've told me something like this. There's no way she would've kept it a secret."

*Just like she told you all about Frank and Jefferson?*

I almost blurt it out like the idiot I am. Keep the snark about Rachel to yourself, Max Caulfield. It's so sad and insecure, not to mention unwarranted. Get the fuck over it.

"She probably didn't know," I say instead. "Maybe some of these powers are so subtle that you don't realize what they are. Not everybody gets to turn back time and break reality."

Chloe just utters a non-committal grunt. I take the picture and move on to the next stop. It makes no difference now, there's no need to dig into old wounds.

A few more paintings follow, attached to more people I don't recognize. There is quite a bit of empty space here, with obvious vacant spots ready to house another frame. Other "scions" not yet depicted, is our guess, or maybe they're yet to be discovered altogether.

The sign standing before the next section reads *Guardians.* As the lights come on I can see the arrangement is similar to the first, but here a life-sized owl sculpture watches over the whole display, a few feet above my head. Hung on the pedestal at eye-level is a very somber, very official portrait of Sean Prescott. The placard says *Prescott Family – Covenant of 1886.*

I drag my finger along the engraved words. "Covenant. As in...a pact? What does that mean?"

"You tell me, Brainiac."
I look at the paintings around me. Unlike the others, these all share a common style and composition. Very clean lines, solid colors—reminiscent of traditional Native-American art. Most have a photo portrait directly beneath, and every one of them is a serious Caucasian man. A soaring hawk, Triplehorn family, covenant of 1903. A leaping stag, Caulson-Thomas family, covenant circa 1710. A long-toothed weasel, Rothschild family, covenant of 1769. A...vulture, I think? Sutherland family, covenant date unknown. There are other animal paintings, but they don't have a family name or date attached. Instead they're marked "free agent."

Chloe lets out a pensive breath. "Care to make a guess what these are about?"

"I don't know. Spirit guardians passed down the family line? I've no idea."

"Whatever it is, Sean Prescott is one of them."

I shrug. "Good to have in mind, I suppose."

While intriguing, there isn't much to go on, here. Next section over.

As I approach, whatever is in there looks...big. Avatars, the sign says. The lights come on, and I have to take a step back. "Holy..."

"What the shit is that?"

"It's...a spider?"

"This woman is fucked up."

Hovering above my head is the eight-eyed face of a giant spider sculpture. Its abdomen folds downwards, a web-like mesh of white rods sprouting from its spinnerets to provide support for the work. Its gross hairy legs perch down and wrap around a full-sized portrait of a woman, and there is no question that this is a rather indulgent self-portrait.

I wouldn't hesitate to describe her as witch-like—of the alluring and mysterious kind. Her hair is long, black as a raven's feather and fabulously styled. Poised straight as a rod, she peers down her nose at the "camera" behind a pair of noticeably thick glasses. She's dressed in a burgundy gown, long sleeved, vaporous, expensive. The jewelry is subtle yet noticeable, and the hint of a smile at the corner of her lips seems to be amused at a joke only she understands.

Only one word labels the entire work, etched at the top of the frame itself. Fateweaver.

Chloe whistles softly in admiration. "I don't remember her looking nearly that fucking hot in the pictures we've seen."

"Didn't know you had a thing for older women."

"Dude, she looks our age in that painting. Would totally bang."

"I'm standing right here, Chloe."

"Come on, hypothetically! I mean hypothetically. Wouldn't you?"

I walk around the frame, taking a closer look at the spider itself. "Yes, let's all have casual sex with my evil arch-enemy, sure. What kind of material is this? It must weight a ton..." I rub the tip of one of its legs between thumb and forefinger. "Oh. It's a wire mesh, covered in black cloth. Of course."

"Wait, go back. What's that? Behind the painting."
"Oh. It's...another portrait. Of an actual witch?"

Black robe, pointy hat, huge nose full of warts and dark aura of evil. Another etching upon the frame: *Catalyst – Mother.*

Chloe is chuckling. "Why are all these rich families always so fucked up?"

"Maybe it isn't creative license, and her mother is a literal witch. It wouldn't surprise me at this point."

"And there's that 'catalyst' word again."

"Yeah. I don't know, let's just keep looking."

There are four large works arranged in a semi-circle behind the spider. They're all eye-catching, but one in particular immediately gets my full attention.

"Chloe...it's us."

"Holy shit, look at that thing."
"Okay," Chloe says, "I know you're in the den of evil and this is real sinister and all, but...when it's all over, I want that thing hanging somewhere in our house."

I'm only half-listening, because I still need a moment to take it in. "Uh. Do we have a house?"

"Our future house. Or New York loft, or cabin in the woods, or whatever. We'll decorate with the
spoils of battle."

"What's with the weird darkness around my head?"

Black tendrils sprout in an ethereal weave hovering around me, a sort of...black halo.

"I don't know. A manifestation of the grade-A bullshit trauma clogging your brain?"

"It's not that bad..."

I get a bit closer. Bluewing, says the etching at the top. And below: Catalyst – ♥ Chloe ♥

"That's your name. With hearts around it."

"Yeah. I see it."

"What's up with the hearts around it?"

She waits for a beat. "She has a crush on me, obviously. I mean, who wouldn't?"

"Uh-huh." I can't even muster the tepid chuckle she deserves right now. Seeing myself posing like a superhero is too fucking weird. "So you're my...catalyst?"

"I guess so? You know, it kind of would make sense to call me that. I kept bugging you all the time to use your powers back then, and I'm the reason you kept using them. You came into this reality because of me, and what's the first thing I tell you to do? Use your powers." She's silent for a moment. "Shit. It's like I'm this...cosmic influence on you."

"Isn't that what I've been trying to tell you? It's always been you who keeps me going, without you I wouldn't even have these powers, I would've never pushed myself. Look at this thing, you're front and center, you're every bit as important as I could ever be."

Another moment of quiet. "Y'know what? This whole thing is starting to really freak me out."

"Just starting? My hair's been standing on end for the last twenty minutes."

"How does she know all this shit, Max? It's way worse than I'd imagined, we're like...grossly outclassed—I mean, we barely even cared this bitch existed, but she has fucking fan art of us?"

"Well...I guess that's what we're here for, right? Catching up. We have to find out how deep the rabbit hole goes."

"Yeah. Okay. Stay calm and keep taking pictures, we'll figure things out once you're out of there."

With some reluctance I step away and look around. Three more large paintings. A familiar girl, covered in moths. They crawl all over her, thread through her hair, swarm at her back. The young woman is laughing in true joy, more moths coming out of her mouth. A man lies dead at her feet. Mirage. Catalyst – Ryan Derrick Auntie Dianne.

Next, a teenage girl sitting on wooden steps, knees tucked up to her chin. Dark haired, tan and somewhat overweight, she stares straight at the viewer, eyes reddened and bitterly sad. Behind her, a tall scrawny boy faces directly away, his back turned to her in a deliberate snub.

A praying mantis sits atop the girl's head, utterly unconcerned. The rest of the canvas becomes a tangle of low-contrast wavy patterns in an expanding circle all around her, strands leading off the
center as if she is the source of the distortion.


Lastly, a thirty-something woman walks alone like aiming to step out of the frame. Her skin is the color of roasted coffee beans, her clothes a pristine white suit. Flames lick her limbs and coil in her wake, smoldering cracks spread on the stone where she steps—and yet, within the cracks, grass and vines and tiny flowers sprout. Huge insect wings made of bright golden light spread at her back, colors and contrast so vibrant it gives the impression the canvas might catch fire any moment.

*Flamewreath.* There's nothing else inscribed.

"Man," Chloe says, "wonder if we're supposed to fight all these people."

"I hope not. I don't think so, this feels more like a...I don't know, an MVP gallery? And if we're part of it, we might even be able to get someone else on our team."

"That sounds a lot like wishful thinking, though I wouldn't mind having that flaming lady on our side. She looks all kinds of badass."

"First we'd have to find out who the hell she is. Honestly, I'm dreading whatever else is in here. There's so much more to get through."

"So get to it, then. No time like the future past."

She gets a snort out of me. "Who's the dork now?"

"You. It's still you, always and forever."

I take my pictures and walk back to the start. Don't think too much yet, keep going. Two bulkhead-made corridors lead further in, ostensibly joining behind the *Guardians* section. No automatic lights come on as I step between the makeshift walls: my careful strides are bathed in white, everything above the waist is steeped in shadow.

Four different entrances to as many sections, each marked by a lamp and a sign. A corridor running down the middle between them, bare and perfunctory, heading to whatever is past this part. There's also the doorway to an adjacent room on the wall close by. Beyond an arched threshold with curtains drawn back, I can make out the shape of an easel and stool.

It would be extremely easy for someone to hide in there and catch me off-guard after I move on. With every time-bending precaution I approach within a slow rewind, then briefly go back to normal to flip the light switch. As I endure the dull ache I take a good look at what I presume is Dianne Prescott's painting studio, lit in perfectly uniform white and well-stocked with all the tools of the trade.

It's fairly small. Cozy, one could say. No unpleasant surprises lying in wait here.

"Whoa, what was that jump?"

"Making sure this side-room is safe. Sorry."

"Oh, okay, cool."

Back to business. I walk down the entryway to each section, trying to decide which to explore first.
The seared-wood signs posted before them each have a small motif below the words.

*Duplicity.* The moth.

*A Path Aflame.* The firefly.

The long bare corridor, foreboding as all fuck.

*Logos, Ethos, Pathos.* The praying mantis.

*Chrysalis.* The butterfly.

I stand before what I can only assume is our very own gallery. Even in the dimness I can already see this one is bigger than the others, jam-packed with artworks of every size. "No way this is all fan art, right?"

"Let's find out, Super Max. Pretty sure it'll be way creepier than that."

Light floods the area as I step past the sign. Two long walls full of stuff, with free-standing pieces and occasional separators in the middle, here and there. There is so much that I don't know where to look first. It isn't only paintings: there are series of photographs, a few sculptures, sketches—sometimes with several tiers, one above the other. Paper blue butterflies are scattered throughout, resting on frames and bulkheads, sitting atop statuettes, hanging from threads down from the ceiling.

"This is nuts," I breathe out loud.

"She's committed to the theme, I'll give her that. Dude, that's totally my truck."

A model of her old rust bucket sits on a display case a few feet straight ahead. It looks fully hand-crafted in wood, every detail painted, down to the stickers and the busted up license plate. Inside, cute little clay dummies represent Chloe and I. We're looking at each other, a big goofy smile on our toothpick-etched lips. *Set in Motion,* reads the plaque underneath.

"Creeped out already," she says.

"We've barely started."

My head is spinning after getting through only a few pieces. The first series of small paintings is titled *In the Beginning.* Cutesy-cartoony depictions of two girls growing up together, from their first meeting at the daycare all the way to a tragic death in the family. I recognize each and every situation—we are scrubbing at a wine stain on a carpet, in one of them. A curved arrow is drawn on the wall in black sharpie, pointing up and away from William walking out the door for the last time. *See branching timelines,* the handwriting says. Yeah, uh, okay. I'll get to it.

Next up is *Divergence.* Above, I'm getting through my new life in Seattle. Bright colors, sharp clean lines, hopeful tone. Below, Chloe spirals out of control. Dark contrasts, violent strokes, bleak as can be even after Rachel enters the picture. A thick black line separates the sets, white letters written within: *by fate forsaken.*

Next comes *Transformation,* vignettes of events as they happened during the dreadful five days from hell. Chloe standing over Nathan in the bathroom. Me taking her picture while she dances. Us walking on railroad tracks, and being complete fools in the Blackwell pool, and finding Rachel's body. It keeps going, most of them situations nobody ever saw happening, nobody but us. And more arrows call for a viewing of the *branching timelines* section.
"Max...this is our whole lives. They've been watching us our whole lives."

"This feels like way more than watching."

*Doomed Paths.* It's me in a fluttering hospital gown, catching a tornado-borne school bus in a rewind. It's Chloe staring at her hands as she takes a razor to her wrists. It's Rachel, Chloe and I, posing together for a picture—there's Chloe sitting by my hospital bed as I languish comatose, there's me and none other than Sean Prescott, shaking hands without one hint of animosity. And some are pencil sketches, done in a radically different style that reeks of Nathan's more unhinged work. "Chloe in the Dark Room," repeated over and over. Jefferson fused in a hug with someone, maybe him. A mockup of Nathan's graduation diploma and a plethora of others I can't find the will to decipher.

*Necessary Evil.* A huge mural with every one of Jefferson's sick photographs. *Deanna, Lucy, Carol-Ann, Ashley, Megan...so many more.* Then comes Rachel. Kate.

Maxine.

It feels like I'm losing my mind as we look closely at mine. With a tiny bit of relief I see they aren't the actual photos, but pencil sketches. Some are posed and framed just like the ones I remember from a reality that never was. Though the style isn't nearly as erratic as before, Nathan's work is still easy to recognize.

I've had a nauseous feeling in my stomach for a while now. This is insane. Chloe's chatter has been reduced mostly to breathless swearing.

*Branching Timelines,* each one its own series of meticulous pencil and charcoal illustrations. Thirteen-year-old Max, triumphantly tossing keys out the window. Chloe, happy as can be on her sixteenth birthday. A heart-wrenching wreckage. Chloe, sweet and brave Chloe, broken and bedridden, asking me to do what she could not. There's a post-it note below the car wreck. *Corrective measure,* it says.

Chloe lying on a filthy junkyard with a bullet wound to the head, followed by everything I did to undo the timeline. Another "corrective measure" note is attached to one of the drawings. It shows the jagged edge of a chair's leg, honed sharp enough to maybe cut through duct tape if enough friction is applied. It would seem an utterly random and nonsensical drawing to anyone that wasn't forced to break free from that chair.

There's me, hugging myself while sitting on a bathroom floor. Attending a funeral. Going through the motions until I couldn't bear it anymore. No note here. There's us, hugging my parents. Attending a meeting with a man we thought we'd left behind. Going through hell and escaping from it. No note there, either.

Dread has steadily grown into a monster gnawing at my insides. "How do they know about this, Chloe? How could they possibly know?"

"I don't know. Fuck, I've no idea. Eavesdropping spies? A bug planted in our RV?"

"But...they'd have found us a long time ago if they had surveillance on us. Right? And I hadn't even told *you* about my reality until two days ago, there's no way they had time to—I mean, did you see the detail in most of this stuff? It took years to put this whole place together, I came to this timeline *two days ago,* nothing makes sense, how can these drawings even *exist?"

"Okay, just...calm down, keep it together, alright? This is some crazy magical family of assholes,
they know shit, okay? Let's leave it at that for now, we have to take all the pictures and get you the fuck out of there. Okay?"

I realize I was raising my voice almost to the point of screaming. My heart is anxiously booming in my ears, I'm pacing ill-at-ease and didn't even notice. I start deliberately taking deep breaths, trying to compartmentalize the freak-out away into its own little mind-box.

"Max, I'm serious, get out now if you feel you can't handle it anymore. We got enough, I just want you safe now."

"N-no, no, I'm okay, I can do it."

"Are you sure?"

I try to steady my voice and sound reassuring. "It's been a really long night, my nerves are a bit fried, that's all. I'm good, Chloe."

I can sense her skepticism in the silence. "Besides," I tell her, "we still don't know why they're doing all this."

"Just...don't run yourself into the ground, alright? I had enough of that with the other versions of you."

"Don't worry. Let's keep going."

My steps are almost steady as I arrive at what seems to be the main focus of the display. Unlike most of the other stuff so far, these are elaborate oil paintings on large canvases—not as huge and impressive as those in the avatars section, but with the same level of breathtaking care. All twelve of them are arranged along an arch of extra fancy bulkheads, each artwork with its own custom frame and title. The name of the collection is inscribed at the start in ornate black lettering:

Bluewing's Maximal Path
(No Pun Intended)

It begins in the Blackwell bathroom. I'm in the foreground, facing away, dramatically holding out my hand toward Chloe and Nathan. It's easy to see in Chloe's ashen features that the gun already went off. It's titled Bluewing's Chosen Is Jolted Awake.

Next I'm passed out in Chloe's lap, her face the picture of worry. We're on a rusted car's hood. Heaps of junk are piled all around us, a train cruises through the background. Her hands carefully wipe blood from under my nose. It's titled The Catalyst at Work.

The next one is in first-person. From ground level Kate can be seen leaning into thin air atop the Prescott Dormitory. A hand, distinctly my own, comes into the painting, bloodied fingers taut with strain. Thick raindrops are defined in great detail, down to every minute refraction. A bird is caught in the frame, frozen in place. Though the image further tightens the knot in my throat, the photographer in me won't shut up about the amazing work with perspective, here. Breaking Boundaries Prematurely.

It's followed by a pair of works hanging next to each other. Both look at my back from over the shoulder as I stare into a photo I know all too well. In one I'm sitting in my dorm's bedroom as I endlessly retread in my mind an argument over nothing. A Remorse-Driven Journey. In the other I sit by Chloe's bedside. A photo album lies on her lap, her hand resting limp next to it. Teardrops run down the polaroid gingerly held between my fingers. To Learn the Folly of Discrete Changes.
"Fuck," I hear Chloe mutter. I might lose it again if I start talking, so I take the picture and keep going.

The next one is a profile of Jefferson and me in the Dark Room. He's bent at the waist, staring close into my eyes, a smug punchable smile on his asshole face. I'm strapped to the chair, leaning toward him with such visceral loathing in my glare that I barely recognize myself. I can almost hear the words "eat shit and die" coming out of my mouth. *When Fear Becomes Wrath.*

Chloe's tone wraps a similar hatred around her words. "That fucker is lucky he died before I got my hands on him. I'd have spent days paying him back for what he did."

"Did I ever tell you about this? Precisely this, exactly as it happened?"

"No. You spared me the details."

"So then..."

"So then, yeah, they somehow know way more than we thought. Take all the damn pictures already and get the fuck out, Max."

She can't hide the tremor in her voice. Chloe is probably as ready to scream as I am. She's right, don't obsess over it yet, just get the job done. There'll be time later to take in the details and agonize over implications.

We kiss farewell in front of the mega-tornado, and next to that we also hold hands while watching the destruction—all "four" of us, standing on the same cliff. *An Irreversible Bond.*

I'm strapped to a chair in a white room, staring into a laptop screen. The horror in my eyes is something I didn't think possible to capture so completely with simple paint and brush. There is no doubt as to what I'm watching. *The Forgotten is Given Single-Minded Focus.*

I'm kneeling before a gravestone, hugging myself. I look exactly as broken as I felt at the time. *Encroaching Despair.*

I'm a flitting shadow in a hallway, desperately running toward the window ahead. I'm surrounded by uniformed people that aim their weapons off-target. *Preparing the Host for the Twice-Awake.*

I'm a silhouette atop the lighthouse, leaning into the wind. A blue butterfly sits on the foreground as if watching it happen. *The Unchosen Reawakens in a Nevermore World.*

The whole gallery comes to an abrupt end after the next piece. Within the half-light I can already see two more large sections ahead. Their signs are plain enough to read from here. *Endgame. The Weave.*

Keep going, just keep going.

In the last painting I'm lying on marble tile. Above me, all around me, a cloud of blackness throngs and swells to cover most of the canvas. The unfathomable dark sprouts in ribbons from my own head, as if I'm the source of it all. *Perfect Timing, Maxine."

"What—"

Pressure builds inside my head, and the sudden pain is like railroad spikes shoved into my eye-sockets.
"Ngh—"

"Max?"

It doubles me over. My knees go weak. My head burns with agony like I've never known. I could no more resist it than I could stop a freight train with my bare hands, and I don't even feel it when I collapse on the floor.

"Max!"

For a moment there is only pain, overpowering and absolute. It feels like forever until it recedes, and the first difference I notice is the faint smell of seawater in the air. I roll onto my back, hands cradling my head as though it might explode if I don't hold it together.

I open my eyes to black skies.

"Ungh..."

The ground under my back is soft and damp, and in near-darkness I see the shapes of sparse trees, a few shrubs, a sky that's one huge raincloud ready to unleash an end-times flood. There is a roaring thrum in the background, like that of a far-off jet engine. The pain rolls back to a dull presence, but it doesn't leave completely.

"Fuck...fuck, no, not again, not now..."

I groan to my feet and with some difficulty manage to stay upright. There is a small trail ahead, between the shrubs. Not one leaf is moving. Everything around me is in perfect stillness.

Wait, what did I just say? I was...I was doing something. I was somewhere else just now, right? It was important.

I was...

"It's not your fault."

Chloe's voice, solid and present like she's standing two feet to my side. Frantically I look, but she's not there.

"Chloe?"

"This had to happen. It's not your fault."

She's...elsewhere. Up the trail. I know it the same way I know she's not speaking the truth—even though she knows the truth. I've told her. I've told her everything.

My eyes slowly adjust to the darkness. The place is familiar, but the path is not one I've tread before. I move forward through the stillness, toward...the cliffside. Yes, that's right, the cliffside. That's what we came here for. To watch it happen.

I feel it, I can distinctly feel her fingers tangled with mine. It's not a sensation I could ever mistake for anything else.

"Why do you punish yourself like this? We can still turn back, you don't have to see it."

"Yes," my voice responds. "I do."
Arcadia Bay so far below, asleep in the black of night. Not a single light is on, not one car through its streets. I know there should be a lighthouse atop the cliff across from us, yet there is only the jagged remains of battered rock. Ships are foundered all over the harbor. The beach is only sand and seabed, the water is all gone a mile into the ocean. And beyond, in the thundering distance...a presence. A monster.

It curves the horizon in a way that's entirely surreal. It's growing, it's swelling, fast approaching. A wall of water as tall as a mountain; a leviathan, roaring with its abyssal maw, come to crash upon the shore and obliterate everything in its path.

This is the kind of monster from which no town could ever recover.

"It's not your fault, Max."

"It's my doing. I chose it."

"Nobody chooses this. Stop killing yourself over it."

Her arms wrap around me. I can feel them, I see them now, we're together, always together. Her voice is a plea next to my ear. Her love is all that keeps me sane.

Our hands nestled together over my chest, we watch the ocean swallow what's left of Arcadia Bay. We watch through the night, until dawn breaks beyond the mountains.

I open my eyes to a white ceiling, then shut them closed at the sudden influx of light.

My head. God, my head, it feels swollen and throbbing, ready to crack into pieces. And one spot in particular, above my brow—it's like someone took a hammer to it.

Beyond the pain, my senses are as though smothered beneath a dozen blankets. As though...drug-addled.

Fear spreads through my lungs and skitters up my throat. I try to get up but there are restraints on my limbs. My wrist and hand sting sharply, as if from a puncture wound. I look around, really look around.

Four walls around me, barely six by six. A bed underneath, a lone toilet and a machine embedded into the wall. A door sturdy enough to withstand a cannonball. As the white tile and the camera and food tray slot and crisp sheets—as the cell I'm in makes itself known to me, terror grows into an insect swarm crawling under my skin.

I'm a prisoner. I'm their prisoner. It's real, it's fucking real.

The truth of it empties my lungs, and it's only now that understanding crashes onto my thoughts like a tidal wave upon a sleepy coastal town.

Everything I've seen, all the visions that came to me...they were not memories at all.

They were warnings.

They were visions of the future.
The gorgeous art for Max and Chloe's portrait was created by the excellent Artkitt - Tumblr Deviantart. It was commissioned all of his own initiative by Debott, our trusty German translator. Big thanks to them both.
The world slowly comes into focus from the haze. I remember waking up briefly in the cell, and then...nothing. It takes me some time to understand I’m bound to the chair. Table, laptop, phone, mirror. It’s all as real as the dull thrumming in my temples.

“Miss Caulfield. I believe this conversation is long overdue.”

The words barely register still. My head is stuffed with wool, weighted with lead, seized by visceral fear and intense loathing.

“I’ll let you gather your thoughts for a moment. I would rather you were in full use of your mental faculties, or as close to it as you can be at this time. You may even travel through this conversation, if you are up to the task once your head clears. It will be an interesting experience.”

“Chloe...”

“All in due time. Be still, now. Let the medication wear off.”

My voice is a dry rasp. I would murder for a gulp of water. “Where’s Chloe...”

“She’s alive and well. Gather your wits, Miss Caulfield. You will need them.”

The pain in my head becomes more acute as the drug-induced fog clears. My clothes are gone, replaced by a flimsy gown. It makes me sick to my stomach to know someone here undressed me and handled my body while I was unconscious. I can only hope that’s all they did.

I try to pull myself free, but my muscles are barely there right now. I wouldn’t be able to break through chewed-up shoelaces, let alone the sturdy manacles holding me down with zero room to wiggle. How long has it been since the Art Room? It feels like I haven’t moved in weeks.

I take a deep breath, let it out slowly. Try to work whatever moisture I can gather into my throat. “Tell me where Chloe is.”

“She’s safe in our custody, now. She was injured during capture, but we treat her well enough, despite her best efforts to be disruptive.”

“Injured? You injured her?”

“An unfortunate lapse in discipline. You can see for yourself.”

With some effort I focus on the screen. The pointer in the remotely-accessed laptop clicks through menus in some kind of surveillance program. The ensuing video cuts through the perspective of a few cameras, showing a dark shadow charging through the lawn, barging into the mansion, gunning down everyone in her path. It cuts to Chloe taking a crowbar to the Art Room door, and
setting up a bunch of the pipe-bombs we brought just in case, and trying to ram through after the detonations, and kicking and screaming at it when everything fails. Then it cuts to her in the middle of a shootout, trying to use the cover afforded by the arcade. She gets shot in the leg, but continues to fight until a dart comes from her unprotected side, burrying itself in her collarbone. She brings a hand to it. I see the white of her gritted teeth.

I can feel my chest breaking as she slumps back against the wall, out of sight. The video stops.

“One of my employees was far too distraught from the loss of a comrade and went against my strict mandate for non-lethal weapons. He will be disciplined.”

I only half-hear him. Tears burn on my eyelids as I stare at the black-and-white freeze-frame. She should’ve fled, I should’ve made her promise to run away if I got trapped. She could have sought help, make a plan, blow a hole in the walls with proper explosives, something.

God, who am I kidding? She wouldn’t have listened, just like there’s no way I could’ve ever left her behind if the roles were reversed.

“That being said, your partner trespassed on our property and murdered several of my staff. One could argue that her wounds are well-earned.”

The current time-stamp is right there in the bottom right corner of the screen. 11:12AM, 3/11/2014.

March 11. Fuck you, Universe. Fuck you and your twisted sense of humor.

It’s been two days, then. Two days under heavy sedation, maybe even a medically-induced coma, since I don’t remember any of it. That probably means an actual doctor treating me. A nurse moving me, cleaning me up. I might throw up in my mouth thinking about it. How much do you have to pay someone to do these things outside a hospital?

“You people are sick.” I want to put fire in my voice, but it comes out smothered-wet. “How can you do this to anyone?”

“If you are referring to your current state, it was necessary. We kept you alive, Miss Caulfield. The swelling in your brain would have caused severe damage without medication.”

“Swelling?”

“From your vision. Your gift is not without drawbacks. You must have understood by now that we have led you down this particular path, which led to a series of visions you were not yet prepared to withstand. Without the treatment we administered, you’d have never regained consciousness.”

“Am I supposed to be thankful? You made me trigger that vision!”

“No. Not in the sense that you mean. We simply knew when and where it would happen. Dianne does love to indulge in theatrics, however. I’m of more...pragmatic inclinations.”

Try as I might to focus, his voice keeps fading in and out of my awareness. Some of the words become garbled, others I understand but can’t quite process like I would in a normal conversation.

Two days...

“Look, I don’t care. Do you have any idea what I saw? We’re all going to die if we stay in Arcadia Bay.”
“We are safe here. The upcoming storm won’t be as severe as you think. The high-speed hail will claim some casualties and a lot of property damage, but the twister will die out soon after it swallows the lighthouse rift. This is why we built storm shelters, we are prepared. Most of the townies are flocking to them or evacuating.”

The fuck is he talking about?

I’m forcing my thoughts to bump into each other, parsing his words with care. This means...they don’t know what I saw. They can’t see into my visions.

How can I work that into leverage?

I’ve no idea. I don’t think I can. I’d rather try to save people’s lives.

“It’s not just a tornado this time. Arcadia Bay is about to drown in a tidal wave. You need to get everyone out, there might not be any time left.”

For a moment there is only silence.

“You are not lying,” he finally says. It’s a statement, there is no question at all in his tone.

“No shit. I guess you sick fucks don’t know everything after all.”

“Tell me exactly what you saw.”

I press my lips together. Yeah, saving people is important, sure. But...

“I want to talk to Chloe, first. I need to know that she’s safe.”

I hear a subdued sigh at the other end of the line. “You don’t understand your situation, Miss Caulfield. Your life is no longer your own, you won’t ever talk to her again. Her well-being, however, is entirely in your hands.”

He says it like it’s an immutable fact, a universal truth. You won’t ever talk to her again. The words plunge deep into my lungs. He might as well have stabbed me in the chest.

I know that this is where I’m supposed to be bold. It’s where I find something clever and brave to say, and give him the finger, and throw him off-balance.

You won’t ever talk to her again.

The idea is like sinking in a pit. I can’t think of a different combination of words that would more thoroughly shake me. This is yet another advantage they have over me, isn’t it? This man knows exactly what I want and how to exploit it, while I still have no idea what motivates them.

I swallow, shake my head. “You’re wrong. You can’t keep us apart. Nothing can.”

I want it to be a defiant stance. It comes off as an attempt to convince myself. It’s not over, Max. Grit your teeth and fight.

“Your vision, Miss Caulfield. Tell me what you saw.”

“Let me see her or go fuck yourself.”

“I was already planning to show you her living space, but it will happen after you tell me what I want to know. It’s in your best interest to cooperate with me, Miss Caulfield. We will resort to more
invasive methods, otherwise.”

“Look, I told you. We watched a huge tsunami destroy Arcadia Bay in the middle of the night. There was nothing left, even your precious mansion was made splinters and washed away. I don’t know if five days is always the rule, but that would give you just three to evacuate.”

“We? Who was with you?”

“I was with Chloe. I will be with Chloe. I don’t give a shit what you say, you can’t keep us apart.”

There is a brief pause.

“I will look into this.”

“You do that, but you might want to hurry.”

“Miss Derrick, is the connection ready?”

If there is a response, I don’t get to hear it.

The cursor moves on the screen again, selecting *Live feed* from one of the menus. It scrolls through quite a few serial numbers until settling on one. The video pops up shortly after.

Chloe is lying on a bed, asleep on top of the covers in black T-shirt and shorts. Her thigh is cleanly bandaged, ankle resting on a sling that keeps the leg elevated. There are scratch marks on her face, and her hair is a complete mess.

“Chloe...”

“She’s sedated at the moment,” he volunteers, “for her own safety, as well as the sanity of my employees.”

The room looks far better furnished than mine, more a bedroom than a cell. Probably because she can’t use time-travel tricks to make a book or a chair leg into a deadly weapon.

There’s a deep ache in my throat. The tears never really stopped flowing. I wanted to see her pacing, or fuming, or fighting restraints, or screaming curses at whoever might hear. To see her beaten like this, defeated, fully at their mercy...

“You won’t keep us apart. You can’t.”

“Like I said, your freedom has been an illusion thus far, Miss Caulfield. This is the fate we designed for you, and now we’ll eventually use your powers whether you want it or not. You had already lost before your adventure even started.”

“That’s bullshit, no-one could have that kind of power over everything.”

“Your defiance is no surprise. It’ll be tiresome to get past it, and that’s why I want to make a deal with you. Give us your full cooperation from the start, and your partner will not be harmed at any point. I promise you she’ll walk free in the end.”

I need a moment to process what he’s saying. “You expect me to believe that?”

“I’m always true to my word. Miss Caulfield, look at your current state. We can take anything we want from you, do you think I *need* to make you this offer? It’s a courtesy. A kindness, and a matter of good taste and convenience. We will derive no pleasure from causing pain to either of
you.” A brief pause. “I won’t, in any case.”

I would laugh if it didn’t feel so incongruous right now. “And you’d let her go? Just like that. Do you really think she could ever move on? She’ll be going after you for the rest of her days.”

“She’ll be inconsequential by then. You were no match for us while working as a team, what harm can she possibly do on her own? She will only be a nuisance to be swatted down from time to time. I’m willing to bear the aggravation, if it means skipping a large portion of the unsavory business. Your life is forfeit one way or another, you might as well freely give it up for her sake.”

It’s so chilling, the matter-of-fact way he talks about it. The chance that he might be wrong simply does not exist. I don’t believe it’s true—can’t believe it’s true—but I do believe in the sincerity of his conviction.

“What are you even asking of me? What do you want from me? Why are you doing all this?”

“Ultimately? Complete domination of the pantheon, of course. This war has spanned hundreds of years, and we plan to put an end to it. As far as your role is concerned, you’ll facilitate our supremacy over the other Guardian covenants. Bypassing all the safeguards in place is a matter of timing, if you’ll pardon the indulgence.”

“What...why, uh—” Blink. Blink some more. “All I had to do was ask?”

“What you know and don’t know no longer matters, Miss Caulfield. Your path is now set with no chance of deviation.”

“And when you win...then what? New world order? Destroy civilization? Retire to the Bahamas?”

“It will be quite literally anything we please. We have...plans.”

Yeah, the way he says it?

It’s not world peace and free universal healthcare.

“And if I work with you...what will happen to me?”

As I say the words, Chloe’s voice is so clear in my mind that she might as well be standing next to me. That is not an option. Never. I would rather be dead.

“The same thing that will happen if you don’t cooperate,” he answers. “You will serve us until we can no longer use you, and then you will die. I don’t believe you understand yet the choice I’m giving you, Miss Caulfield. You are already ours. You will suffer, regardless of what you choose. The question is exactly how much pain we will have to inflict before it’s over. The question is whether you want your partner to suffer with you, if you resist, or remain relatively unscathed, if you submit. Unlike so many other choices that have come before it, this one is entirely up to you.”

The sensation is all too familiar. My lungs shriveling inside my chest. Despair clogging my throat. The room shrinking all around me like I’m trying to hide somewhere inside my mind. It’s that sinking feeling again, held tight to a chair, that there is no way out at all. That no matter what I do or say, I’m still utterly powerless to stop what’s going to happen.

This is the point where I turned to pleading, once. Where hopelessness took me, right before David showed up. And I know, I know because I saw exactly what it takes to get here, that no-one is going to bust through the door this time.
“It’s not a choice,” I mutter. “You already know what I’m going to say. Don’t you?”

“No. Details may change, and we often operate with probabilities. Your suffering truly doesn’t need to be as dire.”

No, it really isn’t a choice, because I am not falling to despair.

I had a vision. In that vision I’m free. Details may change, but all my visions have come true, one way or another.

I had dreams, flashes of a different reality. Blood runs through those images, on Chloe’s flesh, on an empty hallway where I try to hold on to my sanity.

I have memories scrawled on a journal. I escaped, once. It might have been by design, or it might be a hint of a weakness in the system. Thirteen days. I have to find out.

I have a guardian spirit of my own. It chose me, chose us—for what, for this? I can’t accept that. There is a plan, there has to be. I believe now. I have faith.

I have a girlfriend, a future wife, the closest there could be in this world to a fated soulmate. She’d rather die than give these people even one inch. At one point I might have made this deal, because keeping her safe would trump anything else—but I know better, now. The life she’d have if I surrender isn’t a life at all. She would not have it, and I will not settle for it.

I just need to resist. I need to hold on. It’s not over until I’m dead.

I swallow hard and stare into the mirror.

“Do your worst, motherfucker.”

The silence that comes after is frost upon my skin. It clings in fumes to the air and condensates on the mirrored wall. This is what Nathan must have felt every day of his life, this cold clump of dread borne of his father’s intense disappointment.

There is a rustle of clothes on the other side of the line, the sound of a chair scraping on the floor.

“I will, Maxine. We’ll have to do something about your language, as well.” He sighs audibly. “Take her away and get started. You know what to do.”

“What—”

The question hitches in my throat as a presence looms behind me, out of nowhere. An arm cradles my head and keeps it in place, and there’s a sharp sting to my neck. It will always baffle me, how quickly the drug works to muddle my senses.

Before I lose consciousness, a voice straight from my nightmares mutters in my ear.

“I can’t explain how long I’ve been looking forward to this, Max.”

Mark Jefferson’s hands hold me down to the chair. He makes sure I don’t struggle.
Black and white scenery. Harsh lights, storage boxes. Mark Jefferson, sitting back on the couch in front of me.

“I guess I did give you too much, it’s taking you so long to come back. I’m still getting used to the new cocktail. But better safe than sorry, don’t you think? We don’t want you waking up during transit.”

He’s cheerful. Nearly laughing.

“Nhh…”

“There you are. Take your time, I think you know by now that I’m a patient man. It’s not like I’m in a hurry, anyway. We’re going to be here a while. A very long time.”

The chill in the room has every inch of my skin roused with goose bumps. I try to speak, but my mouth is so clammy I can barely move my tongue. I’m so out of it right now that I probably couldn’t string two words together if I tried.

“Can I offer you some water? You must be thirsty.”

Without waiting for an answer he pours the contents of the nearby pitcher into a plastic cup and comes over. Delicately he holds my head up at the chin. “Careful now, don’t choke.”

Despite the thirst, I don’t want anything from this man...but I can’t even pull back at his touch. I try to swallow as best I can until a coughing fit makes me spurt half of it back out, spraying it all over him and his expensive suit.

He recoils on reflex. The cup drops and spills all over the tile.

I expect him to blow up, the way he did in the Dark Room. The thin veneer of kindness will dissolve to reveal the fucked up monster beneath. Within the mist of my mind I brace for impact.

Instead, he clicks his tongue and looks at his wet sleeves with disappointment.

“Tch. That was my bad. I gave you too much, too fast.” He wipes his hands on his pants. “That’s why we have to pace ourselves. Let me dry you up.”

I’m still coughing. I’m still trying to recoil from this apparition, this zombie of a man that was supposed to be dead and buried beneath ten tons of rubble.

He’s smiling as he tenderly dabs my jaw and chin with his napkin. “Oh, I’ve missed you, Max. I’m being honest here, you were my favorite student. I wasn’t fond of how you’d space out in class, but you had such talent.” He chuckles to himself. “You have talent, obviously—you’re a time traveler! You don’t see that every day. No wonder I couldn’t get to you before the police showed up. But that’s okay, right, Max? I did get to you in a different timeline. I’ve seen the sketches of my work. I’m glad I was able to capture you the way I always envisioned.”

Get your fingers closer to my mouth, asshole. You’ll fucking lose them.

“You’ve kept me with you all this time, haven’t you? I’m part of you, now. I couldn’t ask for higher praise.”

Push the words out. Spit them at his smug face.

“Get off me...you insufferable...dipshit...”
He laughs at it. There’s something askew about the laugh, too high-pitched, too damn amused.

“You’re something else, Max. I’m curious how long you’ll be able to keep that attitude. I mean, we’re not taking pictures, here—or, well, that’s not the purpose of our little playdate. I think I’ll still take some photos of you, after I...pose you.”

He reaches for the rolling cart behind me. Slowly his tools come into view, each one neatly laid out in a perfectly spaced pattern. Syringes. Knives, of several shapes and sizes. Pincers, clamps. Bottles and containers holding who-knows-what. A cattle prod.

Dread surges in jittering tides through my gut, and it’s all I can do to keep it there, under control. Feed the anger instead. Find strength in the loathing.

“The need to keep my subjects oblivious meant always holding back. There is so much more to capture, heights of expression that no-one out there dares to reach for. Today we’ll explore them together. It will be...an experience.”

“Is this...what you’ve become? A washed up loser...torturing—”

His backhand flashes across my face, no windup, no warning. It’s not a hard blow, more like a chastising smack to turn my head and shut me up.

“Torture, how dare you. So crude and lowbrow. This is art. This is portraiture.” He lovingly holds up my chin like he didn’t just slap me. “Well, I suppose it will be torture for you. Forgive me, Max. You do have a point. Let’s get this out of the way, alright?”

His gloved hand travels to my back and undoes the ties to my gown. Without hesitation he pulls on it until my chest and shoulders are exposed, and the thing is so damn flimsy that it rips off at the sleeves. He discards it to one side. There is nothing, nothing between him and me.

My nails dig into the armrests to a painful degree. Stop. Shaking. Survive. All I need to do is survive. None of this will be real.

“I’m a bit disappointed you haven’t even asked how I’ve been. Where are your manners, Max?” He casually picks up one of the knives. It’s a small, razor-sharp scalpel. “I guess we never got close on that level. We will, now. This will be beautiful. Intimate. We’re going to achieve purity together, art in its most distilled form. I hope you’re ready.”

He pushes me at the collarbone, tilting me back. In his other hand, the blade draws near my chest. There’s feverish intent in his eyes, features overcome with zeal, as if enraptured at the prospect of watching me bleed.

Fuck. Fuck, this is happening. Who the hell am I kidding? I’m not a trained spy, I’m not a superhero. I can’t handle actual torture. Rewind, rewind, go back as far as I can, clear my head, find a way to break free.

Before I even try, the blade starts to shake, and Jefferson breaks into giggles.

“Wow, I can’t believe you’re falling for this. How pretentious did the man get?”

“Wh...what?”

He lets go and leans back. “I thought I was cranking up the ham to the max, but I guess I was kind of on target?”
I’m looking at him, blinking laboriously. “What?”

“You poor thing. I’m messing with you. Let the spell be undone.”

Before my eyes the Dark Room scene dissolves away into a different space. The couch pops out of existence and becomes a simple chair, the rest of the props and dressing simply disappear into drab gray walls. In the blink of an eye Mark Jefferson becomes a tall, flaxen girl, scrawny, bright-eyed.

“Surprise!”

Her smile is wide and toothy. I’d even call it friendly, if I weren’t tied up and nude. I can’t help but notice that the tray full of terrifying tools is still there, as is the scalpel in her hand.

“You know,” she keeps going, “after watching all the surveillance footage of that man, I still can’t believe the steaming pile of self-important wank he kept spewing. You and I know the truth, right? He simply was a plain ol’ sick pervert. The whole ‘capture the loss of innocence’ thing was just an excuse to get his power fantasy boner.”

I can feel my thoughts finally coming out of torpor. As she speaks, what just happened clicks in my head at last. “You’re Samantha. Mirage.” I heave a deep breath. “I get it.”

“Yay, you get it!”

It wasn’t just the visuals that changed. The room is warmer now. The smell is...subtly different.

“Is this just fun for you? That entire thing...it was a major dick move, you know?”

“Fun? Well, yeah, I guess. But messing with your head is what we’re here for, dummy! It’s all part of the experience.”

“So he’s dead? He’s definitely dead?”

“Of course he’s dead. Didn’t happen at the police station, though. We took him before that, paid off a few people to look the other way. I got to spend a lot of time with him, and so did Auntie Dee.” She considers the scalpel still in her hand in the most nonchalant manner. “It was fun. Totally unrelated word of advice: she’s super nice most of the time, but don’t get on Auntie’s bad side. She doesn’t do forgiveness.”

I’m staring at her knife-wielding hand. She’s idly playing with the thing like it’s a pencil and she’s bored in class.

“So...asking you to free me and join me would be a waste of time, right?”

She gives me a pained half-smile. It actually seems sincere. “Yeah. Pretty much. I’d give you the whole ‘it’s not personal’ thing, but I don’t even get why they always say that. I mean, what, you’re gonna sit there screaming, but at least you’re relieved I don’t actually hate you? Like, just imagine, we could’ve been friends in a different reality! Big whoop-dee-doo, am I right?”

“We could’ve been friends, though. All I ever wanted was to—”

“Okay, okay, let me stop you right there. I will cut you, Maxine. We kinda have to do it? Or, I don’t know, if I don’t do it, then a different path happens. She’s coming over to explain soon, I’ve been living with this for a few years now and I still don’t fully understand it.”

“You don’t have to, no-one has to do this—”
Come on, hey, I already told you it’s pointless to try and talk me out of it. In fact, I’ll let you in on a little secret right now: I’m kind of fucked up in the head. I’m aware of it, you know? I own it. Kinda like Dexter? Have you ever watched Dexter?”

“I...no, but...I know what it’s about.”

“It was eye-opening. It’s not that I absolutely have to kill, it’s not that kind of crazy, but—the whole ‘empathy’ thing? I have a real hard time with that. Anyway, how about Fight Club? Did you ever watch Fight Club? I always wondered if chemical burns were really that painful. It turns out that they are! Our mutual friend Mark found out pretty thoroughly. You’ll see, we’re going to go full reenactment, here. Hope you got a happy place ready.”

“Is this...are you being serious right now, or just fucking with me? You’re so cheerful, I honestly can’t tell.”

“Huh. Well, I’m no expert, like I said, but I think you can tell. Otherwise your voice wouldn’t shake so much. How about a superhero scar? You fancy yourself a superhero, right? I can give you one that goes across your brow and the nose bridge, like this.” She traces her finger to demonstrate, the scalpel’s blade barely an inch from my eyeball. “Or vertically down your eyebrow and across the eye, like a badass pirate. Don’t worry, I’ll only give you cool ones where people can see. Disfiguring such a pretty face would be gross. How’d you feel about—”

There’s a brief clatter at the door, and then it swings open. After a second of hesitation, a soft-spoken female voice comes through. “Samantha, please, cover her up.”

“Oh!” She hastily gathers the ripped gown and drapes it over my body, tucks it under my arms. It feels more than a little ridiculous. “There. Done.”

The woman I know to be Dianne Prescott walks in with measured steps and softly closes the door behind her. She’s older than in the painting, much more...homely. Her dark hair is done up in a frumpy bun, paint daubs stain her simple blouse and skirt and several parts of her anatomy. She has the look of someone that’s made it a habit to spend days on-end immersed in her art and last night was no different.

Eyeing me with open curiosity, she approaches Samantha and lays a hand on her shoulder. “What is she seeing right now?”

“Nothing, auntie. Raw input.”

Her lips press together. “We’re not in private, dear. Address me properly.”

Samantha’s cheeks turn red. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t—I mean...I apologize, mistress.”

“It’s okay, don’t worry about it.” She pats her shoulder, then takes a step closer to me. “Hello, Maxine. Um, Max. You prefer Max.”

She says it like she once knew, but forgot. I feel the impulse to spit in her general direction. I’m getting sick of people starting conversations with me as if I’m not tied to a fucking chair.

“Don’t do it,” she tells me. “I’ll know you did it, even if you rewind it away.”

I blink at her. “Do what?”

“What you have a point-three-five probability of doing. Which is spitting at me. I’m going to sit down, I hope you don’t mind.” Without waiting for an answer she plonks down on the chair as if
she walked here all the way from Olympia. “I’m finely tuned to this node in the weave,” she continues. “It takes a lot out of me, the deeper I go into detail. This isn’t momentous, you see? It isn’t an inflection point, it’s insignificant, so focusing on it is like catching a specific pebble tumbling on a riverbed. I might take a break down the line, just letting you know.” She sniffs softly, amused at her own words. “Down the line. Get it?”

Behind her, Samantha rolls her eyes and smiles, like Mrs. Prescott just made a lame yet endearing joke.

A dozen different responses come to mind. Aggressive rebuke. Stoic stare. Conversational questions. Groveling, pleading, weeping, thrashing, spitting anyway, yelling until my lungs give out. It’s a disheartening thought to realize I’ll probably try them all and none of it will work.

My chest seems to deflate under her calm scrutiny. I let my head hang, and I’m suddenly...done. Done with everything. Done with their bullshit.

“You’re all going to drown. I saw it. Do whatever you want to me, I don’t even care why you’re doing it. I’ll eventually be free, and you’ll all die in the end.”

“Jeez,” Samantha quips.

“That’s right, the vision you had, I’m glad you brought it up. Are you sure that’s what you saw? I just don’t see it happening, dear.”

“That’s your problem, isn’t it?”

“Well, no, you don’t understand. I meant it in an official capacity, as the Fateweaver. You’re an intelligent young lady, you’ve put it together by now, right? I can see everything that might happen, if I focus hard enough. Major paths are plain to see, detailed predictions take a lot of work and are often rife with probability. But something so major as that? It would stand out. I’m telling you right now: there is no reality in which that happens. It simply doesn’t exist. Sean tells me you’re not lying, so either you don’t know what you truly saw, or your gift sometimes works with symbolism instead of the literal future.”

“Or maybe your gift is wrong, did you ever consider that? Are you willing to take the chance?”

“My gift? What does that have to do with...” Dianne Prescott trails off and goes quiet. Her inquisitive gaze drops to a vacant stare.

Samantha steps a bit closer and subtly nudges her mistress’ shoulder. The forty-something-year-old woman startles and looks around. “Where was I?”

“She doesn’t know the difference between an innate gift and the spirit bond, mistress.”

“Oh. Right.” She frowns. Her eyes focus once more as she looks at me. “Well, you see, your visions, your talent with photography...those are your gifts. Your gifts. They don’t come from Blueewing’s bond. I don’t blame you for not working this out on your own, everything manifested so close together for you.”

Her patient, kindly tone, her non-threatening outfit, her weird absent-mindedness...none of it is like I expected. It does more to keep me on edge than a stereotypical villain would. Maybe that’s the whole point.

“Why are you even explaining things to me? Are you just...gloating? Is that what you’re doing here?”
She purses her lips and regards me with...what, contrition? Pity? She actually looks away and sighs, as if self-conscious. “No, I’m here for a good reason, we’ll get to it. But this part, right now? It’s guilt, I guess. I’m aware you and your friend don’t deserve what’s happening to you. I can at least answer some of your long-standing questions before it’s all over. I’ve been painting you for so long, I feel like we’re close friends, in a way. Though maybe it’s more like old rivals.”

I can’t help but stare in dismay. “If you really felt guilty, you wouldn’t be doing this to us. It’s not too late, you can still let us go. I swear we’ll never see each other again.”

“That’s not a very good argument, dear. Just think, you caused the death of over two hundred people and brought misery to as many more. You feel guilty about it, don’t you? And yet you know in your heart that it was worth it. Well, that’s what’s happening here, it’s the same for us. You simply happen to be on the ‘cost’ side of the scales this time. It’s not personal.”

Samantha gives a sudden snort, then puts her hands over her mouth to hold back the rest.

“Did I make a joke, Sam? Or do you have something to add?”

“No, no. I’m sorry, mistress.”

“Hm. As I was saying—”

“I did what I did for love. Can you say the same?”

Dianne raises her brow at me and laughs in breaths. “Somehow you make it sound so noble. How is your love anything but a selfish and destructive parasite? Now more than ever, you would trade thousands of lives to have her back, wouldn’t you? There is nothing you wouldn’t do, no matter how ruthless it may be. Do you deny that?”

I have to stop glaring and look away. There are things I wouldn’t do, but they’re so deep into “complete monster” territory that I’d only be helping her argument by bringing them up.

“You can’t throw that in my face,” I tell her instead. “I wouldn’t have to make these terrible choices if you’d left us alone to begin with.”

“Oh, I’m not blaming you, far from it. I’m only pointing out that your moral high ground is shaky at best, that’s all. You actually have us beat on body count...though I guess you could argue that we teamed up for this whole Arcadia Bay disaster.” She shakes her head as if dismayed at a sudden thought. “Let me tell you, working with you has been such a challenge, with all the new layers you keep chucking onto the weave. It isn’t just what happens and what might happen; I had to figure out what indeed happens but gets undone, as well as the explosion of plausible impossibilities that your abilities allow. Plotting a course that would make you this powerful this fast was...migraine-inducing, to say the least. I blame you for my gradual loss of sanity, young lady.” She wags a finger at me with mock severity.

“Take this conversation, for example. You could break free by toppling the chair and then rewinding it back upright, and then you’d kill us all—so we had to bolt the chair to the ground. You could jiggle the restraints until you could rewind out of them, so we had to tighten them so painfully like that.” She’s leaning forward, enthusiastically gesturing with her hands as she gets more and more into the matter. “See the cup of water? There’s a reason it’s not made of glass. After enough retreads you’d have become desperate enough to shatter it with your teeth, and then you’d have used the blood to lubricate your hand enough for it to pass through, broken bones and all. And then we all die, of course.” She throws her hands up in a helpless gesture. “You see what I’m saying? You’re so exhausting to control. That’s why we have to do things this way. There is no
reality in which you don’t turn against us at some point if we give you the smallest bit of leeway, even when you work for us willingly. So...the only way we can use you is by destroying your will until not a hint of rebellion remains.”

I keep quiet for a moment, thoughts churning through everything she’s saying. I’m still at the blood and broken bones part. Would I even consider something so extreme, if I were desperate enough?

Yes. Yes, I would.

And...she knows it. She already knows what I’ll do and say before it even happens.

How could I ever outplay a prescient being?

“You’re still human,” I tell her. “You still make mistakes.”

“No, I don’t. Or rather, I can plan around them, because they are foreseeable. Do you understand that? This is what I’m here to explain, actually. We are in complete control of what happens. I’m being literal, here: there is no possibility of escape for you. Everything is covered, from system malfunctions, to treachery, to Raymond Geller and David Madsen. None of it will save you, there is no photo to escape through, and the sooner we can get that in your head, the easier this will be for everyone.”

I can feel my jaws clench. “Really? Were you in complete control too when Nathan turned out to be a fucking nutjob?”

Immediately she stands and takes two long steps toward me, then stops within striking distance. Her hand, clamped into a fist, slowly relaxes. For a few seconds she’s staring through me, every hint of cordiality gone from her eyes.

“There is a timeline,” she starts, voice creaking and grave, “in which I slap you so hard right now that your teeth shred the inside of your cheek. Thinking yourself so clever, you freeze yourself in the time-lapse and try to break free the way I described a moment ago. And after a lot of pain, you realize that you can’t get out. You realize that you only tried it because I said it would work. You realize you don’t need a shard of glass or a slap, you can simply work enough spit, or bite yourself, if you are determined enough. But it doesn’t work, you can’t get your hand through.”

She grabs my chin, painfully squeezing my mouth between ironclad fingers. Trying to pull away only makes her grip harder, forcing me to look up at her. “Do you believe for even a second that I didn’t want you to find that journal? That I didn’t have you in mind when I wrote it? Do you think even one word escapes my mouth that isn’t designed to manipulate you in some way? You don’t get it yet. You walk up and down these threads, and choose this, choose that, trying to pick the best outcome—oblivious to the fact that I’m the one who built the web. Whichever path you tread, I’m the one that crafted it for you.”

She doesn’t let go as much as she throws my face to one side in a gesture of disdain. She sags slightly, and the next moment Samantha is next to her, steadying hand holding sure to her arm. The girl tries to pull her mistress back to the seat, but Dianne shrugs her off, leaning closer instead.

“I sacrificed my son to this cause. Don’t presume there’s a line I won’t cross. We will break you, and then I’ll make you into my puppet until the day you die. You’ll be nothing but a husk.”

“Whatever you say.” I’m not even looking at her anymore. “Soon none of this will exist. You’ll be a fresh corpse floating in the flood.”

She rests her hands on my wrists, and I try not to squirm under the pressure. “I know how I’ll die,”
she rasps. “I’ve known since I was thirteen years old. It won’t be in a flood, and it won’t be by your hand.”

“I don’t care. I’ll never do what you want, you can’t make me. Whatever it is, when the time comes I’ll find a way to screw it up and fuck you over, even if it kills me. I swear it.”

Her nails painfully dig into my skin. Our eyes lock in a glare. “That,” she says, “is the actual reason I’m here. To show you my gift.”

We keep looking at each other, and soon I feel this...pressure, inside my head. A pinpoint of discomfort that grows larger, like a manual drill slowly boring a hole, a bug biting its way in.

“What...what are you doing?”

The pinpoint is now a crack, a jagged line of something, prying at the seams, pushing it agape. Tendrils like spider legs are shoving their way through. It’s...a presence, making its way into my thoughts.

It’s this woman. She’s spreading into my thoughts.

In a panic I try to shut her out, like pushing aside a bad memory. Her hand clamps on my throat, she leans in close enough for me to feel her ragged breath on my lips. The presence sprouts a hundred tendrils that skitter through my mind, enveloping my every thought in a poisonous web. My body tightens, coils up, seizes beyond my reach.

She then raises her right hand. Though mine is restrained in place, I feel the muscles pulling in a way that would mimic her motion, obeying commands that are not my own.

The rewind that follows is brief, faltering, close to imperceptible. I’m still the source, but I don’t control it. My breath is like shallow fumes as I helplessly stare into Dianne Prescott’s eyes, because there’s no doubt in my mind that she just traveled back in time with me.

With a groan she nearly collapses against me, and my thoughts break free all at once. She’s shaking, barely keeping herself upright even if most of her weight rests on my limbs. A trail of blood drips down her nose, past her chin. Droplets land on the tile with an audible spatter before Samantha is pulling her back, pressing a kerchief to Dianne’s nostrils.

“How...”

“I’m fine,” she rasps, taking the napkin from her, folding it over, pressing it again. “Thank you, dear. I’m fine.”

“That was...amazing.”

“Don’t get attached to the memory. You won’t keep it.” She walks over to the chair, sits once more. All she does is wipe and look at me. Constantly, just looking at me.

I can’t speak. No words will come, no thought is big enough to give shape to this monstrous thing clutching my insides right now. Like dread, like a panic attack, like repugnance, powerlessness, sickness. She was...inside me. She shoved aside who I am and took over everything.

Breathe. Just breathe.

“Do you see now?” She’s watching my every twitch and quiver. “Do you understand, now?”
I...do. I understand, now.

“You’re monsters,” I mutter. “I’m alone and surrounded by monsters.”

“Yes, yes, fine.” She dismisses it with a wave of her hand. “That’s not what I meant. I need you to see the reason for all the pain.” She pauses, catches her breath. “I want you to realize there’s no light at the end of your tunnel.”

She’s doing a pretty fucking great job of it.

She also seems ready to pass out.

What Dianne Prescott just did took a lot of effort.

“As long as I resist...you can’t stay in control. Not for long.”

“Yes, that’s right. And that is why we’re going to crush your will until there’s nothing left.”

She keeps saying these things that freeze the blood in my veins, and it’s no wonder that she does. That’s the whole purpose, here.

I need to snap out of it. This is exactly what she wants, for me to wallow in despair, in hopelessness. I can’t let that happen, I have to hold on until there’s some way to—

But if me resisting more is the end result of her actions, doesn’t that mean that’s what she wants me to do? Doesn’t she already know—

No, she’s trying so hard to convince me there’s no way out. Maybe that’s because she doesn’t want me to try. If I rewind through all this, if I explore every possibility—

But she told Samantha not to get attached to the memory. Which means she already knows I’ll rewind, which means she already planned—

So if I don’t rewind, I’ll be proving her wrong, it’ll be unpredictable—

Unless that’s what she wants me to think so I won’t even try, because there’s something—

But if she knows how I’ll react, then that means what they really want—

Either way she already knows—

Stop, stop, STOP.

While I’m running circles in my head Dianne gets up, or tries to. Her knees buckle, and she’d have collapsed if Samantha hadn’t been there to catch her and lend a shoulder. The woman looks spent, ashen.

“Thank you, Sam.” Arm around her waist, she pulls the girl close. There seems to be honest affection in the gesture, but who the fuck can tell at this point. She then meets my eyes and gives me a crooked smile. “You have a thick skull, Max Caulfield. I wish we could have been allies.”

She lets Samantha help her to the door and uses a keycard to get it open. Her steps are somewhat steady by the time her hand rests on the door latch.

Samantha clings to her arm, obviously reticent to let go. “Will you be okay?”
“Of course, dear.” Dianne looks at me. The warmth in her eyes vanishes like snuffed candlelight. “Make sure she screams, Sam. Have her say she’s sorry before you’re done.”

“Alright.”

Mrs. Prescott steps out, the door closes. The fucked up instructions are bad enough, but what sends the actual chill down my spine is the utter lack of hesitation in Samantha’s earnest response.

She spins on her heel and comes over. There’s disapproval in her features.

“You know, for being completely helpless, you sure have a big mouth. Though I guess I’d be like that too, if I knew I could take it back whenever it goes wrong.” She’s standing over her knives, considering her options like she’s browsing produce at the market.

“Is that what she did to you? Crush your will and take over?”

“Pff, it doesn’t work like that. And she didn’t have to, anyway. The Prescotts rescued me. I’d rather stab myself than betray them, so just save your breath.”

“She’s wrong, Samantha. We’re all going to die, we have to get out of Arcadia Bay...”

“You don’t listen, do you? I think that’s your main problem. I mean, I told you not to get on her bad side. Not that you had a choice or anything, but still. She even warned you she was deeply focused on this moment, but you kept rising to the bait over and over. It was kinda sad to watch. You could’ve tried harder.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Um, what just happened? The back and forth, the defiance, the anger...it’s all the outcomes she wanted, it’s what worked best. And now I guess you’ll turn back time and go down the next path she laid out for you.” She settles on the scalpel she was playing with earlier. Samantha stands over me, lips pursed like she’s about to discipline an unruly pet. “Let’s start small and work our way up, okay? The apology’s gotta be heartfelt.”

“Samantha, please...”

“Stop asking me to disobey her, it’s getting annoying. Now, how about that badass scar? I think I’ll go for both. An inverted V, like this”—she traces it—“Make sure not to move much, you’ll ruin it.”

“No, please, wait. Wait!”

Her free hand painfully clamps on my hair, holding my head still. “There’s no time like the present.”

I watch the blade approach like in slow motion, its point blurring as it gets too close to follow. My arms are painfully tense against the restraints, desperate to grab at her hand, make it stop. I can’t do anything, I can’t break free. This is actually happening.

I rewound. Of course I did. As far back as I could, tried and tried and tried to get past the blackout, to no avail. Go through the scene dozens of times, different words, silence, more anger, no anger, attempts at logic, negotiation, pleading, praying, pushing, pulling, violent thrashing. I stopped short of breaking bones, I exhausted every option I could think of.

Every time, it’s like she knew.
She always knew.

Now the blade is frozen an inch from my skin. Every path leads here. Thoughts keep spinning their wheels my mind, each more desperate than the last. Stay frozen until I can’t do it anymore, until maybe I pass out. Delaying the inevitable, at best.

Trigger another vision, glean more information about the future I saw. How? No amount of squeezing my eyes shut and wishing really hard does the trick.

Bite at her fingers, pry them open, hold the knife between my teeth, stab her hand. I can’t—in the standstill, moving someone’s fingers is like pushing at mountains. But even if I succeeded, then what? I’d just piss her off. Even if I managed to seriously maim her somehow, I’m still trapped.

Hours of trying, and I have nothing. Nothing. Just dread in my chest and a blurry knife above my eyes. In shuddering breaths I surrender to the obvious truth before me.

The only way out...

*Hold on. None of this will exist.*

The only way out is through.

---

“I’m sorry...”

“Oh. What was that?”

“Please, no more...I’m sorry...”

I didn’t last a day. I didn’t last an hour.

I’m not a trained spy. I’m not a superhero.

“Please, forgive me...”

“Oh, wow. I’ll be honest, that took longer than I thought it would. You’re pretty tough.” She finds a clean spot on her rag and wipes at my tears again. The clean spot comes back stained red. “What are you sorry for, though?”

“For...talking back. Nathan...everything...”

“Alright, good, that’s pretty good.” She reaches for something else on the tray. “Now we can move on to the advanced stuff. You’re now Jack’s deep sense of regret.”

“...What?”

Samantha thoroughly licks her lips, then kisses my shoulder—the one as yet unmarred by “badass scars.”

She holds up the lye container and looks at me with pure mischief in her eyes.

“This,” she proudly declares, “is a chemical burn.”
“But I thought—!”

The container tips and pours. The pain rolls in like a blizzard, burying my world in blinding white —

—**blinding white**—

burns the eye I can still open. It never goes off. Never blinks out.

Ennui is its own form of torture. The hours roll by without anything to focus on, nothing but the scalding agony beneath the bandages, between the stitches. Sleep is a dream I can’t reach. The night terrors run rampant through waking hours, bleeding into the blinding light.

In the aftermath I could find myself again. I could find the fight again. If it were just me, if it were just my own flesh I could some day forget—

What they did to Chloe.

Oh, god, what they did to Chloe...

I should have surrendered. I should have never—

—**brought back the storm**—

rages outside. Even in this place, it reaches me in subtle quakes and peals of thunder. The mansion creaks above me, gusts of wind rumbling down to the foundations, blowing into the ventilation system that connects to my cell.

And yet there’s no water.

I wished for it. Let the tide come in, erase the town and all the pain it’s brought. Wash this torment away and let this fucked up mess drown into oblivion. It’s down here, huddled in my blinding white corner, that I first wish for death before freedom.

Freedom. The ventilation system, surging in unison with the storm. Far too narrow for anyone to fit through, but I can see the fan’s blades spinning, deep under layers of mesh and grill. If I could get to the blades, break one off, sharpen it somehow—

No, no, no, don’t even think about it. Leave the option there, untouched, forgotten. If I think about it, she’ll know. If it’s a future that I consider, she’ll know. She always knows. She’s in my head, always in my head, I can’t deal with this anymore, I can’t—
“No,” he tells me, “You are simply not trying hard enough.”

“I’m trying, I just can’t! I’m about to pass out...”

“Exactly. Those are your two options: reach the mark, or lose consciousness. There is no middle ground, Miss Caulfield. We already know you’re capable of this, it’s only a matter of training you properly.”

I keep my eyes down, fixed on my hands. If I look up, I’ll see the stranger in the mirror. I don’t ever want to see her again.

“I can’t take it. Please, I can’t take it anymore...”

“You’re about to prove yourself wrong. Give back the phone. Let’s do this again.”

“Fuck you, I’m so fucking tired...”

“This is the last time I warn you. Do not use that language in my presence.”

I thump the goddamn fucking mirror, nearly collapse against it. “Fuck you! You fucking—”

The jolt that comes through the bracelet turns my cries into sobs.

*It’s not even*

*that bad*

sure, not even close to the cattle prod, but still—

“Give back the phone.”

I can’t keep a whimper from escaping my throat as I drop the damn thing in the slot, close the lid, push the button. It automatically makes it to the other side. It’s all tamper-proof, despite my best, thoroughly punished efforts.

Keep your eyes on your hands. Don’t look up, you’ll see that poor wretch in the mirror again.

The damn thing comes back shortly after. I look at the timer.

Counting down to thirty minutes. Thirty minutes of walking through a perfect standstill. So far beyond my reach at this point that there isn’t even a reason to try.

“Start exactly at thirty. There will be dire consequences if you stop before the clock runs out.”

There are a number of ways to falsify the results. I don’t dare anymore, it never flies. One, if there is even a hint of an unplanned anomaly, everything restarts from the top of the session. Two, he always knows when I’m lying. Always.

Pressure builds in my head before I even start. It throbs and thrums in concert with my heartbeat, my spine feels like every vertebrae has shrunk to half the size. There’s no way I can push it for so
long, there’s no way.

The world seems to shrink in place as I watch the fractions count down. It’s so surreal, to be trapped here, to go through this, for my life to have become this. It’s what kidnap victims must feel, this pervading sense of disbelief in the back of their head, this permanent state of wrongness, of not belonging in the present moment.

As I force myself into a standstill yet again, it occurs to me that maybe I already fainted. Maybe this isn’t happening. None of this is real. I’m not—

—real—

You’re not real. You’re dead.

“You keep me alive, Max. You keep me with you, together in our Dark Room. Does it seem normal to you, that it’s become your refuge from the blinding light? We have so much in common now, we might as well be the same person.”

Shut up. “Leave me alone,” why won’t you shut up?

“Tormented until the day we die. It was faster for me, though. I didn’t last...oh, do you even know how long it’s been?”

“Like it matters?”

“Not to you, maybe. But it does to them. And the longer your resist, the worse everything will become.”

Resist.

I don’t know what that means anymore. “I stopped resisting a long time ago.”

“You might think so, but resilience goes much deeper than what you might say or feel in the moment. You still hope. You still hate. You still put yourself back together. Is spending time with me part of that? Does it help you, to remember me? To hold close the demons of your former life?”

“I’m not...it’s not me.” It’s an illusion. “Get out of my head...”

“Come on, Max. We were getting along for a moment, there. Why push me away? I’m all you have left.”

“Stop, stop fucking with my head, stop doing this to me!”

I throw myself at the apparition, at this zombie of a man. I knock him down, pin him to the ground, wail on him the way a desperate captive might do. And he’s just laughing beneath me. The more I hit him, the more he laughs.

Some part of my brain knows that it’s just me, thumping the floor with bloodstained fingers—

—bloodstained fingers—
a finger, a bloodstained finger,

lying by the door. I recognize the nail polish, now chipped and blemished. I know the ring still on it, a ring I gave her an eternity ago. I’m staring, motionless, too afraid to move, to pick it up. It will be real, then. It will stop being just a nightmare.

There’s a note under it in Dianne’s handwriting. I won’t read it, I refuse to read—

You could have saved her.

What does it mean? Is she dead, now? That’s what it means?

They killed her. God, they killed her. After all this, they just kill her, monsters, fucking monsters, my—

—Chloe

Oh, Chloe.

This isn’t her. It can’t be her.

“Max...please...”

You’re not my Chloe.

“Do what they want.”

I can’t avert my eyes from the screen. How can this be the same Chloe I remember?

“Give them everything they want.”

But I know. I’ve heard her voice collapse like this before.

“Please...”

I loved her so much.

“I just want to die.”

What kind of world does this?

“Please let me die.”

Who does this?

There.

There it is. Here I am, I found it. You can stop asking me now, Sam. This is it.

Rock bottom.
There could be a way out.

It occurred to me some time ago, then it vanished. I don’t know why I didn’t resolve to try until now. I must have felt like I still had something to lose. I must have felt like my mind was still my own.

Soon I won’t even have the drive to think about it. When she took over again, a part of me was thankful. Escape, however brief. Not having to live in my own body, everything bound to end. Yeah, I can’t lie to myself, I welcomed it.

It will be over soon. That’s why I have to try. It’s a crazy long shot, but I have to try.

I’m lying down, staring at the ceiling, gathering what’s left of my wits—but don’t plan it, don’t you dare plan it. The moment I freeze time, I can’t let go for an instant, not even at the very end. That’s the key. They can’t tell what I’m doing for as long as I hold it. If I let go, the new reality will take shape. She’ll know in the past, and she’ll prevent it from happening. That’s how it works, right?

Hell if I know. Do it, do it now. Freeze.

Step one: get to the fan.

Within the standstill I fish the ring from under the mattress and push my legs to obey, get me to climb on top of the toilet. Now wedge the ring—

*The ring they provided*

—wedge it between the gaps in the grill, use it as the tiniest crowbar until they bend enough to give my fingers purchase. Ah, crap, don’t drop it, no!

Oh, right. It doesn’t matter. It simply enters regular timeflow, floating in mid-air.

Get in there, now. The whole hand. Pull, pull it apart, you can do it. I know it hurts, you can do it.

Suddenly it snaps in two, and I’m falling backwards in super slow-motion. Plenty of time to turn, get better footing. Jeez, already getting tired. No amount of compulsory training will ever make a perfect standstill easy.

I can take it. Come on, I can take it. I’ve held it for far longer than I could ever need for this. In a way I’ve been practicing *for this*, all along.

Next up, the mesh. Punching it out of the way is a non-starter in this state, but it’s flimsy enough to push the corner into a slow-folding crumple. From there I can get enough purchase to pull the whole thing out of its socket. I get it out of the way, leave it floating next to my head.

Step two: get the fan itself. My hand almost reaches for one of the blades before I realize they’re nowhere near stationary. Such a good way to lose my fingers—there’s enough blood on them already, thanks. Instead I rip the mesh off its thin metal grid, loosely fold it up and wedge it between fan blades and frame. I take a shuddering hit on momentum transfer, the vibration pulling it off my grip—but of course it stays in place the moment I let go. Grabbing it again is the weirdest
sensation, a phantom push that conveys more intention than actual force. Physics get real weird when trapped in the null time-lapse.

Using the mesh I shield my hand as I push against the fan blade, opposing its torque. Push, push, push until it moves. There, no more inertia. That should take care of it.

Goddamn, I need a break. Standing on my tip-toes as I stick my hand into the vent is awkward as f—uh, awkward as heck.

Alright. Let’s see how sturdy this fan is. It looks doable. Tentatively I hold onto a blade, and it yields a little under my prodding. Bracing my knees against the wall, I start pulling as hard as I can. I’m panting by the time it’s bent in any significant way. This is so pathetic, I bet Chloe could easily pull, twist and snap it right off.

Chloe...

Don’t think about her, don’t you dare lose focus. We can fix it. This is the way out, my last chance. Stay in this moment.

Pushing to bend it backwards is way harder. I don’t really have anything to hold on to, so I’m constantly losing my footing. It takes precious minutes of plosive breaths and whimpering. And so the process continues, bending the thing back and forth, each time a bit easier as it starts to fray at the seam, yet becoming far harder from exertion as Max-time drags on.

I’m falling in slo-mo again once it finally snaps in my hand. It’s a bizarrely joyous moment as I float to ground level. This is where I ended up. Of all the things I could’ve ever imagined bringing me joy...

Stop. Focus on the damn moment.

I inspect my precious new tool. The broken edge is about three inches of jagged metal, far from a clean split. It holds promise, though. It’ll work, with the right treatment.

Step three: sharpen the blade. I look around the room. The toilet won’t be any good. The grill I broke is too damn flimsy. The bed’s legs are round and bolted to the floor, but their textured grain might do the trick with enough grinding. The door is mostly flat, but the one-way slot...it does jut out at an angle, and it’s definitely sturdy. It might be my best option.

I drag my sorry carcass to it and test it out, pressing the broken metal to the protrusion and grinding away. Egh. It will straighten out the bumps, but the soft, round edge on the slot will dull the blade if I keep at it after that. Try the bed leg.

Yes. Yes, this’ll work. I’ll be here a while, but it’ll work. The constant back-and-forth grind is a jarring sensation, the kind that makes your hand go numb. It’s helped by the near-complete absence of sound as I do it—it’s only a vibration, this faint shockwave that propagates through my body. Back and forth, get both sides, even it out. I can only give half-thoughts to the task by this point: staying frozen in time is quickly becoming an ordeal all of its own.

I hold it up to eye level for the hundredth time, turn it, thumb the lip. This is as good as it gets. It’s not the razor’s edge I was hoping for, but there’s no doubt that it can ruin someone’s day in a hurry without putting a lot of work into it.

Now, before anything else, cut this revolting IV cord. Don’t let them pump you full of gunk if the standstill falters. God, who knows how much permanent damage all the drugs have done by now? They’re part of the whole process, aren’t they. Disorientation, fragmented thoughts, intermittent
sleep. Not like it matters, whether this works or not. Either way I won’t have much longer in this reality.

I go to my usual corner, lean against the wall. Step four.

Step four...

My hand shakes as I hold the thoroughly sharpened edge to my wrist.

Come on, Max. You got this far. There is no other option, there’s nothing to lose. Go long and deep, you can do it, you’ve had far worse. The longer you wait, the harder it’ll be to stay in control.

Down the lane. Come on. Don’t chicken out.

One

decisive

slice—

Fffuck! Fuck—hold on, hold on to the standstill, don’t you dare let go. Keep going, come on, this? This is barely a five. Try the cattle prod. That’s a seven, or eight, depending where it hits. The sodium hydroxide sizzling on your flesh, that’s a whole-hearted motherfucking ten. This is nothing.

Go longer, cut deeper, paint it red—like Chloe’s lips, like Chloe’s fingertips.

Hold on. Hold the fuck on. Blood, holy fuck, so much blood, it’s getting on everything. Breathe, breathe, it’s okay to cry, just breathe.

Concentrate.

Only one chance. One chance. Concentrate. Don’t let go and don’t stop watching for it. The rescue. Immortality.

The hard rewind.

One chance to seize it and throw it as far back as it will go, before this horrible nightmare started. Does this sound desperate? Hell fucking yes I’m desperate, but it might work, it might—and I know it’s coming this time, I know what to look for. I just need to grab it and use it for myself. It’ll work, it’s either...this...

Or...

Stay awake! Don’t you fucking dare pass out, it’s not over yet. Didn’t expect it to happen so fast, though. Not...really a surprise, I’m...so weak, lately...

Stay. Stay awake, stay here. It’ll come. It has to come, and I have to be ready...I have to—

I have to...

One instant. Less than one instant.

Then, I was bleeding to death in my usual corner.

Now, I’m lying down, staring at the ceiling, gathering what’s left of my wits.
I look around. The grill is back in place. The pooling red is nowhere to be seen.

“No...”

There was nothing to jump onto. Nothing to seize and control. It came from the outside and I couldn’t even feel it, exactly the way my own powers appear to everyone else.

“No, no, no...”

There’s no way out. There’s no hope. I can’t even put an end to my own life, because it really isn’t my own anymore. All I can do is lie here until...

Hm.

Something’s...different.

The vent’s fan, eerily silent. Not a single light blinking on the embedded IV machine-thing. Motes of dust, perfectly suspended under the blinding white. And the shifting colors, bleeding into one another.

Time is still frozen? But I’m not...

I see it through the corner of my eye. The blue butterfly, fluttering down from the vent. That’s right, it’s supposed to show up every time this happens. I wish I could take credit for summoning it, but I didn’t even consider this part.

I track its flight as it draws a wobbling circle down to eye level. Now it perches on the toilet seat, facing me straight-on. It lazily flaps its wings.

The anger boils deep down, then immediately fizzles. I don’t have it in me anymore. My questions are barely a broken whisper.

“What do you want from me? Why did you give me these powers? What was I meant to do?”

It’s watching me. It seems utterly unconcerned.

A new thought enters my mind, the last one in this interminable litany of misery. All this time, I’ve thought of this spirit as some sort of guardian, watching over me, giving me second chances.

Now it occurs to me...it might be one of them. It’s not a guardian at all, but another guard to my prison.

A part of me knows it’s stupid to feel so betrayed. It never promised me a damn thing. I made it all up in my head.

The tears come all the same.

“Are you, really? Are you with them?”

There’s a...shimmer, in the air around me. At first I think it’s the blur in my eyes, but as I stare at this creature the gleam takes more definite form, coalescing around a flickering shape. The shape of a person. The frame of a woman.

The butterfly takes flight, and with it the frame comes near. Within its twinkling confines the butterfly glows black and blue and gold, vibrant and lovely in the harsh white of the room. I can only stare, stunned and shallow-breathed, as it slowly, gently flutters to my forehead. The woman’s
hand, on my forehead.

Upon her touch my thoughts become undone in faltering gasps—it fills me, her touch, it pours into the yawning gaps and blackened chasms carved by tears and blood. It lifts my heart from stink and murk and shadow.

Her touch, it’s love, pure, pristine. Love like a nose buried in my hair in the black of night. Like fingertips tracing the lines of my features beneath a knowing smile. Love like a hand that twines with my own and won’t let go, like warm sighs and heaving sobs and tear-smothered laughter. Her love is the lost memory of everything I used to live for.

I stare at the woman’s frame, this radiant spirit whose features take their shape from the sun itself.

“Chloe?”

In shimmering eddies her contours resolve into the Chloe I knew. Chloe, blue-haired and jacket-clad, with her worn beanie in eighty-degree weather and entirely pointless suspenders dangling at her sides. Chloe angry in a bathroom, Chloe weeping on a shallow grave.

“Your time to choose has come.”

So much distance in her voice. So much sorrow in her eyes.

“I hope you’re ready.”
Everything around us, suspended in-between dimensions. There is a preternatural grace to her very presence that reaches beyond worlds. No part of this mess has been more surreal than this frozen-in-time moment, and yet right now I feel more lucid, more present than I’ve felt since the day I was captured. The fog of crazy that’s been shrouding more and more of my thoughts has swiftly cleared from my mind.

And now I’d like to think I’ve been doing this gig for long enough to know when not everything is as it seems.

“You’re not really my Chloe, are you?”

She caresses my forehead and brushes my hair back, careful not to touch the angry-red scars. She’s shaking her head.

“I’m not. But she is part of me, now, as I am part of you. I’ve grown to...identify with her, to some extent.” She smiles. It really is Chloe’s beautiful smile. “And I thought you could use a friendly face. I want you to feel safe with me. It tears me apart to see you this way.”

I’m hearing Chloe’s voice, but there are so many layers beneath it. Every vowel is a kindness, every sound is steeped in mourning.

“But...your touch. That felt...it felt—”

Like her.

She nods, encouraging. “It’s her love. And your own. You gave it to me, and now I repay you in kind.”

“What...?”

“It’s complicated. Our bond, I didn’t...well, I wasn’t prepared. You’ve changed me, Max. You both did.”

I turn onto my side and prop myself up on the crook of my elbow. “Could you maybe not speak in riddles? Like, just tell me, up front, give me answers—for once?”

She laughs softly, and with it comes a surge of...I don’t know. Excitement? Joy? Maybe just...affection. It’s weird, like there’s this connection between us that touches me with what she’s actually feeling.

“I’m doing my best,” she says. “There are things in this world that have no explanation. Some things simply are.” She holds my hand between hers. “Ask, and I’ll answer.”

The usual questions brawl for attention at the tip of my tongue.

What are you, really?

What do you want?

Why did you put all this on my shoulders?
Why haven’t you talked to me before?

All of them are like pebbles to a mountain.

“Is there any way I can get out and save Chloe?”

Her sorrow, it blankets over me before she even speaks.

“She is long gone, Max. Chloe died the day they captured you.”

The words are sandbags onto my chest, and for a moment breath won’t come into my lungs. I have to lie back again. I’m sinking into the mattress.

“But...I saw her. I watched them...I watched as they—”

“You saw what Mirage wanted you to see.” She brings my hand to her lips. There are actual tears running down her cheeks. “Chloe didn’t suffer along with you.”

“How? How’d she die? They killed her?”

“She knew what they’d put you through, so she took matters into her own hands. The surveillance tape they showed you cuts off before she shot herself.”

“She what?”

“It was always her plan. A last middle finger to the Prescotts so they couldn’t use her against you. Of course, she didn’t know about Mirage.”

The grief is there, acute and terrible. And yet, directly beneath, relief spreads like a body-wide balm. It’s a tangible thing, healing this deep ache that has clutched my insides ever since.

It wasn’t her going through that horrendous nightmare. Thank every god that might listen, it wasn’t her.

“She never mentioned it...”

“Of course not. Her mind was made up, and you would’ve freaked out.”

I have to pause and look at her for a moment. I sit up, hug my knees close to my chest. “No offense, but...you don’t sound very godlike.”

An amused laugh above the sadness. “I know. The two of you are so much a part of me now. Your thoughts, and emotions, and motivations...they mingle with mine to the point that I can’t tell them apart anymore. I don’t want to remember what it was like before this bond. To feel so intensely. To care so deeply. My existence used to have purpose, but now it has meaning.” She gives me a somewhat sheepish smile. “Besides, nobody said I was a god to begin with.”

“What...what are you, exactly?”

“Exactly? I don’t think there’s an answer to that question. I’m Bluewing. I am change, and free will, and choice and consequence. I am hope itself.”

I’d be cringing far more if the gesture didn’t pull at the scars. “Really? That’s all you got? What about all the bullshit in that fucking Art Room? All the ‘scions,’ and ‘guardians’ and so on? What about the Prescott’s ‘hundreds-of-years’ war?”
She sighs like a teacher bored of her own lecture. “If you really want to get into it, here’s the primer. The Scions are primordial manifestations of Gaia. The conjoined spirit of Earth’s creatures, channeled into human anomalies with the affinity to sustain them. The Guardians are just that, spirits of preservation. Not good or evil, but conduits of life’s primordial drive to endure. The Avatars...we spring from reality itself, from the collective consciousness. We are aspects borne of universal concepts, given voice, risen to sapience. Often we work in concert, and yet we are naturally bound to oppose one another.” She frowns at the lips, like the words are leaving a bad taste in her mouth. “It’s no fun to just tell you all this. It ruins the mystique.”

_Cry me a fucking river_, I want to tell this woman-spirit-thing—though I’ll admit she does have a point. Does it really make a difference, to be aware of all that gobbledygook? I’m still here. Everything still sucks.

“So what the hell did you need me for? Why fuck with our lives? Couldn’t you fight your own goddamn battles?”

“Would you rather Chloe had died in that bathroom?”

“It would’ve been better than this! And Chloe’s dead anyway. God, the only thing I ever cared about, and she’s dead anyway...”

She hesitates, then sits next to me, fingertips light on my hand. Through her touch I feel earnest conviction, and sincere hope and affection and...

Fear?

She’s afraid. What could a being like this be afraid of?

“We can only move the world through our conduits,” she tells me, “and it’s only through the depth of our bond that I can talk to you now like this. You talent as an augur drew me to you, but I chose you, Maxine Caulfield, because Chloe was right. You are exceptional in all the right ways. There were others out there, but none like you, and none like her. Together...you were my best chance to break free.”

I just sit there, struggling to understand. It’s a bit much. I want to scoff at the whole spiel, blame her for everything that’s happened and demand that she tell me what she’s really after.

_Break free._

More magical words were never spoken.

“You know what? It doesn’t even matter anymore. Just tell me you have a way out. It can’t end like this, I’ll do anything to get her back, anything.”


“You would, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes.”

She pauses for a moment before carrying on. “There is something we can do, together. But as always, it will come at a cost.”

_Your time to choose has come_, were her first words to me.
I should be taken by dread, but it’s mostly weariness by this point. “So what kind of fucked up choice do you have for me now? I swear, if you want me to give up Chloe for the greater good or whatever, you might as well just leave me here to die. There’s no way I’m going to—”

“Are you kidding me, Max? She’s half the reason I’m willing to make this sacrifice, your love is fucking precious to me. I already know what you’ll choose, it’s what comes after that frightens me.”

Her sudden intensity is enough to make me shrink back. “Alright, whoa, okay. Are you sure you’re not Chloe?”

She snorts. “Sometimes I can’t even tell. This is what the two of you have done to me. I used to be somewhat rational.”

“I’m just fed up of having to weigh her life against something, you know?”

“There is nothing I want more than to give you a life with her. I’m going to die trying.”

Blink. Blink a bit more. “Is that a figure of speech, or...”

She’s quiet for a second. Her poise shifts. She’s looking straight ahead, elbows leaning down on her thighs.

“Have you ever seen a butterfly caught in a spider web?”

“Uh.” I think about it. Does she mean it, like, metaphorically? “No, can’t say I have.”

“It’s a rare occurrence because, once it’s caught, the butterfly only has a few seconds to escape. If she doesn’t make it, the spider will come and immediately clip her wings. And then it’ll be too late. The butterfly—or the moth, for that matter—will be crippled, trapped forever, no matter how much she struggles.”

“That’s...depressing.”

“Yes. And that’s what they believe is happening.” A tiny smile touches her lips. She looks at me, the twinkle of Chloe’s mischief in her eyes. “But I am hope itself, and some things can still be concealed from prescient eyes. You haven’t lost hope, have you, Max?”

I have to puff out a laugh. “Well, considering I just tried to off myself...”

“Yes, but even that was an act of hope. You didn’t want to die, even after everything they’ve done. That is their goal here, you see? Drive you to forsake your own life for no other reason than to end your suffering. The ultimate expression of despair. They would step in, then, and bring you back from the brink of death. And then she would use this broken body we’re trapped in until there was nothing left.

“But no, you were trying to escape. It was the right idea, yet not ambitious enough. How far back would you have gone, if the power to reverse time itself was truly yours?”

I stay quiet for a beat. “Is that an offer?”

“Indulge me and answer the question.”

“I...I don’t know. To before we came to Arcadia Bay, I guess. Before they had a chance to grab us.”
“And with everything you’ve learned now, do you think you could have escaped this eventual fate?”

“We would’ve tried. We would have found a way.”

Not-Chloe is shaking her head. “An insignificant tear in the web, a simple setback. You would be caught in the threads before you even realize the difference. No, Max. You need to rend it apart, shred it beyond recognition—and then strike before she can spin a new web from the tatters. It’s your only chance at freedom.”

“What exactly are you talking about? You want me to jump back years? I fucked up so hard with William, I don’t know if—”

“No, no, not like that. Going through photos is an incontrollable clusterfuck at such range, you learned the right lesson there. I’m talking about going back...and staying there. Your elusive hard rewind, pushed as hard as it can go.”

I spend a moment just looking at her, my one good eye open wide. “You could send me back that far?”

She gives me a satisfied half-smile, like I set her up for just the right answer. “No, I can’t. That extent of power over reality isn’t mine to abuse.” She stands, steps away from the bed. After a momentous pause, she looks over the shoulder with godlike dramatic timing. “But it is mine to give. This is where your choice comes in.”

Chloewing turns to face me and raises a hand, palm up. Her voice grows bolder, richer, more...official. “You can stay here and fulfil the purpose they have for you. Through that usurped power they will destroy the other covenant patriarchs all at once and go on to control all of the pantheon. From the shadows the Prescott family will continue to spread their influence and power unchecked.

“This might sound dire, but know that their plans are not malevolent, despite their ruthless methods. They’re simply self-serving. The supernatural forces will become focused, purposeful. Without the Guardian covenants’ in-fighting, no wild Scions running amok and no rivaling Avatars scheming against one another, the world will change for the better. Broadly speaking.

“Or...” Her other hand comes up. “You can risk a third awakening. I will give myself to you, until no part of me remains. I don’t know what will happen, exactly. I’ve delayed for as long as I could, but it’s still far too early. It’s not supposed to be done this way. It might kill you, or destroy your mind, or simply give them more power to play with.

“But I know your heart like no other. I know your strength. My hope is that you will endure, and then take this power within you to do what you must. Undo this fucked up weave, hunt them down and buy your freedom with their blood. What happens after...will be entirely up to you.”

I’m sitting there, quietly trying to assimilate her words.

Holy shit.

Hey, what do you know. There it is again, this eerily familiar feeling. My hand on a doomsday switch. Left or right, either path surely leads to ruin.

The difference is, this time there’s no question about which way to go. Take your broadly better world and shove it real deep, thank you very much.
“When you say you’ll ‘give yourself to me,’ do you mean, like...dying?”

She shrugs a shoulder, features unsure. “I will cease to exist...for a while. Long after you are gone I will reform, resurface upon a clean slate. Hope doesn’t die. Change is a constant of the Universe.”

“Still—you’re willing to die for this? For us?”

“For you. For Chloe. For the love that binds us.” She crosses her arms in a defiant pose. “And because I’d rather be dead than see that smug bitch win this war.”

Hah. A-fucking-men to that.

“Do you really think it’ll work?”

She looks at me with lips lightly pressed together, as if weighing her next words. Blue Price leans back against the wall, her vibrant frame subtly shifting colors in the prolonged standstill.

“Twice I have touched you,” she says, “and with each touch the ripples thunder through the timeline. They open a rift that demands a counterbalance in the new reality. This town will not survive a third awakening—especially as it happens here, underground, at Arcadia Bay’s very core. I don’t know what it will look like when it’s over, but I doubt even rubble will remain.”

The connection happens so clearly in my head that I can almost hear it go ‘click.’

The vision.

The tidal wave, the flood.

The utter destruction of Arcadia Bay.

“It’s not your fault, Max.”

_Her arms wrap around me. We’re together, always together. Her love is all that keeps me sane._

I close my eyes, holding on to the memory, marveling at the actual, _real_ hope blossoming in my chest. “This isn’t a choice at all, is it?”

“Oh, but it is.” She has this haughty little smile on her lips as she nears the bed once more. “A question is no less a question simply because you know the answer to it.”

I’m a bit grossed out at the relief washing over me. How many times will I consciously doom this town to oblivion?

_As many times as is necessary._

It’s sobering, how readily the answer springs to my thoughts. This spirit-woman could be the devil asking me to sign in blood, and I’d still gladly seal the deal.

“I told them,” I whisper. “I told them the visions always come true. They were so sure they couldn’t be wrong.”

“Their arrogance will be their undoing. You’ve made up your mind, then?”

“You already know.”

“I need to hear it. I need you to want it.” Her hand slips past my arms, delicately rests over my
heart. She somehow avoids touching the burns. “Embrace it with every part of you.”

Funny. The pain is...not even there right now. All I feel is her presence, soothing every ache and worry. Bluewing’s promise. Chloe’s radiance.

What am I about to become?

“Do it. I’m ready.”

She grins fiercely, and cradles me against her chest, and kisses the top of my head. The fear is like quicksilver on her skin.

I hold on to her like I might to Chloe herself. “Don’t be afraid. I’ll make it. I won’t let anything stop me.”

A stifled laugh, barely a breath. “It’s not that. It’s just...you don’t have to be human to fear death.”

“What...what’s gonna happen now?”

“I don’t know. We’re going to find out together, I guess.” She sits next to me and cups my jaw with both hands. “Last minute advice. Most important part: don’t let go of the time-freeze until you reach the furthest back you can manage. Otherwise she’ll know. Do you understand? Whatever happens, don’t return to regular time-flow before you’re done.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Go as far back as you can. The longer you go, the bigger the wound. I can’t know for sure, but it makes sense that her head will become scrambled eggs for a good while if you go far enough. I know it sucks to take back half your life, but it’s the only way this is going to work. Okay?”

“I’m...kind of used to the idea. You want something, you have to pay the price.”

“Find them, wherever they are at that moment. Get rid of them, and do not let her talk to you. If there is a way to manipulate you into self-doubt to save her skin, she will find it.”

“Don’t worry. I doubt we’ll become friends, after what she’s done.”

“And for fuck’s sake, if you make it through all that—give me a goddamn call this time around.” Her voice quivers with laughter, but I can tell she’s dead serious.

I hadn’t considered it yet. A chance to be rid of the one thing I regret most in my life.

Even apocalyptic time-rewinding events can have their silver lining.

“As if you have to tell me? I’d do this just for that reason alone.”

“Yeah. You would, wouldn’t you. We would do anything for each other.”

She’s so close, sparkling blue eyes locked with mine. I can feel her cold fingers tremble on my neck. Her breath runs thin through parted lips.

“I will always be with you, Max Caulfield.”

It’s simply...her.

All I see is Chloe, the woman I fell in love with, the woman that’s been torn away from me time
and again. It’s so much her and nobody else that I feel a sting of panic, because I would never want my Chloe to see me this way.

I hold onto her fingers, bring them to my lips to kiss the palm of her hand. “I’m never saying goodbye to you again. I swear it.”

She hesitates for a moment, then slowly leans in. I meet her half-way, closing the gap between us. It’s Chloe’s breath on my tongue. It’s Chloe’s lips grazing my teeth.

Despite my words, it feels like a mourning farewell.

And then...something shifts. We share a skin-rousing shudder that doesn’t end when it should. Her breath—it enters my mouth like freshwater pouring down my throat, like the scent of pine trees and the humid musk of a black-skied mountain top. It’s happening. Whatever frightens her so, it’s happening right now.

I try to brace myself, but I don’t know how. Warmth, light, they fill me up, more and more, flowing in, coursing down to my limbs, through my veins. It’s a torrent, a flood I cannot stop, spreading in unrelenting waves. Her frame has become glowing blue and black and gold, vibrant and overwhelming to the point I can’t keep my eyes open.

This liquid light swells inside my head, pushing at the insides of my skull like it wants to come back out. It takes hold, it digs deep, washing over everything in reach.

It hurts. Oh, it hurts, a body-wide overload that spreads from my spine to each and every nerve ending. But it hurts like forcing a cramped muscle to stretch. Like climbing the last ramp at the end of a rough hike, pulling from the last of your reserves to make it to the top. It’s the sort of pain you might feel when forcing a standstill to happen for as long as you can, because otherwise your dear friend might jump off a roof.

It has purpose. It has meaning. I don’t want to fight it. I surrender to it, become one with this new presence inside me.

Besides, it’s real weird and everything, but it’s just about an eight, overall. I have it in good authority that I can take it. Don’t mind the convulsions or the desperate attempts to fit some air into my lungs.

The widespread torment seems to retreat to a number of places. My chest, my spine, the base of my skull. My left arm, for some reason. All throughout the experience it’s as if my brain stretches to accommodate—new neural paths to adapt, connections severed and made to deal with this new thing settling into that weird, mystical well that I tap to travel along the timeline. It’s all ripples and wild tremors in there, a writhing, throbbing mess where before there was only perfectly cyclical vibrations.

Calm down. Relax. Commune with the power, find common ground. We are all friends here.

Slowly, far too slowly, the tension eases to a six, a four, barely a three. The insane thumping becomes more manageable, its influence spilling over from the well in ever more measured surges that now gently seep into my bones. As I lie back on this bed that I loathe, desperately taking in gulps of air as big as the room, I can feel it dissolving from a distinct presence to simply...a sensation. A new state of being.

Eventually, it becomes a warming tingle that’s more uplifting than painful. The well, the coiled spring, it returns to something that’s somewhat familiar—only far deeper, grander, enormously
more complex.

It’s another part of me. The new normal.

My arm still hurts like a bitch, though.

I gather my wits, open my eyes, look at it. Stare at it in awe.

“Holy...shit...”

I didn’t expect her promise to be this literal.

A stylized butterfly spreads its wings in blue and black below my wrist—right where the blade went in. All four wingtips sprout vine-like lines that draw beautiful patterns all over my arm. One such climbs over the crook of my thumb and draws a tightly coiled spiral on my palm. The others intertwine in smooth arching paths curling up my forearm, past my elbow. Rolling up my shoddy gown sleeve shows them spreading out toward the shoulder, branching off toward my back, into my chest. A look down my collar confirms that most end in spirals over my heart. If the trails of fire that twine on my skin are any indication, the others converge in a cluster at the base of my skull.

It all burns in a lovely blue glow that really hurts.

As I stare I notice it quickly growing faint. The pain is fading with it—and I know, the way I might know an itch or a pang of hunger, I know that the moment it dies, the temporal standstill will end. In a panic I rush to grab hold, remembering Bluewing’s dire warning.

It’s straightforward, trivial. I stay in the null time-lapse without much conscious thought. The glow burns bright once more. The pain flares back.

“Shit, is it gonna hurt like this from now on?”

It doesn’t seem to fade away over time. I suppose I can see myself coping with it. Hardly a four, maybe a three-point-five.

In better news, the vise on my spine is gone. My head no longer throbs with the strain of prolonged time manipulation. It’s as if...as if this glowy tattoo thing is drawing all of it. Purging out the harm to make it only skin-deep.

I stretch out my arm, turning it this way and that, reluctantly admiring it. Something tells me this will not go away, no matter how far back I rewind. Such fun, explaining it to my parents. At least Chloe will flip out when she sees it.

Oh.

“Right. The whole point of this. Come on, Max.”

The worry that I might not know how to go about it had crossed my mind, but it’s clear now that there was no need for concern. It’s right there. This coiled spring, this deep, deep well, it’s thrumming and shifting and so ready to go, rich and crammed-full with potential aching to be unleashed. It’s a scary thing, huge and ominous—and yet...I can’t deny the thrill that innervates my lungs. It can take me to freedom, if only I command it the right way.

I reach within myself, dive deep into the pool, soak my thoughts in it. I reach out with my glowing hand, old skool rewind style. One last look around this six-by-six hell. Nothing in this place is
worth even remembering.

Make the connection, push it through. Years-worth of a rewind, take back everything that’s happened, wipe it all clean. God, everything Chloe and I have shared will be like it never existed. The bond that so profoundly links us—

I squeeze my eyes shut and banish the thought. I can’t think that way. Everything that matters can be reforged. This is the path I must follow.

“You can do it, Max. Hit the reset button.”

Fear quakes in my gut as the power springs forth to unravel reality.

It hits all at once, and nothing could have prepared me for it. My world becomes undone the moment the hard rewind punches through. It’s a rending storm raging inside my flesh, a turbulent force I can barely control. Every line on my arm flares in blinding paths of pure light as I begin to shred my way into the past.

In an out-of-body experience I watch myself lie on the bed, toss and turn, wake and slumber. My conscious self stands in an overlapping time-space, aware and arm stretched and under extreme duress as events roll backwards before my eyes. I’m split from my physical body, yet linked in some way I couldn’t begin to explain.

It’s fast. So fast. I sleep, I get moved, I get drugged and poked and deliberately driven to suicidal insanity. The conversations, the forced training sessions, the screams and blood and loathing, everything flashes in reverse at breakneck speed—and as it un-happens the power keeps peeling layers off my fucking soul, bursting forth from the well, crashing awake without restraint from this tightly wound spring.

Pain, and sorrow, and despair, withdrawn, forsaken. It feels as if it will tear me apart any moment. I grab my own arm at the wrist as if that would somehow help. I’m shaking, pulling everything I have from every corner within myself just keep it going—but I can hardly keep my mind in one piece, let alone lord over this wild torrent shattering my thoughts. It’s too much. I can’t control it, it’s too much.

I see myself needing to let go a moment before I crash to a stop, my vision white-washed, my body tumbling as if gravity suddenly decided to up its game and toss me about in multiple directions. The time-freeze, for fuck’s sake, hold on to the time-freeze, whatever you do—

Blood, so much blood pouring from my nose and mouth. I’m in a sterile white hallway, barely standing, leaning against the wall. My head, it’s about to explode, like—

—railroad spikes through my eye sockets—

—through the corner of my eye I see a gurney, and behind the gurney a man, pushing it with purpose down the hall. He’s frozen in place. I’m supposed to be lying on that thing, bleeding inside my skull.

It doesn’t matter. Keep going, you have to keep going. Try again. Don’t even try to control it.

Past the pain and the blood I reach into my mind, reach out with my hand, and throw my fucking soul into it. The hard rewind explodes onto the world in a rippling wave of undoing.

It’s a painting of myself, hand outstretched—
It’s the hood of a car, and a ball of napkins flying backwards through the air—

It’s the sun itself on my lap—

It’s a deserted RV park and a tow bar in my hands—

It’s steam on the shower glass and half-lidded sighs—

Love expressed atop bedsheets—

*The memories will be ours forever*

Despair and longing dropping from the lighthouse— Single-minded loathing and a stun-gun dropping guards—

Going through the motions, holding on to nothing— Gunshots, an explosion, collapsing through a window—

Tears wept before a grave, bitter, tired and heart-broken— Routinely taken selfies and Chloe wreathed in fire—

Sleepwalking through a funeral— Hands bleeding on the rubble—

Hold Joyce’s hand in condolence— Bed-bound Chloe begs for death— Pinning clues on a wooden board—

Cuddled up in the bathroom— Take a hammer to the glass— Let my powers be awoken—

Tea with Kate—

—bear hugs with dad, tears with mom—

—my hands on a Blackwell letter, my gut a nervous wreck—

All the things that I forgot and now remember.

Chloe’s rage.

Chloe’s sorrow.

Chloe’s pain and broken dreams.
From my hand it all unravels, all the threads of fate whipping in irreconcilable chaos. My fingers rake through the weave of history and leave it a mess of shredded tatters.

The end comes with a sputter. A slowdown, a falter-and-restart. It’s not exhaustion. It’s...loss. I cannot do it anymore, because there is nothing to channel forth.

My thoughts once more become one with the flow of the universe in the absolute weirdest feeling I’ve ever had. One time-dilated moment I’m splintered beyond dimensions, the next I am whole. It turns my mind to kibble for a while, and all I can do is gasp for breath on the floor.

On the floor...

My fingers brush into the wooly rug spread under me. It’s a monumental effort just to push myself upright.

It’s my room. My Seattle room. I loved this rug, I picked it myself while shopping for the new house with my parents.

“Fuck...everything...”

It’s dark, only a trickle of street lamplight filtering through the blinds. My arm no longer burns in blue lines of fire. I work to wake past the scrambled brainpan and stand on my feet, because none of the urgency has left. Yes, hooray, I’m out of that place—but I’m not even half-way done with this prison break.

Shamble to the wall, turn on the light. Look around. It’s fucking weird to be here again, but I try to focus on what matters. The swaying-tail Cheshire cat clock on the wall says it’s a quarter ‘til six in the morning. I go to my phone on the quaint little bedside table. Split between apprehension and curiosity, I wake it up and swipe it unlocked.

October 12.

2009.

I’m fourteen years old.

“Holy shit.”

No wonder I feel so...different. Smaller, for one. But also...I don’t know. Lighter. Brighter. Both my eyes are wide open and alert, fully awake, well rested. The constant pain, the angry scars, the burns, it’s all gone, thank the powers that be. And hey, look at that. The spiraling lines fade completely when I’m not using the power. Only the butterfly remains.

Way easier to hide or explain, if I survive all this. Silver linings.

The phone in my hands. My fingers itch to keep tapping and reach out to Chloe right away. If I remember it right, it’s only been months since the move, and a few weeks more since...William. Could I have gone as far back as William? Could I have pushed a bit harder?

I know it’s too late now. Time’s no longer frozen, this is when I need to get things done. I imagine Dianne Prescott collapsing to the floor from the sudden, devastating change to every one of her fateful threads and Machiavellian plans. One can hope, anyway.
I reach for the power regardless. I’m met with a shallow puddle that’s just plain pitiful. A faint glow on the magical tattoo, a dull ache down my arm, and then the sickening, all-too-familiar vertigo of “I seriously can’t go any further.” I have to give up immediately—and now I’m back in darkness with my face on the rug, because that’s what the hard rewind does.

I roll onto my back. This is it. Deal with what you’ve got.

There are noises downstairs, probably dad getting ready for work. It’s a school day, then. Mom will come get me eventually, after I fail to show up for breakfast. I really could use a motherly hug right about now...

I get up, lock the door and boot up my computer. As much as I’d love to see them, I can’t afford to waste a second.

This fourteen-year-old has some homework to do.

I walk through a luxurious hotel lobby that’s frozen in place. According to the chirpy pink watch on my non-glowy wrist, six hours have passed since the jailbreak.

It’s been a strange time, adapting, finding myself again in this fourteen-year-old body.

No, not strange. More like crazy weird. I didn’t fully go back to my teenage self, but neither did I keep my exact same personality from the fucked-up future. It’s a bizarre merge that’ll probably take weeks to get used to, if I make it that far. All the knowledge, all the over-the-top experiences are there—but muddled by teenage social worries and the dreaded math test coming up Wednesday.

It makes the heavy stormclouds inside my head not so dark anymore. Everything I suffered, the horror...it’s not as if it happened to someone else; every wound and humiliation is pristine-clear in my mind, and yet it doesn’t loom as dire. It’s distant. Scarred over. A veteran’s combat nightmares from a war fought long ago.

Even the love...I know it, I cherish it, I long for it dearly—but it’s not the burning need it used to be. It’s not this soul-choking hold on my throat.

I want it back.

I glance behind me, at the Honda parked right in the middle of the hotel’s foyer. If everything goes well, it should be there for a blink in the final timeline, then gone. Barely a glitch in the system.

Traveling here sure was an adventure. I haven’t dared go over a quarter of an hour before rewinding back to minute-zero. Who knows what she can set in motion, if I let enough time pass? So switching cars to travel was a total pain in the butt—until I discovered the newest upgrade to my powers, that is. I rewound atop the bitchin’ motorcycle I “borrowed” around Lakewood, and the bike stayed with me. It was much nicer to keep going after that. The freeze has become trivial to maintain, and riding the thing feels way safer when I’m weaving past stationary cars on the highway. Wonder if anyone will notice the thin trail of exhaust smoke that will eventually materialize between lanes.

(Fun fact: I have to really gun it to go anywhere close to fast. I can tell the engine is in permanent
overdrive, with the fuel needle going down like there’s a gaping hole in the tank. That poor bike might give out before I’m done today.)

Honestly, the worst part was all the cold calls I made and general information gathering I did before leaving. I went through so many rewinds getting people to talk, I literally lost count. It’s amazing, what you can convince strangers to divulge on the phone with enough well-placed lies.

At 5:46AM, Sean Prescott is leaving his posh hotel room in Olympia. Dianne is somewhere at the Estate, no doubt inside that fucking Art Room. I’m dealing with him first. I’ve no idea why I feel so calm as I watch the numbers in the elevator display count up to the top floor suites.

The robotic female voice announces the stop, the doors smoothly slide open, and I come face-to-face with one of the Oxen Twins. Our eyes have time to meet for a fraction of a second. He’s already bringing a hand inside his jacket.

Freeze.

I look past the guy. Sean Prescott walks a ways behind, closely guarded by the other Laurent brother. A woman I recognize as Helen Briar brings up the rear guard. She looks terribly alarmed. I guess you could say she’s just about to cry wolf.

Only one of these people is my enemy. Don’t know how much of Helen’s story was true and how much of it was a Prescott ploy to manipulate everything we did, but I’m still hoping to make an ally out of this woman. The brothers, I’ve no clue—but I’d like to keep the door open, regardless. Each one of them gets a handwritten note in their pocket: a calling card, an invitation, and a thinly veiled threat all rolled into one. I have to think beyond my immediate freedom, beyond revenge. There are at least two sides to this war they’re fighting, and something tells me the other factions won’t leave me alone forever, precisely. Though maybe they will, after this.

On my tip-toes I help myself to the gun for which Mr. Laurent is reaching. Jeez, he’s tall. The gun is lightweight and compact, no idea what model it might be. It takes me a moment to even figure out how to check the clip.

Yeah, plenty of bullets in there. Three is all I want.

I engage a very slow rewind as I walk. Easily I overtake them as they reverse their paths and return to the room they left. The elevator ride was twenty-seven seconds, and Prescott ends up exactly at the door’s threshold. I’m standing before him, staring into a dead man’s eyes. I dig through his wallet and find the Prism card I’ll be using soon enough.

I take one step back, brace the gun with both hands and aim carefully. I thought I’d be angry. I thought I might cherish this moment.

I just feel cold inside. Detached.

“This is for Chloe.”

My hands are steady like an intravenous drip as I pull the trigger. The recoil hits pretty hard, but I manage it just fine. The bullet leaves the muzzle with a small flash and hovers in its deadly path, ready to speed directly into his forehead.

I sidestep a tiny distance. Aim and fire again. Two bullets, caught in the folds of time.

I could leave it like this. Walk out within the freeze, take the stairs, let it all happen once I’m long gone. There is no stopping the events I’ve just set in motion.
Instead I return to normal flow. One second, less than one second. I watch the bullets disappear into his skull. I watch his head whip back. I hear the collective gasp.

I had to watch it happen. I had to make sure.

For Chloe.

Dianne Prescott stands at the beginning of dread. Her shoulders are hunched over and her chest hollowed out, like someone just gut-punched the air out of her lungs. Her brush is half-way to the floor, as if suddenly dropped. The stroke was violently interrupted, ruining a good portion of the painting she was working on.

I recognize the painting. I’m in it.

It’s almost seven hours later, but only a second since the jailbreak, from her perspective. One second after her precious weave crumbled to ruin, and one instant after her faithful husband was shot by my hand.

I draw closer to woman and easel within the standstill, and as I do the distance between me and the hatred vanishes. In her presence, everything comes back. Everything. Again I can feel the metal constraints on my wrists, her ironclad fingers clutching my chin, her spider-like tendrils wrapping around my will, molding it as she pleases.

My free hand is clenched to a fist. My grip on Remi Laurent’s gun tightens to a near-cramp. Right here, right now, I want to see this woman suffer.

Time resumes its normal course, and I watch as she stumbles back, and cradles her head in her hands, and lets out a throat-rending cry of agony. The brush clatters noisily on the floor. Her face is horror itself.

Make sure she screams, Sam.

Boy, that looked awfully painful. The thought that by now I’ve made these few minutes happen over a hundred times brings a dark smile to my lips—no, more than that: it brings real, genuine pleasure to my heart. I recognize it as a fucked up thing to feel in the face of someone else’s suffering. I enjoy it anyway.

This is wrath, pulsing through my veins. This is what vengeance feels like.

She crumples to the floor, breathless. Her cry devolves into long, pained moans. Finally she looks up, and her tortured gaze lands on me. Wide eyes widen further.

“You? The weave...how—”

I’m next to her and pressing a gun to her stomach before she can say anything else. “Predictthis, bitch.”

The shot is muffled by cloth and flesh, but still it rings in my ears. She gasps loudly, and her fingers grip my shoulder like I might suddenly become her salvation. For a moment there is more shock than pain on her features. She looks down.
“What—”

The shock wears off, and pain takes over. Her grip weakens, her blood pours warm on my hand. Soon she’s leaning back against the wall, with palms pressed to the wound and face growing ashen by the second.

“This new weave,” Dianne mutters among whimpers, “what have you done?”

Her breath rattles in erratic wheezing, her lips are stained red. It turns out that bullet wounds that perforate the stomach are an extremely painful way to go. I know it, I looked it up ahead of time. Where might it fall on the scale? An eight? A nine?

“What have you done?”

She’s getting off easy. With a point-blank shot, this won’t last longer than five minutes. Fucked up Max from the future keeps staring as if spellbound. Fourteen-year-old Max is ready to throw up. This is not okay, she keeps saying. It doesn’t matter what she did, this is not okay.

I’m not changing a damn thing.

“You brought this on yourself.” I turn over my hand so she can see my wrist. “You should have left us alone.”

She blinks like she’s lost in a crowd. Understanding blossoms shortly after, because this woman has the devil’s wits. “Bluewing...” She starts shaking her head. “This new weave...you’ve no idea what—”

“Oh, let me guess. You’re the lesser evil, right? Maybe I should take this back so we can talk it out, instead? We could work together, for sure. Are you going to tell me that this is only the beginning?”

Anger flashes among the pained tremors. “Stupid child, you think you’ve won? You’ve brought —”

“I don’t give a shit. There is nothing you can say. Look into your future, Dianne. Tell me if you see any way out. Tell me now if this is how you die.”

It’s brief, but I’m watching for it. Even she can’t remain in control at all times, not at a moment like this. Quickly concealed behind scorn, pushed down not quite fast enough...

I see fear. I see desperation.

“You don’t know what you’ve done,” she sputters. “You’ll lose everything in the end, this will cost you everything. And your precious Chloe, she’ll fear you—she’ll never accept the monster you’ve become. Your life will be buried under a mountain of lies and in the end all the suffering...the suffering will be for nothing, unless...unless—”

She can’t keep up the rant. Blood spatters over every word, leaving a trail dribbling down her chin. For a while she can only catch her breath, grit her teeth. Slowly lose the last battle she’ll fight in this life.

“Are you done?”

We look at one another. I don’t know what she sees in my eyes, but it’s enough to sap the fight right out of her. Her brow knits. A hand drenched in red feebly reaches out to me but falls listless
on her lap. Tears well up in her eyelids.

“Please...don’t let...my children...”

The sounds die somewhere in the space between us. Her eyes droop lower, then close altogether. The tension that so tightly coiled her body slowly eases, until she lies limp against the wall.

*This is not okay.*

I could take it back. I could force her into a conversation, play cat and mouse until I know everything she knows. Maybe, now that I’m free from her clutches and clearly in control, I could give her the chance to live, if she abides by all my terms. It’s possible she was telling the truth. I might indeed be headed for disaster.

I consider it, I honestly do, despite everything that’s happened. The idea is as viscerally repellent to me as the memory of live skin blistering before my eyes, bubbling into misshapen crags.

I take out my phone. It already auto-updated to the local time. One knee on the bloodied floor, I watch until her last breath whispers past her lips.


My prime marker. Never forget it. I will never, ever rewind beyond this point.

For better or worse, my fate is now my own, and only my—

“Bluewing’s heiress.”

The voice, harsh and sibilant, comes from the doorway. Time’s frozen before I even turn.

Eight unblinking red eyes glow in the darkness beyond the threshold. They draw closer to me despite the time-freeze, until they are at the door itself. Eight marbles of red, hovering at shoulder-height in two rows of four.

“Set your house in order,” it rasps, “then seek out the daughter. She shares the talent, yet lacks both guile and ambition. We will work together.”

My back bumps against the wall, and I realize I was recoiling from the intruder’s advance without even noticing.

“Wh...what—”

“You have made your own fate. To the victor, the spoils.”

One moment, the room is filled with this presence of swollen darkness and foreboding eyes. The next, color seems to return to the world, and I’m left alone with the bleeding corpse of my arch-nemesis.

Pretty sure I won’t be able to rewind that for a do-over.

I look at the woman. Crimson pools all around, I’m nearly standing in it. After the adrenaline rush and the anger and the last-minute apparition, a thought-addling numbness is settling over my chest. This is my world, now. This is what my actions have wrought.

“Fucking spirits. It won’t ever end.”
I leave Dianne’s body where it lies. The soon-to-be rotting legacy of the family I destroyed.

The swaying-tail Cheshire cat clock on the wall says it’s a quarter past six in the morning. I’m stuffing my stained clothes in a bag to be eventually incinerated. The gun is already deep in my closet, under the weight of all the stuffed animals that could no longer merit their parcel of bed real estate.

I wanted to go to Chloe. She was right there, barely a few blocks away. A knock on the door, a desperate hug and possibly hours of abject crying. She would have been so confused.

I couldn’t. Not with blood so fresh on my hands. That’s not the Max she deserves.

The ride back to Seattle remains a numb haze in my mind, save for the horrible near-miss arriving at Lakewood. I almost lost control and was close to jamming my head into the back of a trailer truck. Such a cosmic irony it would have been, to survive all this only to die on the road after dozing off for a second.

It was simple bus rides after returning the bike to its parking spot, keys “forgotten” in the ignition. Turn off the phone, let time pass, who the hell cares anymore. Just rewind at the end and sneak back into the house. The only challenge was not falling asleep.

I toss the bag full of clothes into the closet. Back in my night T-shirt and shorts, I’m ready to fall over—the chirpy pink watch says I’ve been awake for close to twenty hours, but I know that’s only part of the bone-deep exhaustion that grips me. I want to wrap myself in bedsheets and stop being me for a little while. I want to forget.

But first I need to go out into the hallway and get to the bathroom, because I have every intention to spend the next four hours under the showerhead.

Mom is going the same way, mid-yawn and nightgown-clad. We startle each other.

“Oh, hey, honey. This is so early for you, getting an early start?”

Without waiting for an answer mom goes in for the usual morning hug. It’s routine. We’ve done it since before I can remember.

Caught out in the open, I try to act normal and reciprocate, but I’m as stiff as a flag pole in her arms. “Yeah, uh. I’m just...I couldn’t sleep.”

She holds me at arms’ length and takes a good look at me. “It shows. Are you alright, sweetheart?”

“Y-yeah. Yes.”

“Hm.” She gently cups my jaw and turns my head slightly, feeling for a temperature.

It’s such a simple gesture of concern. Of freely-given kindness. She’s just being mom, a bit touchy-feely, a bit overbearing, like she’s always been. I’m beyond used to it.

In this particular moment, it’s a precision strike to my chest that breaks me into pieces.

“Are you sure you’re okay? You really don’t look okay, honey.”
“No,” I confess right away. My voice barely breaks out of my throat. “No, I’m not okay…”

“What’s wrong? Are you feeling sick?”

*I’m a murderer, mom.*

The tears start to run down before I’m even aware of them. A hard knot clogs my throat, as hard as the fist clenching my lungs. This is all it took. I’m falling apart, it’s all crashing down—I can feel it happening, and I can’t stop it.

“Max, what’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

Amid hiccupping breaths I bury my face in the crook of her neck, holding on as tight as my arms will let me. After a moment of surprise she starts brushing my hair with her fingers, murmuring next to my ear.

“It’s okay, sweetheart. Shh, it’s going to be okay…”

She doesn’t know what’s going on, but that doesn’t matter, she’s there for me all the same. Teenage troubles, I bet she figures. I had a crush and he rejected me. The cool kids were mean to me again.

Not premeditated murder. Not erased timelines and lives that will never be. Not systematic torture or a supernatural conspiracy or the power to warp the universe at my fingertips.

She keeps shushing me in a calming litany. “Everything will be okay.”

It hammers home my new reality like nothing else could. I’m not jumping back to the present anymore. *This* is the present. This is me, now, imprisoned in a life I left behind years ago, a life to which I simply can’t see myself going back. And god, how am I ever going to tell them? How could I ever tell them?

The prospect just makes me sink farther. It’s full-on breathless shudders and open-mouthed sobs. I’m clinging to her like I’m five years old again.

“Jesus, Max, you’re scaring me. What happened?”

The tremor of serious concern makes me realize that I will have to take this back, too. I will let it all out and then rewind and I’ll have to pretend like nothing’s happened, and that’s when the lies will begin piling up.

“I’m sorry,” I try to say, but it’s just noises. That’s how it’ll be, right? The only reason the other Max told them was because she had no choice. She was on the run and it was the least she could do, next to simply leaving them with a missing daughter. And she was already out of the house, a grown adult making her own way in the world.

I’m their teen girl, smack in the middle of puberty, and the worst fear they have for me is that I might get knocked up by some asshole.

“Oh my god, let me take you to your room, sweetheart. You can stay home today, okay? Just tell me what’s wrong. You know you can tell me anything, right?”

She’s about to start crying with me, she’s so alarmed. I just nod and let her guide me, and maybe I could simply stop *thinking* for a while. I’m still sobbing, clinging to her gown. I could believe her for now and decide that everything will really be okay.
Mom leads me to the bed, and gets me to lie down, and tucks me in. She kisses my forehead and strokes my hair with the kind of love they make whole movies about.

“I’m always here for you, Maxine. I’m always on your side.” She seeks my hand and squeezes it reassuringly. “Promise to tell me what’s wrong? You don’t have to, right now. When you’re ready.”

I squeeze back. The tenderness in her every gesture and word bring about another torrent of tears that she can’t see.

“Promise,” I manage to whisper. She keeps smoothing my hair and holding my hand, sitting next to me like she’s guarding her most prized possession. She has no intention of leaving my side. I’m holding on to her, because I don’t want her to go. Her reassuring presence is the last thing I remember before falling asleep.

I promise to tell you, mom. I swear I will, one day.

One day. When I’m ready.

I slip on the fresh change of clothes, gather my wet towel and open the bathroom door. Mom’s on the other side, mid-yawn and nightgown-clad.

“Goodness, that must have been the earliest shower of your life. Are you in a hurry today?”

She spreads an arm, inviting me for the morning hug. I take a swift step back and bring a hand between us. The other remains carefully hidden under the towel.

“Actually, I’m feeling really sick, mom. I was trying to clear my head, but it’s not working…”

I don’t have to pretend much at all to sound like I’m in miserable pain right now.

“Ahh, you poor thing. Come here, let me see.”

“I don’t want to get you sick.”

She chuckles. “Honey, if you’re coming down with something, I already got it too. We shared a straw at the movies yesterday, remember?”

No, I don’t remember.

“Let your mother take a look at you.”

She does what mom does, feeling along my jaw, pressing the back of her hand to my forehead. It still chips at my heart, but I keep it together this time. I even pretend to mildly resent it.

“Hm. You’re not fever-sick, at least. Did you eat something different than we did? Is your stomach upset?”

“No, not at all. I don’t know, it’s this really bad migraine. I just feel terrible, I really don’t think I can go to school today.”
Mom purses her lips, brow knit with concern. “That bad, huh?”

There isn’t a hint of doubt in her eyes, because I’ve always had a damn good record. I’m a nice girl, I’m not cool enough to play hooky and honestly I’ve always hated missing school—catching up later is such a pain in the ass. If I claim I can’t go, it’s because I truly can’t go.

She sighs. “Well, back to bed with you, then. I’ll give them a call, and then I’ll bring you up aspirin and something for breakfast. I’ll leave you all set up before going to work, okay?”

I give her a meager smile. “You’re the best.”

“Don’t I know it.” She sneaks in the hug and kisses my head. I hug her back, perhaps a bit tighter than I usually would. Then I do as she says, dragging my feet as I go. They feel pretty heavy right now.

I slept for over fourteen hours, then rewound it all away. Just a vanilla, standard rewind. The time-path through unconsciousness that I thought to be non-existent before is like a line of Christmas lights now, and I just need to follow it. Getting through does something weird to me, not quite like taking the sleep away, but neither does it leave me well-rested. Just...kinda stuck in the twilight. Don’t know how to explain it.

I get myself in bed and patiently wait. Mom does exactly as she promised, coming back up the stairs a minute later and leaving a tray on the nightstand. She makes sure everything I might need is close by and ready and available.

“I’ll take you to the doctor if you don’t get better by the time I get back. Keep the phone close and don’t hesitate to call me if you get worse, I’ll literally run over from the flower shop. Can I get you anything?”

I feebly shake my head. “Thank you.”

“Get some rest, sweetheart. And don’t skip breakfast if you can keep it down.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t. Have a good day at work, mom. I love you.”

“Hah, my god, who’s this sweet girl and what happened to my teenage daughter?”

I know she’s just joking, I know it. My heart still skips a beat before I push out the smile.

“I got rid of her. You’re stuck with me, now.”

“Can’t say I mind. I hope you feel better soon. I love you too.”

She swings the door half-closed and leaves the hallway light on. I listen for a few minutes until she walks out the front door.

Queue up the deepest sigh in the world.

Get used to this feeling. Take in stride. You’re protecting them from heartbreak, after all.

My life, a fucking mountain of lies from now on.
Joyce’s voice is a dejected monotone, like she absolutely hates saying the words.

This is the Price residence. Leave a message after the tone.

It used to be this super corny whole-family joint message, playful and adorable in typical William fashion. It must have cost her five years of her life to overwrite it.

Beeeep.

Silence.

“Hi, um. This is Max. Max Caulfield? I, uh...I just...”

Silence.

“I just wanted to...”

Silence.

Silence.

Silence.

“Chloe. Listen, Chloe, I’m so sorry. I should’ve called you sooner, I just didn’t know...no, there’s no excuse, I’ve been such a shitty friend, but I miss you so much. I’ve missed you every day since we moved. Please call me back, okay? I know I shouldn’t have—”

Click.

“Hey.”

“Oh. Chloe?”

“Yeah. Hey, Max.”

“Chloe...Chloe, I’m really sorry, I’m so happy to hear your voice...”

“Dude, you’re laying it on thick. I get it, you’re sorry. Cool it with the waterworks.”

“I can’t help it, you’ve no idea...look, could we do this in person, can I see you? Are you free for a visit?”

In my mind I can see her startling, blinking at the receiver. “Y-you’re in town?”

“I’m right outside your door.”

“Fuck off, no way.”

I can hear the rushed thumping from where I stand. I had the sneaking suspicion she wouldn’t be in school. I would have scoured Arcadia Bay to find her.

Chloe throws the door open, wide eyed, not-quite smiling. There are several things I could have noticed first: the short blond hair, chopped haphazardly in a bout of rage; the “I’ve no plans to ever
get out of my house” pajama top and sweatpants; the pallor of her skin and near-sickly frame. It’ll be my turn to worry about eating habits.

But no, what first strikes me is the darkness under her eyes. In her eyes. They aren’t supposed to look like this, dull and vacuous. The hollows of her eyelids are dark valleys full of shadows; there are reds and purples deep enough to pass for zombie makeup.

Looking into those eyes is a punch to my gut. I’ve had some fucked up shit happen to me in very recent memory, and still nothing hits quite like witnessing first-hand Chloe’s pain.

“Max...”

“Hey.” I raise a sheepish hand, give her a timid smile. “I’m here.”

I expected this to be difficult. I expected her to hate me. Chloe, young and angry and broken Chloe, she steps out of the house and wraps her arms around me. It feels so unlike the Chloe I’m used to, who was so vibrant with energy, who could lovingly crush me in her embrace and hold on so tight that I’d need to come up for air. This Chloe is...frail, pressed to my chest. Wraithlike, weightless. Like she’s given up. Like she’s fallen apart.

The scent is the same, though. The swell of her breath and the curve of her neck, they’re the same. It might’ve seen better days, but I can still recognize my home.

I am home.

I hold her the way she held me all those times, when she would keep the fear at bay and soothe the nightmares back to silence. I give her everything I have, all my remorse and empathy and concern, and I’m pouring so much love into it that I’m afraid she might push me away, because I’m not yet that person in her mind.

But she stays. Whatever tension there is between us simply dissolves, and gradually her embrace collapses to just leaning on me, just...sagging. I feel her fingers curl on my back. Her chest breaks in vacant sobs that can no longer carry tears.

“I missed you...so...much...” she manages.

Me being here, with her. That’s all we needed to reconnect. Her walls are not yet built. Her fortress is smoldering ruin. I knew she needed me, I’d always known, and I stayed away anyway because I kept coming up with bullshit excuses until I convinced myself that it was too late to try. That she would be okay. Even after we got together again, I asked forgiveness as if I deserved to be forgiven.

I didn’t understand until this very moment just how much she’d needed someone.

“I’m sorry, Chloe. I’m so, so sorry...”

She relaxes a bit, letting go enough to rest her forehead on my shoulder. She’s working to calm down and get a hold of herself. “It’s f-fine. You’re here now. Life really sucks, Max...”

“I know. It’ll get better. I promise it’ll get better.”

“Fuck you. My mom...s-she’s gonna marry this guy, in a few weeks.” Chloe takes a moment to catch her breath, sniffle and wipe at her nose with the back of her hand. “He already moved in his shit, acting like we’re his family now. What the fuck, Max? It’s like my dad...never existed...”
Poor Chloe. She must’ve been dying for so long to shit-talk about David with someone that’ll listen.

“That sounds awful.”

“It’s like...who the fuck are you? You’re not my fucking dad, no-one could get even close. You know?”

“Yeah, I totally get it. Has this guy been, like...an asshole to you?”

“No, he’s just...he’s trying, I guess? ‘Cuz he has to, and I fucking hate it. He’s not my dad. Fuck him.” Chloe lifts her head and looks at me, hands easily resting on my shoulders. She seems to realize we’re still standing outside her door, and gives me a tiny smile that’s brimming with hope. “You wanna...hang out in my room? No-one’s home.”

I take one of her hands and firmly squeeze it between both of mine. “There’s nothing I’d love more.”

The smile almost becomes a grin, but something seems to click in her head. She seems suddenly anxious. “Shouldn’t you be in school?” She glances at the driveway, around the neighborhood. “Who drove you here?”

She doesn’t see the car, of course. Here’s another fun fact: my mom’s Jeep goes infinity miles to a gallon. Seattle to here and all the way back, not one drop of gas used up.

During the trip I considered so many ways to tackle the inevitable questions. Hopefully I can tell Chloe the truth before the day is over, but I’m not delusional enough to think she’ll believe me within the very first five minutes of finding each other again.

“This whole thing has been killing me,” I tell her. “I couldn’t stay away anymore, so I convinced my mom to do this for us, we drove in last night. She dropped me off just now and is spending the day visiting old friends, she’s giving us privacy.”

It’s gross to lie to her like this. She’s still glad to see me, but she’s also looking at me like I just escaped from a mental asylum. “Are you nuts? That’s so many hours of driving, and on a Monday? You could’ve just called me, you know?”

“No, I couldn’t—I mean, I should have, but I never did, and I just felt...I felt calling you wasn’t enough anymore.” I shrug a shoulder and try to make my smile as disarming as possible. “So that’s why I’m here. So I can hang out with my best friend again.”

Color springs to Chloe’s cheeks. Score, made her blush. She looks down at my hands and for a moment she looks...happy. Just for a moment.

“Better late than never,” she says.

Chloe pulls me inside and shuts the door behind us.

I walk into a room that lives in the interim between what was and what would have been.

“It’s...a bit messier than you remember it.”
There’s a hint of the younger Chloe in there, because there’s some actual shame in the warning. Clothes and clutter litter the floor, but it isn’t quite the tornado disaster zone I slept in. Most of the graffiti hasn’t happened yet, with the notable exceptions of “I can’t sleep” and the crossed out height chart with the words “dad is gone” scribbled angrily at the top. No frayed American flag curtain—and who knows where she stole that from, in the days of past future—and mostly bare walls: devoid of the girly, sweet, rad skater and pirate-y stuff we hung together; not yet covered up in all her badass, somewhat twisted imagery. The few bits of tape and ripped paper still attached here and there are telling of the kind of mood she was in when she tore it all down.

It’s honestly not that bad, though I might have a pretty low standard set in my mind when it comes to her room. It actually reminds me of...Kate’s...room, in the later days. Future Chloe’s chaos had a certain artistry to it, a metric ton of personality poured into its madness. This is just...somber. Unkempt. It doesn’t take a genius to know that Chloe’s mind is still in a dark, joyless place. It hasn’t even been a year since William’s passing.

She heads straight for the stereo and pops in a dime-a-dozen rewriteable CD with a bunch of permanent marker scribbled on it. Totally legit, I’m sure.

“Here, you better like this. You need to stop listening to all that bubbly pop shit.”

“I’m open to new horizons.”

In my defense, my taste in music was...less than matured, back when we hung out together. The guitars start playing, and oh, yeah, it’s only Bon Iver, performing one of my favorite songs ever. I’ve lain on my bed more times than I care to count listening to Blood Bank’s melancholy chords. Would it be too suspicious if I started to sing along?

I opt for cautious silent appreciation, instead. I might hum a little.

Chloe plops onto the bed while letting out a big breath. She’s well aware of how my gaze wanders all over the room. “I couldn’t stand looking at all our stuff anymore, okay? It just...reminded me of you. Of everything before...you know.”

“I get it, Chloe. You don’t have to explain.”

“Well, I explained anyway. Come on, sit somewhere, tell me what you’ve been up to.” She tilts her chin at me. “Aren’t you hot in that hoodie?”

Yes, I am, but I’d rather you didn’t see my new inexplicable butterfly tattoo just yet.

I go for the bed instead of the desk chair, because fuck baby steps. I want to stay close to her. “I’m good, I like it warm.”

“Suit yourself,” she says with a shrug. She’s trying so hard to be cool after the way she broke down out there, it’s adorable. “So, Seattle sucks ass, or what? How much do you hate your new school?”

“It’s...okay, I guess. It hasn’t been all that fun, just real busy...”

I start talking, trying to remember everything as it happened four years ago. It doesn’t take a lot of effort to make it sound pretty lame and boring. I’m not excited about any of it, as I might have been in my distant past.

But it really was a busy time, there’s a lot to tell between moving woes and school bullshit and dad messing up on a few forms so I wasn’t even officially a student for a whole month while they sorted it out.
She asks me more and more questions, genuinely curious as far as I can tell, and I do my best at answering—and as we get into it, all the awkward is quickly gone, faster even than the first time we reunited. I make a cringey pun, she pokes fun at me, and soon enough we’re talking about whatever, music and TV shows and how she spends her time. And...I might be hyper-aware of it now, but I can’t help but notice how very often she touches me. A pat of the knee. A nudge with her elbow. A smack to my arm, a bump of our legs or a casual reach for my hand. It’s like she needs to make sure I’m still here. Like she doesn’t truly believe it yet.

Our time apart melts away, and it’s simply us again. It’s like that, with Chloe and me. It’s just not normal, and I love every second of it.

She’s telling me about her complicated relationship with the school year, which naturally transitions into more David trash-talk. I contribute that his mustache is downright fugly. It gets a big laugh out of her, way bigger than it’s warranted.

“It’s almost as fugly as the new haircut,” I tell her. “Please let me fix it?”

“Whoa, fuck you too! I wanted to piss off Joyce, okay? It’s like she doesn’t even give a shit about me anymore.”

“Come on, you know that’s not true.”

“Are you kidding? She’s banging some douchebag jarhead not even a year after, and she doesn’t give a shit about what I might think of the guy. I’m not ever forgiving that woman, okay? It’s all her fucking fault. Look, I don’t wanna talk about her.” She resolutely gets up from lounging on her stomach and walks over to the shelf. After some rummaging, she hands me a pair of scissors.

“Here. Let’s go to the bathroom and see what you can do.”

“Uh, okay. Sure.” I smile past her burst of anger. “Let’s make you Cover Girl-gorgeous.”

Chloe groans and shoves me out the door, following close behind with the shitty yellow desk chair. As we march toward the Price Discount Salon, I honestly can’t fault her for feeling the way she does about her mother. Yeah, Chloe isn’t handling all this mess in the best way possible, but...she’s got a point. I understand that everyone copes differently, but it wouldn’t have hurt for Joyce to wait a bit longer so her devastated daughter could work through her issues. It probably would’ve saved everyone a lot of pain in the long run.

Then again, what the hell do I know? I’m biased as hell—and I’ve never been forced to truly accept the loss of the person I love. I’ve always found a way to turn back time, instead. By this point I’m pretty sure I’m entirely incapable of ever accepting a world without Chloe.

I’m standing behind her as she sits in front of the mirror. Her lips curl in a mien of disgust. “Yeah, you’re right. It’s a horrible mess.”

Without even thinking I roll up my sleeves. “I’m going to make you pretty again, my sweet.”

“Oh my god, stop. Hey, whoa, what’s that?”

“What’s what?”

“On your wrist!” She turns around and grabs at it, eyes wide with wonder. “Holy crap, is that a tattoo? You got a tattoo?”

Well, shit.
“I, uh...”

“And you were hiding it from me, you brat? Oh, wow, there’s no way your parents even know about it, your mom freaked so hard when we even talked about piercings! How the hell did you get this?”

“Okay, okay—calm down, jeez! Can I have my hand back?”

“Not until you tell me. Man, it’s cool and everything, but is it even legal? You do know it’s gonna stretch, right? Pretty sure you’re not supposed to get one this young. How’d you even afford it, anyway? Did you burn all of your savings into it?”

“It’s...it’s not a tattoo, okay? Not really. It’s a super long story, and you won’t believe a word of it.”

“What do you mean, ‘not a tattoo’? What, you did this with crayons?” She scratches at it to get her point across. “Doesn’t feel like a sticker to me.”

“It’s...look, it’s...”

It’s the mark of a cosmic spirit who merged with me. I have time-traveling superpowers. I come from the future!

It sounds so ridiculous even I don’t believe it. I can take this back. I should take it back. This isn’t the time or place to tell her, it’s too soon, it’s too weird.

“I’m listening, you sneaky transgressor, you. This oughta be good.”

I take a deep, deep breath and let it out slowly. The rules should still apply. No rewinds without consent. Keep things real between us, no matter what.

“I...I have this secret, Chloe. This big, big secret. You’re not going to believe it.”

“Ooo, Max Caulfield has a big secret. What, you joined a gang? Oh, are you a secret government agent, top-clearance, highly classified? Are you a super-powered ninja? The Butterfly Clan! Come on,” she playfully punches my arm, “tell me already, you goon. What’s this all about, how’d you get that?”

“It’s a long story, okay? The butterfly is, um. It’s the mark of my powers. It started...it started when I saw you die in the Blackwell bathroom, four years in the future. I kind of...turned back time to save you?”

She blinks a bunch of times. She didn’t expect this one, that’s for sure.

“What I’m saying is that I’m a time-traveler.”

Yeah, she cracks up laughing. Then she notices how serious I am.

She laughs more.

I bring a hand to my forehead, pinch the bridge of my nose. “I’ll just have to show you. Trying to tell you feels so stupid.”

“Sure, okay,” she says between giggles, “wow me, Time Lord. But then tell me the actual story, because I’m not letting it go until you tell me.”

A part of me cherishes just how hard she’s going to swallow her attitude. Another, much larger part
of me is panicking at how Chloe is actually going to take it. To my thoughts come spiteful words spoken through pain and blood, the haunting wraith of a voice forever silenced. *Your precious Chloe will fear you. She will never accept the monster you’ve become.*

I wonder if someone found her body yet.

“Just...don’t freak out, alright? I’m going to travel back a few seconds. I’ll appear over there.”

“Man, you sure are committing to this.”

I might be imagining it, but there’s a smidge of worry beneath the mockery, like she’s somehow been waiting for something like this to happen. With another sigh, I take off my watch and toss it in the sink, which drives Chloe’s one quirked eyebrow to rise even more. Then I move farther from her, standing in front of the shower.

*Here goes nothing.*

I slowly rewind, careful to stop once the watch is back in my hand. A dull ache spreads through my arm as it faintly lights up in white spiraling lines. The watch comes back to me, and the patterns vanish the moment I return to normal. From Chloe’s standpoint, I just teleported a few feet.

I expected explosive swearing, but it’s just this...gasp. This visceral *recoil* as her whole body tenses and her hands clamp on the chair’s backrest. Her face, her features, there’s no hint of wonder in there. It’s just horror—and something deeper than that, a sense of anxious worry that goes beyond your best friend suddenly becoming a freak.

Her gaze turns inwards, like she’s not even seeing me anymore. Her breath shivers past her lips. “I knew it,” she whispers to herself. “It’s happening again, I knew it...”

I step toward her, reaching out with a pleading hand. “Chloe...”

“No, no, no...” Quietly she leaves the chair, stumbles in a daze out of the bathroom and into the hallway. I chase after, giving her some space, and I watch her wander into her room like she doesn’t quite remember the way. “Too good to be true,” she keeps whispering. “Oh my god, I should’ve known, too good to be true...”

“Chloe?”

She starts rummaging through her stuff on the shelf, on the floor, shifting clothes and items around as if searching for something.

“Chloe, please, talk to me.”

“Oh my god...oh my god, she’s not really here. Oh my god, she’s not real, I’m going crazy...”

“What?”

She keeps wandering around the room, erratically searching in random places, talking to herself all the way through. “You dumb fuck, Max left. Get it in your head, Max moved on, she’s smart, she knows you’re a fuckup. Way to prove her right, you’re so pathetic...”

“Hey, no, Chloe, come on, this is real, I’m *real*, I can explain everything!”

Her fists clench at my voice. She stops and shuts her eyes, breathing hard. Then she resumes her wild search, making an even bigger mess of the clutter on the desk. “That fucking counselor was
right, I need help. Fuck, I can’t handle this, I need help...” Suddenly she swipes her arm across the whole table, trash and books and laptop flying off across the floor. “Where the fuck are those fucking pills!”

“Chloe, stop, please!” I run to her, try to hold her hands in pleading—she shudders in repulsion and jumps back like a snake just tried to bite her.

“Don’t touch me!” She stumbles onto the bed, recoiling desperately until she’s curled up with her back to the wall. Her eyes consciously avoid looking directly at me. “She’s not real...come on, she’s not real, it’s all in your stupid fucked up head, you’re so fucking pathetic, she’s gone, everyone’s gone, they’re not coming back...”

As I watch the tears roll down her cheeks, the need to hold her is a physical thing pushing at me from the inside. I expected her to have a hard time, but I didn’t expect this.

Though maybe I should have. Look at it from the outside, from her perspective. What is she supposed to believe? That her estranged friend suddenly decided to pop up at her door and sweep her off her feet? That on top of somehow saying everything she wants to hear, her mousy little pushover of a friend now also has amazing superpowers?

No. Of course she’d figure this, instead. A confirmation of all her self-loathing and self-doubt. Was it wishful thinking, for me not to see that Chloe was barely hanging by a thread? Shouldn’t I have known how fragile she would be?

“What’s even the point,” she’s muttering. “What’s even the point of anything...”

It takes all I’ve got not to run to her, and wrap my arms around her, and continue pleading until maybe she calms down. I can’t do any of that. She’d freak out even more, I’d only make everything worse.

Making things worse is a specialty of mine.

She’s pressing her forehead to her knees, rocking, whimpering softly. I can’t take it anymore, I have to step out of the room and close the door behind me. As I lean against it, I can hear her sobbing, still.

Well, I wanted it back, and now I have it. The longing has once again become a soul-choking hold on my throat.

I feel like screaming my head off. I’m sure we could work even through this, long term—but I refuse to put her through that, not when the choice is in my hands. There’s no need for her to suffer more than she already has. It’s simply a path I cannot tread.

You are here for her, Max. You’re with her, that’s all that matters. You tried the truth and it didn’t work, now put on a brave face and take back this disaster.

Yeah, putting on that brave face takes a few moments, but I manage. At least using the hard rewind means I don’t have to worry about where I was and where I’ll be. I don’t want her to perceive even the slightest unnatural shift.

I thought this was supposed to be the easy part, after all the atrocious hardship.

One minute of glow lines, mild pain and super weird mental disassociation later, I’m standing behind her as she sits in front of the mirror. Her lips curl in a mien of disgust. “Yeah, you’re right. It’s a horrible mess.”
It’s time to do better. Push out that playful smile, don’t miss a beat. It’s not so hard, as long as I’m with her.

“Alright,” I tell her, “let me go downstairs and get a bowl big enough for your head. We’ll give you a nice mushroom cap.”

“Ha-ha, make another joke like that and I’m taking those scissors away. It’s enough of a stretch already to trust you with them around my ears.”

“I’m honored with this privilege. You do have better stuff than these scissors, right? There’s only so much that can be done with this.”

“Yeah, actually. Over there, the bottom cupboard.”

And so we get into it, enthusiastic, terribly slow, careful, weirdly intimate and familiar. I never roll up my sleeves, because I can’t come up with a story to explain Bluewing’s mark that’s even remotely plausible. I tell her to move her head this way, and that way, and we bicker back and forth, and I purposely tease her about how much of a shit job she did until I annoy her, because what kind of ‘too good to be true’ hallucination would get on your nerves like that? And when we’ve done the best that we could, we go on to watch The Fifth Element, and riff on everything under the sun, and go out to the swing and bullshit together the way we’ve always done. When my mom calls a few hours later I tell her I’m feeling great and not to worry about a thing, thank you so much for checking in—and after she hangs up, she totally asks me to meet her over by Carlson’s Grocer in exactly one hour because she got real caught up with everything and it’s a long drive back, and she sends fond regards to Chloe and she’s so very sorry she didn’t have time to stop by, she absolutely will the next time.

So very convenient, because that’s comfortably before the time Joyce or David get home. Chloe is more than alright with none of these encounters happening. She started groaning just thinking about them.

In all this time together, we don’t talk about her dark times. We don’t bring up William, or the mysterious pills, or even Joyce’s express mourning process. That’ll come later, often deep into the night, during hours of phone calls or stealthily chatting through IM.

Right here and now, she doesn’t need a fucking therapist or a super-powered savior. All she needs is a friend.

She knows that I get it, that I’m not here trying to fix her; I see it in the way she looks at me, in the way she hugs me goodbye at the door like I just got done giving her the world.

“You know,” she whispers behind my ear, “I know it sounds dumb, but all day I kept expecting you to disappear.”

“What do you mean?”

“It just...it felt too good to be true. I thought maybe I’d lost my mind and made you up.”

I laugh past the shudder-inducing reminder. “That sounds a lot like ‘thank you for coming,’ so I’m gonna take it that way.”

“Yeah, well...” She lets go, but she keeps my hand in hers. Chloe looks cute as a button, in a blonde-punk sort of way. We managed a pretty damn good haircut, a sort of side-swept pixie kind of thing.
She looks down, like she’s feeling embarrassed. “Thank you for doing this, Max. It meant...it really meant a lot to me—” Her voice breaks toward the end, and when she rolls her eyes it calls attention to the reddening white and the building moisture. “Fuck. I didn’t want to get emotional.”

I want to kiss her so bad.

Oh, shit. Is that creepy?

I hadn’t considered the creep factor until now, but it’s definitely there. Because, sure, technically I’m fourteen years old, but I’m also a grown-ass adult. And in my mind this is Chloe, all of her, the woman I love more than my own life—but in front of me is this fifteen-year-old whose family was recently ravaged by tragedy. Romance somehow feels fundamentally not okay right now.

Fucking time travel.

“Look at you, getting all teary-eyed too. We’re the worst.”

“No, hey,” I tell her, “this isn’t even goodbye. I’ll call you every day, and I’ll visit as often as I can. You’ll get hella sick of me.”

“Pfah-hah! Who in the fuck says ‘hella’ anymore? Is that a Seattle thing, now?”

“Nah, it’s just a Max and Chloe thing.”

“Oh, no, make that Max only, thanks. But maybe I could visit you, too. You could show me through the city. I’m sure it doesn’t suck as much as you say.”

“That’d be fucking awesome. We’ll talk about it.” I really don’t want her to let go of me, but I make it a show of looking at my watch, anyway. “I’m already a bit late. My mom gets grumpy about being on time, you know how she is.”

“I can walk with you there, if you want. It’s just four blocks.”

“Um, sure, if you want to get through my mom’s hundred-question quiz that badly. Be my guest.”

“Uh...yeah, I’ll stay here, I think.” She’s still not letting go of my hand. “Goodbye, Max.”

I shake my head. “Not goodbye. See you soon.”

A sweet smile briefly lifts the darkness from her eyes, the darkness that’s brightened throughout the day, but never truly disappeared. She shifts her weight from one foot to the other, and for a moment she looks like...I don’t know.

She looks like my own wishful thinking, I guess, because I’m reminded of how Chloe would look right before she goes in for a kiss.

“See you soon, then,” she says instead, and lets go of my hand, and waves before closing the door.

I stand there for a while, blankly looking at the doorjamb. Finally I lean my head against it, releasing a pent up breath I didn’t know I had. A moment later I hear a similar bump on the other side of the door.

“Chloe?”

Brief silence. “Yeah?”
“I don’t want to leave.”

“I don’t want you to leave.”

“Want to run off together?”

I’m only half-joking. Her answer comes after a good while, like she gave it some actual, serious thought. “You can’t do that to your parents. They don’t deserve that.”

“I know. You’re right.”

I take out my phone and tap a quick message. *I’m always here.*

Her response doesn’t take long. *You fucking better.*

I hope she can hear the smile on my voice. “See you soon, Chloe.”

She doesn’t say anything. My phone chimes up, instead. *Love you.*

That spreads the smile to my heart. Another chime.

*No homo.*

And that makes me laugh out loud.

You’ll be the first to know the truth, Chloe, I promise you. One day soon.

One day. When we’re ready.

I’m still smiling as I walk to the gaudy local car dealership, and freeze time, and take my pick of any one of the used cars on the lot. Something compact and discreet and a bit run down, something a small “sixteen-year-old” might drive with her newly minted license.

This dumb, hopeful smile stays on my lips for the better part of the ride back...until it dawns on me, hours into the trip. I need to turn around.

“Son of a bitch, you’re such a dumb-ass...”

I take the nearest exit and find my way back to the south-bound lane. I knew it didn’t feel right. I knew I’d fucked up, somehow.

How is it going to work out, when they finally breach into the art room and see my and Chloe’s face painted all over it?

Chloe

so I officially have a step douche now
December wedding
fuckin tacky

Max

Chloe, please be honest with me
Is he really that bad?

Chloe

dont give a shit if hes a saint

HES NOT MY DAD
THATS THE WHOLE FUCKIN POINT

at least let the fucking body get cold
fucking christ

Max

Ok ok, no need to yell
(>_<)

I’m calling u

Chloe

no need, this is fine

Max
I’m calling you <3

Chloe

dont

im actually blubbering like a bitch

i dont want you to hear it

Max

Chloe

I’m calling you
<3 <3 <3

Chloe

...ok

sorry for allcaps earlier

this sucks

Sterile environment. White background. Harsh, high-contrast lights. Different place, different state, and yet it’s so very familiar.
The girl is bound on the floor, one step above unconscious. She won’t remember a single thing that’s happening to her, but I’m sure she will wake up knowing something bad happened. She’ll wake up feeling gross. Used up.

Carol-Ann, says the empty binder sitting on the desk. She’s real pretty, like all of them were. I guess that means I should be flattered.

And there is Mark Jefferson, hovering over her, high-end camera in hand and intense scowl on his brow. He can’t see me, behind him.

“I’ve been dying to capture you without all your posturing, Carol. This...yes, this is exactly what I want. Don’t move.”

She can only moan. She doesn’t even stir. It’s alright, the sheer disgust inside my chest is stirring for the both of us. Watching it happen to someone else is a whole new level of repulsive.

“You poor thing, always dying to please the camera. There is nothing pure about it, nothing genuine. I’m so sick of working with models. It’s like all you’re taught is to constantly pose like a slut.”

He leans over, pushing at her shoulder to get a better angle on her face and chest. He kneels and takes another shot. Her eyes are half-lidded, completely out of focus.

“This is your true potential, Carol-Ann. I wish you could see it.”

I can’t take any more of this pretentious garbage.

“I’ve been wondering what to do with you, Mark.”

There is only the slightest moment of surprise. He reacts like a prepared psychopath would, and doesn’t waste any time reaching for the gun on the cart close by, next to his precious drugs.

He still doesn’t reach it before I do, of course. When time resumes its usual march into the future, the gun is in my gloved hands and pointing directly at him.

“What the—!”

“That is the last sudden movement you do, scumbag. Try anything else and I’ll blow your brains out.”

Wide-eyed and utterly dumbfounded, he obeys. He shows me his hands and remains in place, no doubt fishing for outs in the back of his head.

“How in the world did you do that?”

“Do what? Your gun was in my hand all along, Mark. Try to keep up.”

He’s staring at me, eyebrows arched high. He’s trying so hard to make out who is the person behind the mask.

“Who are you? What do you want?”

“You can’t tell? I’m one you of your victims, asshole. You messed with the wrong girl. You really thought this wouldn’t catch up to you?”

It’s obvious he doesn’t believe I’m one of his subjects, but he doesn’t dare refute my words. The
gun is in my hands, after all.

“Let’s not be hasty,” he says, and he dares give me that smarmy fake smile he thinks is so charming and roguish. “Maybe we could reach—”

“Wipe that fucking smirk off your face and shut the fuck up.”

He obeys again, but I can tell he’s getting angrier by the minute. It must be the ultimate humiliation for him, for a petite little girl wielding his own gun to be telling him what to do.

“For a famous man, you sure are hard to stalk. It took me forever just to figure out where you were holing up to do this. I can see why you’d want to upgrade to the bunker."

“I don’t know what—"

“I told you to keep your mouth shut, I’m monologuing here. Like I said, I’ve been wondering what to do about you, and I just figured it out. You’re going to take that syringe, fill it up, and pump it into your neck. And because I’m feeling generous, I’ll let you choose whether to make it a lethal dose or not.”

He eyes me like I’m some kind of madwoman wandering into his shitty little basement. After one glance at the drugs, he takes a step toward me, starting on the path that Frank once took.

“I don’t think you will sh—"

I pull the trigger without hesitation.

The bullet blows off his ear and his hipster horn-rimmed glasses with it. He screams and cowers on the spot.

“What was that, again?"

“You crazy bitch!”

I’m not the greatest shot. It took me quite a few retries to hit exactly where I wanted to. I can’t say I minded the target practice.

“Take one of the syringes and fill it up. I will aim far lower, next time. You think I can hit a bullseye?”

Face bloodied and breathing through his teeth, Mark Jefferson gives me a harried death stare before doing what I tell him to do. With shaky hands he drags the plunger until the barrel is half-way full.

“Now put that nasty shit into your neck and find out exactly how it feels.”

“You...you can’t expect me to inject myself with—"

“I do, and you will. Your life is over, shithead. You’re going to rot in prison, and you better stay there a long time, because if I don’t feel you’ve paid your dues, I will find you, and I will finish—”

Fast like the snake he is, he suddenly throws himself on the ground and crawls over Carol-Ann. One arm wraps around her neck, the other presses the needle to her skin.

“Drop the gun! Drop the gun right now! I’ll kill her!”
I can’t help it. I start laughing.

Oh, it drives him so mad.

“What the fuck are you laughing about? This is enough to kill the bitch, drop the gun!”

“Oh, no! You’re just too fast, Mark! There’s no way I could stop you now!”

I don’t give him the chance to respond. I could rewind this last part, but I’d rather not. I’d rather mess with his head. Within the standstill I go over to his cart, grit my teeth through loading up another syringe—

— I feel a prickle in my neck. His breath on my ear sends a shudder down my spine —and walk over to him. With some effort, the needle sinks into his flesh. Pushing on the plunger within the null time-lapse feels like his blood is made of pure granite.

Just in case it doesn’t take hold right away, I pry his fingers off his own syringe and take it away. Each finger is a rusted-off latch on an ancient manhole, they’re so damn hard to move.

I give him wide berth, aim the gun again from where he can’t see, and let it all unfold.

First, a gasp. I’m no longer there. Vanished.

“What the fuck...what is...what...”

He’s feeling it. He’s realizing what’s coursing through his veins. He looks down at his hand, and finds it empty.

“No...how did...what is going on?”

“Poor Mark Jefferson,” I muse wistfully, and his body tenses at the voice behind his back. “He was so stupid, he injected himself with his own poison.”

“Who...who the hell...” He laboriously rolls over. He sounds drowsier in every second that passes —

— It will always baffle me, how quickly the drug works to muddle my senses —

—and his arm grows limp under Carol-Ann’s neck. I step over, looming above him.

“You better hope that they convict you for a very long time, Mark. You don’t want me to show up at your doorstep again.”

I closely watch the horror rise, then fade from his eyes, along with everything else. Lights out, motherfucker. You’ll wake up in custody.

What’s left of the ear is still bleeding pretty bad. It got all over poor Carol-Ann. Can you bleed out from a bullet wound to the ear?

Eh, probably not.

I go over to the desk, unhook the landline phone, dial 9-1-1 and dial up the drama all the way to eleven.

“9-1-1, what’s your emergency?”
“Please help me, this man kidnapped me! I’m trapped in some basement!”

“A man kidnapped you?”

“Yes! His name is Mark Jefferson, I fought him off, he was going to rape me! I- I think he’s dead, oh god, he’s dead…”

“Please try to calm down, ma’am. Help is on the way, okay? You said the man who attacked you is dead?”

“I- I shot him with his gun, and there was a struggle, and…please, please hurry, there’s a girl here, she might be dead too, or—or passed out, please help…”

“Are you safe, ma’am? Is anyone trying to hurt you right now?”

“I can’t stay here, I have to get out of here! Please hurry!”

I hang up with as much dramatic timing as possible. I might have overdone it just a little bit, but it should definitely get the police here with sirens blaring.

Just one more step, now. It might be the absolute hardest thing I’ve ever forced myself to do. Certainly the most revolting.

I go back to Jefferson, push him on his back and…cringing so hard that my face might cramp, I unbuckle his belt, undo the pants button and unzip his fly. I might chip a tooth from gritting my jaw so tightly, but the public shame and obvious sexual assault charges are worth the shudders.

That’s when I notice Carol-Ann’s eyes focusing on me.

I look a bit closer. Yep, I think she’s waking up for real. She might remember this.

“Can you understand me?”

Features full of fear and confusion, she nods very, very slowly.

“Can you speak?”

She tries. Only the faintest breath escapes her throat.

“That’s alright, don’t worry. You’re going to be okay. The drugs are wearing off, you’ll be fine.”

More arduous nods. Tears, lots of tears.

“I’m sorry I let him do this to you,” I tell her, “but I had to get him caught in the act. You are not the first, and you wouldn’t have been the last.”

She tries to look behind herself, at the sickening creep that she no doubt trusted completely only a few hours ago.

“He can’t hurt you anymore. He won’t hurt anyone, ever again. Understand? I’m staying right here until the police arrives. You’re safe.”

She nods again, her brow creasing with relief. Then she feebly lifts her bound hands at me.

“Please,” she manages to whisper. I shake my head.
“I can’t break you free, I don’t want you to be blamed for anything somehow. You’re nothing but an innocent victim. Remember that, you’re the victim. Tell them the stranger took him down and then left, okay? It’s the truth. I’m going to wrap up around here, you just need to hold on a bit longer.”

“Wait...stay...”

“Sorry.”

I make a sweep through the room. Leave only the one syringe with his prints on the floor, take the other with me. Smear his hand all over the gun, then place it on the nearby rug as if dropped in a scuffle. Check the cabinets again; yep, tons of incriminating evidence here. I’m certain the laptop is loaded with it. I already made sure there is no surveillance, but I check every nook and cranny once more, just in case. Not terribly worried about leaving even a strand of hair in this soon-to-be crime scene, I’m all covered up from shoes to tuque.

The sirens start in the distance. San Francisco’s everyday heroes.

“Looks like they’ll be here soon. Hang tight, Carol. It was nice meeting you.”

“Wait...” She’s starting to move, trying and failing to crawl away from the limp bastard behind her. “Who are you...”

I sniff out a chuckle, leaning on the crappy fold-up chair nearby. Definitely a step down from the bunker couches.

“Good question. I’m still figuring it out, these days.”

The sirens are pretty damn loud by now. Right-next-door loud. Jefferson is completely zonked out, still. I sigh and make my way to the few steps leading to the basement trapdoor.

“Take care, Carol.”

“Please, don’t go...”

“I have to. I have school in the morning.”

I unlatch the door and it easily springs open, propelled by the pneumatics. I make sure to leave it closed and somewhat hidden, but still easily noticeable.

I step around the frozen men and women in uniform running in place outside, get to the alley where I parked, climb on Lauren Frost’s bitchin’ brand-new Yamaha and tear off from the San Francisco suburbs.

Settle in for the long haul, Max. It’s another twelve hours from here to Seattle. Pretty sick of the road trips by now, this double life adds so much busywork to whatever I want to get done, if I don’t want to get caught in a lie.

It was worth it, though. That whole thing that I just did...

It felt good.

It felt really good.

I could get used to it.
Chloe

Why dafuq did i do this to myself  

Max

Do what to yourself?  

Chloe

i was fine not givin a shit about school  

shoulda stayed in bed moping forever  

all this fuckin homework and catch up is kicking my ass  
and I blame u completely  

Max

That pain you’re feeling in your head?  

It’s all three of your neurons waking up  

Don’t worry, it’ll pass  

Chloe
omg fuck u

Max

Is that an offer? (^_^)

Chloe

!!!!!

Max

I'm not that easy don't get your hopes up :o

Chloe

ur still one year behind me

studying all that kiddy shit

did they even cover the birds and the bees yet

Max

B+ in sex ed I'll have you know

My grades are somehow way better this year, not even trying

My AB teachers would think I'm cheating
Chloe

are you?  
cuz i could use some pro strats rite now        03/14 5:18PM

Max

Yep! Cheating like the devil                  03/14 5:18PM

You know me, I’m a bad one                  03/14 5:18PM

could get straight A's but that’s suspicious 03/14 5:18PM

Tell you what                              03/14 5:18PM

I dare you to get better grades than me this year  03/14 5:19PM

Chloe

wow congrats                                03/14 5:19PM

most ham fisted motivation attempt ever

Max

Never pretended to be subtle               03/14 5:19PM

I double dare you                           03/14 5:19PM

I double DOG dare you                      03/14 5:19PM

Unless you don’t think you can beat me..... 03/14 5:19PM

Chloe
bich please
you’ve been a C+ student since i know u

Could smoke u if i wanted to, it just aint worth it

Max

(insert numerous chicken noises here)

Chloe

Pfff

wtf do i get if i win

Max

...the right to rub it all over my face for years to come?

Chloe

.................

ur on, bitch

A few tips on long distance travel, for when you’re absolutely sick of road trips.

One, look up the flight most convenient to you, then go to the airport.

Two, go to the appropriate boarding gate, enter the plane at the last minute and look for the
inevitable empty seat. Ninety-nine percent of the time there will be one in first class, because “the economy.” Being able to freeze time will come in handy for this step.

Three, go back in time and settle into your permanently empty seat as if it belonged to you all along. Which reminds me, it’s important to dress sharp. A nice pantsuit with a well-tailored jacket and mirrored shades. Always mirrored shades. No-one questions a well-dressed young woman, it’s uncanny.

Four, enjoy your flight. Don’t soft-rewind once the plane is airborne, unless you want to go sky diving from cruise altitude.

Glad I looked up what happens so high up before testing it on a whim. After everything that’s happened, it would have been the stupidest way to go.

Max

Hey 05/01  9:12PM

You’re not answering the phone, guess you’re busy again 05/01  9:12PM

... 05/01  9:15PM

Chloe 05/01  9:15PM

Things are different between us, aren’t they 05/01  9:17PM

it’s not in my head 05/01  9:17PM

I can’t pretend I don’t notice 05/01  9:17PM

Chloe
yes.  05/01 9:19PM

you’re right  05/01 9:19PM

I’ve been trying to deal
but
I can’t  05/01 9:20PM

sorry.  05/01 9:20PM

Max

can I call you?  05/01 9:20PM

Chloe

please don’t  05/01 9:22PM

I can’t do this if I hear your voice  05/01 9:22PM

Max

...do what?  05/01 9:22PM

Chloe

it’s too weird, max  05/01 9:24PM

I’m grateful, I really am  05/01 9:24PM
but I can’t deal with it

I keep second guessing everything

even now

its like ’how many times have I said this already?’

Max

i don't do that with you, I never do that with you

Chloe

I cant help it

Max

we can work through it, I know we can

Chloe

why? cause you already saw it happen?
ive no fucking choice right?
god I can’t deal with this

Max

Chloe, please....

Chloe
I’m so sorry
please stop I know it hurts I just can’t do this
ok? I can’t
please stop 05/01 9:27PM

Max

Would you rather never know what I am? 05/01 9:29PM

Chloe

No, nononono 05/01 9:29PM

you can’t keep suffering like that 05/01 9:29PM

its not ok its messed up you can’t keep doing this to yourself 05/01 9:29PM

you’re a different person now
something else entirely 05/01 9:30PM

the friend I had is gone 05/01 9:30PM

that’s what I realized
you need to realize it too 05/01 9:30PM

Max

I can’t accept that. I won’t. 05/01 9:30PM

you’re wrong, I’m still here 05/01 9:31PM
and I would rather be dead than without you

I'd rather live the lie for as long as I can

Chloe

fuck max its shit like this that I can’t handle!

go ahead, do what you want

it's my point exactly

I’m just a kid

you're a fucking god

Max

I guess you're right
this isn't your choice

but it isn't mine, either

I can't let go

see you earlier, Chloe.

Chloe
you are fucking insane

Max

I know.

I wasn’t sure how I’d react before seeing her face to face. Unlike the others, I never felt particularly vengeful about her. She was just a misguided dog, trained to do unspeakable things for her beloved master. I suppose I just didn’t hold it against her. Is that weird?

In the absolute shittiest neighborhood of Carlin, Nevada, Samantha Derrick weeps in her bedroom, curled up on her side, shaking with every outward breath. Her skin is covered in bruises. The sheets are stained with blood.

Whatever I’m feeling for this girl, it’s nothing like hatred. I saw the beating, I let it happen. I thought maybe I’d get the same sense of righteous retribution with which the others left me, but there was no satisfaction, none at all. Only pity. Only heartbreak.

Standing at the foot of her bed, I watch her cower, I listen to her whimpers. She didn’t even do anything, just try to talk to her father about the things she’s been seeing. Things that are not there. Things that uncontrollably spring from her thoughts and vanish the next moment. She knows how he gets, and still she tried, because she has no-one else to turn to.

She’s not a problem child acting out, she’s just a kid my age with shit luck. Her father is just an angry drunk with a dead wife and no-one to blame. One of those stories.

“Samantha.”

she startles, and sees me standing there, and quickly backs up against the wall, covering herself. “What—”

“Don’t be afraid. I’m a friend.”

She simply quivers in place, unsure, perhaps wondering whether she should start screaming.

Why did the Moth touch her? Is it destiny? Is it some kind of affinity? Is it simply blind happenstance? From abused wretch to Mirage, why now, why her?

There’s still so much I don’t know.

“Wh...who are you? What are you doing in my room? Is this...is this even real?”

Because Samantha owed her freedom from this life to the Prescotts, she was loyal beyond question.
They shaped her into a monster. What will she become, now that her fate is no longer tangled in a poisonous web?

I pull down my mask.

“I am Bluewing.” I take a step closer and offer her my hand. “And I’m here to rescue you.”

Max

I'm just saying

It's been two years

and if I'm there maybe it'll be different

Chloe

it's still the same

i dont want to

I'll be a fuckin bummer and hate everything

and i dont want u to be there for that

Max

We'll get through it, Chloe.
no
u dont get it 11/22 9:45PM

too many shit memories 11/22 9:46PM

i cant get over it 11/22 9:46PM

Max

Of course you can. You can do anything. 11/22 9:47PM

You're Chloe fucking Price, you're the strongest person I know 11/22 9:47PM

Chloe

will u just drop it? 11/22 9:47PM

like i really appreciate the pep talk n all that shit 11/22 9:48PM

but srsly 11/22 9:48PM

Max

I just wanna spend christmas with my BFF 11/22 9:49PM

Don't care how grumpy u get 11/22 9:49PM

you there? 11/22 9:51PM
Chloe

i said no stop trying to fix me 11/22 9:51PM

i fuckin hate christmas ok? 11/22 9:51PM

ill be a total bitch to you 11/22 9:52PM

and then ill hate myself 11/22 9:52PM

like right now 11/22 9:52PM

so just fuckin drop it 11/22 9:52PM

im gonna be studying anyway 11/22 9:52PM

stay there with ur family and enjoy them while they around or w/ever 11/22 9:53PM

Max

... 11/22 9:54PM

okay, Chloe. I'm sorry for pushing. 11/22 9:55PM

Chloe

jesus 11/22 9:55PM

Chloe
Eyes sparkling with excitement, my best friend in the world tears into the colorful birthday package in the usual Chloe-don’t-care fashion, then gets past the boxy cardboard I used to cover up the shape of the present.

Her gasp and delighted squee are so satisfying.

“Holy shit, this is awesome.”

“I’ve been waiting for so long to give this to you…”

“Max, it’s fucking gorgeous! This is high-quality shit, are you nuts? How much money did you spend?”

She’s turning the skateboard in her hands, marveling at the super badass art all over the deck. There are skulls, and vines, and ribbons and blue butterflies in flight. It’s even more faithful to the tattoo than the original, forever lost under a bed inside a luxury RV; I scoured local shops and the internet to no avail, until I decided to just have it custom-made. A dope skate shop down by Denny Park made it for me on commission based on my shoddy sketches.

“It’s alright,” I tell her, “I stole it.”

“Yeah, right! You would never.”

“Don’t worry about it, it’s worth every penny. You deserve nothing less.”

She seems sincerely touched in her smile. We fuse in a hug, the skateboard still in her hands and pressing against my back. Her birthday was actually last Friday, but since she was coming up for our happily coinciding spring break the week later, it just made no sense to ship it over to her house.

“Shit,” she says, “this puts on the pressure for your birthday…”

“Are you joking? I’m making up for your present. William’s camera is the best thing anyone ever gifted me, I still choke up whenever I think about it. I’m in love with it.”
Just mentioning her dad’s name would’ve bummed her out, not that long ago. Now she’s simply beaming, didn’t miss a beat. “Got new pictures to show me? After we take this for a test ride, that is. Any skate parks nearby in Hipster City, USA?”

“I think that’s Portland you’re talking about. Seattle is all about the potheads and the hobos.”

“Such vibrant urban life, can’t wait to experience it.”

It was her seventeenth birthday eight days ago, and this is her first time inside my Seattle home. She just got here, David and Joyce are still talking to my parents in the kitchen. She tugged at my arm to get out of there the moment Joyce started teasing her about how insanely excited she’s been about this trip. Made me feel pretty good, needless to say.

It’s been a long time coming, because the last time we were together outside our every day long-distance relationship—and I do mean every single day, even if we can only squeeze in a short text conversation that somehow becomes an hour-long back and forth about absolutely nothing—the last time we were together was just a few days last summer, in an actually legit weekend visit to Arcadia Bay with my parents after much begging and nostalgia hyping.

The rest of the year, she was busy. Because Chloe decided at some point to pick up life again and catch up for time lost. She decided to stop throwing away everything her parents gave her. It’s even been secretly frustrating, missing her through all the homework overtime and summer classes. I also couldn’t be prouder or more pleased with myself, because these days she talks to me about science, and gives me random factoids about the Universe that she looks up on her own time since she’s developed a bit of a passion, and she tells me maybe she’ll be going to college in Seattle, wouldn’t that be awesome.

I might have something to do with all of that. Yeah, I am totally taking some of the credit, don’t judge me. Even if I’m never able to tell her the truth, just seeing her like this is enough. I can live with it.

Chloe raps a knuckle on my forehead. “Anybody there? Are you planning to take me somewhere we can shred some rails, or we’re just gonna keep standing here smiling at each other like dorks?”

“Sorry, it’s just...I can’t believe you’re here, I’ve missed you so much.” I playfully muss her wild bangs onto her eyes. “Love the hair, by the way. Letting it grow again?”

She swats at my fingers. “Just being lazy about it. Beats your boring ol’ ponytail for sure, though.”

Chloe picks at my wrist. “You still rocking that goth-lite vibe, huh?”

She’s talking, of course, about the black leather wristbands I always wear. Maybe also about the general lack of color in my wardrobe. Taking on a tiny bit of punk-goth culture is the only way I could think of to consistently hide Bluewing’s mark.

I give her a half-hearted shrug and an easy smile. “I’m a teenage girl, I have to rebel against the system somehow.”

“Hey, no, I totally dig it. I’ve been thinking about doing something pretty drastic, you know? I’m so bored with myself.”

“Hah, like...red hair and piercings?”

“I like the way you think,” she tells me, and starts pulling on my hand, dragging me out of my room. “Come on, can’t wait to test this out. A whole week together, we’re going to take over the city!”
“Hold on, conqueror. Let me get my bag and the camera. You’re going to be my model all day.”

“Ha, I’m gonna need that makeover soon, then...”

I gather a few things and follow her down the stairs. She’s goofily bouncing on each step, disheveled blond locks flying all over the place. I refuse to ever push the blue hair or the gorgeous tattoo, as much as I loved her look back then. There’s something distasteful about the idea, like I’d be trying to rebuild the Chloe I knew. It’s just superficial fluff, I don’t need it. I’d rather she genuinely express herself however she likes.

The weirdest sound greets us as we hit the living room floor: David Madsen’s laughter. It’s full and rich, the kind of laugh that resonates in your belly.

I guess dad told one of his “world-famous” ice-breaker jokes that I’ve heard a thousand times.

Chloe is heading straight for the front door. “C’mon, let’s bail.”

“Wait, I want to say goodbye to your”—parents—“Joyce and David before we go. And I should tell my parents where we’ll be.”

If she caught the almost-goof, she doesn’t comment on it. She puffs out a wordless complaint but begrudgingly follows me toward the kitchen. “Lead the way, daughter of the decade...”

“Just keeping them happy so they don’t pry into my business.”

“Mafiosa Max. I knew it.”

Joyce looks so relaxed next to David, the lines of her face softened in a placid smile. She’s quietly listening to my mom while the men carry their own conversation, but she perks up the moment we walk in.

“Oh lord, is that a new skateboard? Is there going to be a cast on your leg when we pick you up, Chloe?”

Chloe’s roll of the eyes is exaggerated enough to make it into a sitcom. “Way to doubt my skills, mother. I won’t have a single scratch.”

“Mm-hmm.” She reaches over to tap my mother’s hand. “Have the band-aids ready, Vanessa. Matter of fact, don’t let them out the door without some.”

“I’ll keep her safe,” I chime in. “I won’t let her do anything dangerous.”

Mom stretches an arm at me so I can come lean into her. She won’t let me leave without a hug, so I don’t even fight it. “You two going out, then?”

“We’ll be at the park down the street.” I swap a complicit glance with Chloe. “Might go get a haircut at the mall, too.”

“Aren’t you bold and daring. Be home by seven, okay? Your dad is grilling some home-made burgers for you guys. You still love them with pineapple, right Chloe?”

“That sounds awesome, Mrs. C.”

“I want you guys to be careful and stay away from the alleys. Be extra careful if you take the bus. Keep your phone on, honey, I’ll be checking up on you.”
“Groooan...”

Dad wags a finger at me with mock severity. “Listen to your mother, Max. It’s a big city, there are lots of creeps preying on pretty young girls.”

“It’s spring break, Pop. There’s gonna be tons of kids my age out in the park.”

“Yes, well, not that many as cute as you two, so you better watch yourself.”

Chloe pokes my ribs. “That’s a good point, you know. You might as well have a sign on your forehead saying ‘please kidnap me now,’ you’re so damn cute.”

I snort with disdain at the very idea. “I would love to see them try.”

It comes out way more threatening than I intended. Downright wolfish. They’re all looking at me slightly off-kilter, like what they heard and what they see simply doesn’t match in their heads.

“I know martial arts,” I tell them in a self-important tone, getting a round of tepid chuckles. Setting up a lame punchline, that’s all I was doing, don’t mind me.

“That’s my fearsome girl.” Dad pulls out his wallet, already separating a few bills. “You guys need some spending money?”

“Don’t worry, I’m still good. I’ve been saving up for this.”

“Dude.” Chloe literally shoves me out of the way. “We never say no to spending money, Mr. C. I’m very sorry, she must’ve hit her head or something.”

Dad laughs good-naturedly, and I see a pretty big smile crack David’s lips, too. “I like your business savvy, Chloe. Here.” Dad pulls out a few twenties that Chloe has absolutely no qualms taking. “It’s a special occasion, have fun and don’t get in trouble.”

David follows up. “Don’t let your friend cover everything, Chloe. Be generous with the birthday cash we gave you.”

Her lips press together. I can just see her eyes aching for another roll, but she restrains herself. “Sir, yes, sir.” She pockets the green. “I hope you two have fun on your cruise.”

I can’t decide whether she’s sincere or she’s simply saying please get out of here already—and that alone is an awesome step above what it used to be. She didn’t outright tell David to go fuck himself.

Joyce seems to be keenly aware of it. “We’ll be back before you know it, I’m sure.” She gives us a kindly smile. “I love seeing you two together, like peas in a pod. I can’t get over how much you’ve grown, Max. You have this adult flair about you already.”

I glance at Chloe. “One of us needs to be the grown-up.”

“Bite me, Caulfield.”

I just might, I almost tell her, then remember I’m in front of my freaking parents. “I rest my case.”

“Can we please go now?”

I make a grandiose gesture at the table. “With the leave of the court.”
My dad chuckles. “Dismissed.”

We wave our goodbyes and get out of there before more questions pops up. “You’re the biggest suck-up,” Chloe chides me as we step out the front door.

I shrug at her. “The happier they are, the more freedom I have. It just makes sense.”

“Oh, yeah, of course, cold and calculated, what was I thinking? I bet having cool parents kinda helps.”

“I suppose it does. I know you really don’t want to hear it, but Joyce and David—”

“You’re right, I don’t wanna hear it.” She tosses the skate on the sidewalk, jumps on it and rolls away. “Thanks for the sick ride, loser!”

She’s flipping me off without looking back.

I’d be fuming if I didn’t find it so funny. “You’re going the wrong way, genius!”

“Ah, crap.” She does a tail slide (I think) and turns around on a dime, because Chloe is a hella rad skater gurl, yo. Then she kicks her way back, gracefully balanced on the board despite the somewhat uneven ground. Her smile rivals the sun.

It’s the first photo I take. We go on to take so many through the day that I run out of film, even the extra I brought in my bag.

Memorable and precious, each and every one of them.

SamDee

Blue 3/19 5:04PM

Bluuuue 3/19 5:06PM

Blue, answer me 3/19 5:07PM

Bluemeister 3/19 5:09PM

Lady in Blue 3/19 5:09PM
Frost Queen

Lord of the Blues

you suck

Lauren

fuck’s sake Sam

you better hope this was a dire emergency

I only have a minute, what did you need?

SamDee

Hey, you answered!

I’m booooorred

no one’s online, come hang out with me

run me through the Ramparts

Lauren

are you serious? That’s all you got?
I’m not even in the country right now 3/19 5:34PM

told you I’d be away the whole week 3/19 5:34PM

SamDee

Where are you? 3/19 5:34PM

And why couldn’t I go with you? 3/19 5:34PM

Lauren

1, not your concern, young padawan 3/19 5:34PM

2, because I travel much faster alone 3/19 5:34PM

and you’re a huge pest 3/19 5:34PM

I really need to go, I’m real busy. Life or death stuff. 3/19 5:35PM

do your damn homework 3/19 5:35PM

order yourself some pizza 3/19 5:35PM

and level up to 85 already, n00b 3/19 5:35PM

SamDee
For months, I didn’t even want to touch a camera. The act alone would bring every memory back in force, just thinking about photography would make me anxious. Too much baggage connected to it. Too much grief. It was like the click of the shutter bridged the chasm between me and the battle scars.

Then Chloe sent me William’s camera. She’d have freaked to know how much I wept having it in my hands once more. With each photo I forced myself to take just so she could enjoy it, the world tilted a little bit more back into place. Days passed, and soon I didn’t need to force it. Soon after that, I couldn’t stop myself.
As I try so hard for her to find joy in life again, it might seem like all the healing has been one-sided. It might seem like I suffer in silence only so that she may thrive. That’s not even close. The only difference between us is that she’s not aware of how much she’s helped me.

Now, as we lie on my bedroom rug next to one another, a huge mess of photographs spreads before us. It’s mostly Chloe, skating, goofing off, smiling, rolling her eyes, flipping me off. Her, “shredding a rail,” as she’d put it with only a hint of irony. Chloe on a tree branch high-up because she simply felt like climbing up there. Chloe, before and after the mall, pretending to strike a pose but not really pretending.

All on her own she chose ear-length bangs and a streak of electric blue blazing through them. I believe my honest opinion was “fucking gorgeous.” She tucks one side of her ’do behind her ear in the cutest gesture ever conceived.

And yeah, I’m in a bunch of the pictures, because she has long fingers and would steal the camera routinely. There’s me, making a face because she asked me to. Me getting us something sweet to snack on from a street vendor, and attempting to keep my balance on the skateboard, and attempting to nab the camera away from her.

And the obligatory before and after, of course. I’m a total bore and went with the chin-length cut I stuck with through most of my late teens, but she would not let me leave without the few straw blonde highlights. I admit the contrast doesn’t look bad at all. She also got me a cool-as-fuck choker to go with the leather wristbands, so I gifted her a spiked bracelet, because Chloe and spiked bracelets is a thing across all realities. She’s still wearing it.

Not a single one of these photos is a selfie, except the ones with us together, and she took most of those. Selfies are...not really my thing, anymore.

“I love this one,” she says, not for the first time because she loves a lot of them. In the picture I’m stuffing in my mouth the sugary, flaky, puffy thing we bought, white powder smeared all over my lips because she’s making me laugh while I do it.

“You love anything that makes me look like a dork.”

“Not my fault you’re adorkable.” She keeps picking them up, putting them down, incapable of settling on just one. “Fuck, Max. You got real talent.”

She’s admiring what might be my favorite among them all. It’s a shot of her from behind as she grinds down a handrail. I even gave her direction and everything, kneeling by the rail and waiting for her to jump on it just so. Her body wraps one side of the frame, hoodie billowing off the shoulder, one hand spread for balance toward the center. The sun is just out to the side and throws absolutely perfect shadows on her, glinting in just the right way off the shiny chrome inside the wheels.

I might have rewound it a few times, both to get the right shot and for her not to fall on her butt.

“Shit. I know it’s selfish, but can I keep it? This is probably the coolest I’ll ever look.”

“You’re always cool, and of course you can keep it. I mean, they’re as much yours as they’re mine. Remind me to scan it before you go, though.”

“Awesome.” She sets it aside, then picks up again the sugar puff photo. “And this one goes in my wallet, not even asking permission.”

She brings the ratty old thing out of her back pocket, pries the Velcro open and slides the picture in
the only slot that will accommodate it, if only just barely.

The gesture fills me with an entirely disproportionate sense of delight. I can feel the heat rushing to my cheeks. “That’s really sweet of you, Chloe.”

“It’ll be worth a fortune when you make it big,” she teases me.

“Ah, of course.”

Her smirk transitions into a more heartfelt smile. “Hey.” Her hand softly lands on mine. Chloe is looking at me like I’m the dearest thing in the world to her.

Which...I suppose I am.

“I know I give you a lot of shit,” she tells me, “but I’m serious about that. You have this amazing talent, you’re, like, truly special. I mean it. You’ll be one of the great ones, Max. I want you to believe it.”

It’s always so baffling, how she can go from stinkbutt to utterly disarming at the drop of a hat.

It catches me wide open, I don’t even know what to say. I could freeze time or rewind until I find the most perfect answer there is, but that’s not the way I do things with Chloe. Only complete disasters or skateboarding mishaps get taken back.

“If...you believe in me, then...it must be true.”

God, that’s so lame. It doesn’t even make sense. She’s not rolling her eyes or shoving me, though. She’s just...smiling. Looking at me, and smiling with all the warmth of a Chloe I once knew.

That’s when I first notice this new tension between us, like there’s a shared breath between our lungs and we’ll soon have to fight for it in a tug-of-war. Our eyes stay locked for a few seconds too long. Longer than simple friends would look at each other in such close proximity.

Her smile slowly wanes, until it becomes lips quietly agape. Her gaze briefly, subtly flicks to my mouth, then back up.

“Girls! It’s dinner time, come on down!”

Dad says it like he’s the announcer on The Price Is Right. It shatters the weird spell to tiny little pieces.

We both break into a giggle that really doesn’t want to be nervous.

“Your dad is the real dork, that’s where you get it from.”

“Can’t really deny it.”

“Well, great timing, I’m starving!” She jumps to her feet, maybe a bit too quickly, but at this point I think I’m just imagining things. She steps over the photos and rushes out the door.

I stare after her. My heart is thumping and I didn’t even notice until now. I’ve no idea what to feel. Push it down, whatever it is. Push it down the same way you always do.

Nothing just happened. There’s nothing to see here.
Chloe

Max

yo Max yo

yo yo yo

Max

Did you take your phone into the toilet?

What are you even doing in there still

wait

please don’t answer that

Chloe

i got a situation in my hands

well not in my hands

that would be terrible
where's ur plunger

Max

omg Chloe

Chloe

just kidding!

srsly tho dont come in here for a while

u might die

Max

.....................

I can't believe I have to put up with this CRAP

Chloe

lolz what a shitty pun

i knew you had it in you

Max

you are the absolute worst.
“Hey, Max.”

“Yeah?”

“Bomb incoming.”

“Oh brother...”

There’s nothing I can do but brace for impact. She does the cartoonish “anvil dropping from high up” whistle, then quickly rolls off my bed and throws herself onto the air mattress.

“Thrrummm!”

“Aah!”

Yeah, Chloe used to do this all the time. I’m glad some things don’t ever change.

It’s all tangled limbs and muffled giggles for a while. A real challenge, keeping them down so my parents won’t hear, already asleep across the hall. The lights are off, and we can only see each other in the filtered-streetlamp penumbra.

I finally manage to get out from under her. “You jabbed my ribs with your elbow, you troll. You’re way bigger than you used to be...”

“Oh my god, you just called me fat, how dare you!” She pokes my belly, the vanguard of a full-on tickle attack. “I demand an apology!”

“Chloe, I swear, if you start tickling me you’ll get fully blamed when my dad bangs on the door for us to shut up.”

“Totally worth it, in my book.” Her evil fingers creep closer. “Should’ve thought twice before hurting my feelings...”

This is a real threat, to be handled carefully. She’ll win, now that I can’t abuse my powers—

_A life and a half ago._

_A ball of napkins flying through the air._

_She’s shaking, pinned between my thighs._

_Waves murmur on the nearby coast._

_Chloe is the sea, and I’m sinking into her embrace._

Fuck.

I have to shut my eyes for a moment. Sometimes the chasm between past and future closes unexpectedly. Who I am and who I was blends in a painful reminder of what was lost.
I hold on to her hands. “Please, don’t,” I whisper.

Whatever she hears in my voice makes her mischievous smirk falter. “Uh...I was just playing around. Are you okay?”

“Y-yeah. Of course.” I try to smile and mostly succeed. Begone from this place, bittersweet memories. “I don’t want to get in trouble, that’s all. I want my parents to love having you around, which means hiding from them the fact that you’re a terrible pest.”

The concern clears from her eyes, and she’s grinning again. “I’m pretty sure they’re aware.”

Chloe settles in place, stretching to grab the pillow from the bed, properly getting under the covers. If past experience is any indication, she fully intends to end up falling asleep right where she’s at.

I’m not complaining. Her warmth will be forever welcome by my side.

Won’t stop me from bitching, though. “You’re gonna bust the mattress with all that shifting around.”

“There you go, calling me fat again. There will be consequences. Dire, ice-cube-in-underpants consequences.” I try to help her through all her moving and bothering by setting the pillow squarely in place. My wristband lightly scrapes her neck.

“Oh, wow, you’re kidding me. You even wear those to bed?”

“Well, did you ever wear a watch or a bracelet for days and days, and then you take it off and it feels real weird? It’s the same, I feel strange without them, now.”

I’m not lying to her, this is actually true. But also, I’d rather not have to rewind after I forget to put them on one day and my mother freaks out like I just grew a second head.

“That’s some commitment to half-assed fashion, right there. Don’t they smell by now?”

“I wash them, smart-ass. I have more than just two.”

“Oh. Well, could’ve fooled me.”

This is so rich, coming from someone that would wear the same beanie day and night for a whole week straight.

She shifts some more, getting an elbow on the pillow so she can prop her head on her hand. “Today was a total blast, wasn’t it?”

“It was awesome. Even better than I thought it would be, somehow.”

“I know! I’ve missed the crap out of you since you moved, the visits just don’t cut it.” Her tone becomes slightly less flippant. “I really wish life was like this all the time. Just the two of us.”

I roll onto my side, arm tucked under my cheek. Our knees bump a few times, because the air mattress isn’t that big and I can’t move a whole lot without touching her. “The offer is still open, you know. Want to run away together?”

“Pff, and do what, live off ramen and sleep in a cardboard box? You have it made here, sista. I’d rather just move in.”

“Oh, sure. Behave well enough and my parents will totally let me keep you. Then I’ll have my very
“I’m in, as long as I get to be the family cat and do whatever the hell I want.”

“We’ll even rub your belly now and then.”

“Only you. I’d scratch anyone else. Rawr.”

I breathe out a chuckle, and we fall into a short silence.

Here we are again, smiling at each other. The locked gaze doesn’t feel as direct in the near-darkness. I can pretend she doesn’t notice me staring.

And even if she’s noticing and it’s making her feel a bit weird...it’s worth it. How often do I get the chance these days to look at her face in person, hardly a few inches away? I’ll take my pleasures where I can find them.

She doesn’t seem to mind, one way or another. It’s not long before she’s whispering again.

“Back when we were kids, did you really see us staying close for so long? I mean...friends drift apart all the time.”

“Chloe, we kind of are still kids...”

She snorts. “Yeah, right. I haven’t felt like a kid since...well, you know when. And I think it’s the same for you. Are you even aware of how much you’ve changed? My mother was right, you know? There’s something in the way you handle yourself, the way you talk to people. Ever since you moved out of Arcadia Bay, it’s like...I dunno, like you know exactly what you’re doing.”

“Hah. Yeah, okay. I wish.”

“It’s true! But you didn’t answer me, though. Did you really see us sticking together?”

I didn’t answer because I don’t want to think about my secret shame, I don’t want to lie about it. After seeing first-hand how it was for her...sometimes I want to deny that any version of me could ever let it happen.

“Yes, I did.” Can’t keep the bitter out. Why is she even asking, anyway? “The whole Best Friends Forever thing...I really meant it back then. And right after that I moved away, and left you behind for way too long like a total sh—”

“Shush, you.” She shoves my shoulder to get the point across. “I don’t ever want to hear that guilty shit again. You came back exactly when I needed you, and that’s it, okay? And we ended up getting closer, anyway. Closer than we’ve ever been. That’s fair to say, right? We’re closer than ever.”

“Uh. Yeah. Of course, closer than ever before.”

Her hand moves under the covers. Fingers lightly touch the arm under my head.

“I...I really do feel a lot closer to you. I can’t imagine life without you, Max. I feel...special, when we’re together.”

Her body shifts. She’s one inch closer, I can feel her warmth hardly a handspan from my belly. We’ve hugged a hundred times, we touch routinely—but this is nothing like that. This time is different, everything is different. I can’t even think.
Her voice is the gentlest breeze on my face. “Like...when we were going through pictures, earlier.” She bites her lip, smiles only briefly, hardly a cringe. “That f-felt...special, right?”

Oh.

Oh, Chloe.

“Y-yeah. It did.”

She shifts again. “It really did.”

The hand hesitantly travels to my cheek, barely grazing it until her fingertips trace the contour of my jaw.

I swallow. “Yeah.”

Her palm is so warm, a hairbreadth away from my skin. Chloe is going to kiss me, it’s is the air around us, in the cadence of her breath, in the heat coming off her cheeks and the way her eyes subtly dart between my facial features. It’s written in every little nuance of her body language.

And I can’t let it happen. She doesn’t yet know who I truly am.

She’s leaning in. Her eyes are half-lidded. Her lips are parted. I should stop her, I should, I should, I should, *I should*.

I don’t.

My Lord, her mouth pressing into mine, her taste, her touch. It’s a full-body tremor coursing through my skin, I can’t stop my lips from melting into hers. I’ve missed her so, *so* much.

When we pull away it makes my chest shrivel, like a yawning void just opened between lungs and ribcage.

“Wow,” she whispers onto my skin, and immediately goes back in.

“Chloe. Chloe, I can’t.”

Chloe blinks like coming out of a trance. She looks at me, and notices the contrite features, the guilt and the worry. She was flustered before, but now she’s nearly on fire.

“Fuck.” She recoils, eyes wide in full-blown panic, like she just took a gamble on her very life and lost. “Fuck, I’m so sorry, I just— I was getting this vibe from you all day, and we’ve been flirting so hardcore all year, I just thought you might...shit, Max, I’m sorry, I fucked up, please don’t hate me.”

“No, it’s not like that!” Her hands are perched half-way between us, as though she wants to reach for me but she’s too afraid to make anything worse. I hold them in mine and press them close to my chest, desperate to make her feel better. “I could never hate you, I- I like you that way too, it’s just...I can’t do this with you yet. I can’t.”

She looks so hurt and mortified, all shrunk up like she wants to disappear under the covers. Once she’s had a moment to parse my words, she frowns, head tilting to one side. “’Yet’? Did you, like, make one of those abstinence pledges or something? Because that would be the lamest thing you could possibly tell me right now.”

“No, it’s just—”
“Besides, I don’t think it even counts if you’re with a girl. The whole point is not getting knocked up.”

“Chloe, it’s not that. It’s way more complicated. I...”

I haven’t tried to tell her in so long...

It used to be a necessity, then just a priority. Eventually it became something to work towards, a long-term goal. Something that would happen sooner or later. If I’m honest, I’ve been deathly afraid of it, and these days it’s mostly become something to hide.

And now I realize that somehow, at some point, I fell into the groove of things. When was the last time I made actual plans to tell her? Outside my night-time escapades, sometimes I’ll surprise myself actually caring about the silly teenage fluff in my everyday life. Wear a mask for long enough, and all that.

“Look, I have this...secret. Something that will change our lives. Something that will totally freak you out.”

She’s looking at me like my biggest secret couldn’t possibly be worse than I cheated on a test this one time.

“Are you an alien? Because it would explain a lot.”

I huff and shove her shoulder. “I’m serious, here. Believe it or not, that would be way easier to explain. My secret is...a lot bigger.”

“Bigger than being from outer space. Really.” She rolls her eyes. “Look, I get it, just tell me I grossly misread everything and you’re not into me, okay? I know I made things real weird right now,—”

“No, I’m so into you, Chloe—I’m in love with you. I love you more than anything, you have no idea...”

It just comes blurtting out. I’ve held it in for so long, and suddenly it’s out and floating in the space between her mouth and mine. There’s this moment of charged-up silence, and then I can feel her chest swell, only a few inches from my own heart.

“You...you’re in love with me?”

The sheer joy and awe in her voice is only a stab to my throat, because it’ll only make this harder. Because I tried to tell her a second time, a few weeks after her sixteenth birthday.

It went worse than the October 12th disaster, in a way.

The fear quickly spreads through my thoughts. It’s a vision of the future, of sorts, written in our erased past. I have to bring a hand to my brow, too damn overwhelmed by it. “Fuck, I don’t want to take any of this back, I’m so sick of taking things back...”

“What are you talking about? This is awesome, Max! This is the greatest thing ever, I’ve been so afraid to ruin our friendship—”

“You don’t understand, I’m going to tell you all of it, and I’m going to lose you again.”

“What? Come on, there’s nothing bad enough, you know you can tell me anything! Honestly
I’m...kind of offended you’ve kept this big secret from me, whatever it is.”

“You’re not going to believe me. And then I’ll show you, what I can do, and you’ll freak out and be afraid of me forever.”

It must be getting through to her how serious this is, because her smile fades gradually. “Okay, you’re starting to worry me now.” She searches my eyes, trying so hard to understand. “Max, whatever it is, you can tell me. You can tell me anything, you...you saved me, you’re my angel. I’ll always be your best friend, no matter what.”

“Not after this. You won’t even be able to look me in the eye. You’ll end up not even knowing who I am.”

“Dude, how do you even know? Come on, try me! I swear I won’t freak out on you, okay? I promise, no matter what. What, did you steal a bunch of stuff? Did you, like...did you kill someone? I- I don’t care, I really don’t, I’ll help you cover it up. I’m serious, I’m here for you.”

God, she’s never badgered me like this before. I want to believe her so bad, but the heartbreak of the erased past is like a blockade on my throat.

“I tried twice before,” I tell her, almost begging. “I had to take it all back.”

“What does that even mean? What, you made me forget or something? Max in Black over here, she’s Super Secret Agent M now.”

“It’s really not that far from the truth.”

“Look, are you going to keep being a huge cocktease, or are you going to tell me already?”

It just keeps playing back in my head. Reveal, disbelief, proof, total freak out. And the freak out was natural, it was. I could live with it. It’s the days and months after it that I couldn’t bear.

The way she started looking at me. The shift in the way we talked. The mistrust, the paranoia, the distance opening between us as she understood exactly who I am, what my powers entail and what I’ve done. Without all the tragedy and trauma of the First Week binding us together, Chloe couldn’t get over the monster lurking behind my pupils.

Of all the suffering piled up in my memories, nothing hurts like losing her trust.

“Max, you have to tell me.” She brings our entangled hand to her lips and kisses my index finger. “Whatever it is, you have to trust me. Let me be here for you.”

*Your precious Chloe will never accept the monster you’ve become.*

I breathe deep, gathering my thoughts. How much of this fear belongs with the words of a desperate shrew grasping at straws? It’s been almost a year, we’re different, now. We’re...in love.

If nothing else, I can hold on to that incredible nugget of joy. Chloe loves me. Not my powers, not what I can do for her. She loves *me*, the mundane geek she’s known all her life.

So if I don’t go for this now, then...when? In another year? In a decade?

Never?

I have to try. There is no point to anything I’ve done, if I don’t at least try.
Try, slow and careful. “*Keep an open mind, this is gonna get supernatural, it’s a long story.*”

Try going epic. “*It all started in a future now undone, with the vision of a tornado destroying Arcadia Bay.*”

Try to dazzle. “*What if I told you there are people with super powers out there, and I’m one of them?*”

Try sympathy, self-loathing. “*I’m a monster, Chloe.*”

Barf. They all start the pattern. Reveal, disbelief, proof, fuck-all.

She’s simply looking at me, patient, expectant, giving me all the time I might need to get the words out. And it’s the words that are the problem. I can’t come up with any that are big enough, strong enough to break past the disbelief. If I could just skip right through to wonder, to acceptance. If I could make it into not just my thing, but *our thing* again, like it was in the future past—

Wait.

Wait a minute.

*Our* superpower.

Our hands, clasped together.

“Chloe, I’ve been going about this all wrong.”

“Uh, okay?”

I kick off the covers, start getting up, drag her to her feet. “Come with me.” I’m walking up to the window, pushing it open. “We’re going outside.”

“The hell is this about?”

I’ve never tested it. Could it work?

If it works...god, if it works, it will change everything.

“What are we doing?”

She pokes her head out. “Do you trust me, Chloe?”

“I’m sharing everything with you. It doesn’t have to be scary. It can be beautiful.” I sit out there, and as she follows through the window the leather bands are coming off, one buckle at a time. One falls, revealing clear pale skin, rubbed smooth. I hold on to the other, fast against my left wrist.

She huddles close to me. “Fuck, it’s chilly out here. You’re gonna freeze in that top.”

“I don’t even feel it right now.” I raise my arm and let the bracer come off. Bluewing’s mark is flush with vibrant colors even in the soft black-and-white of moonlight and streetlamps.

A familiar puzzled frown. “Is that a tattoo? A butterfly tattoo?”
“No. It’s the boon we earned through tears and blood.”

She’s blinking at me like I just spoke a different language. “Wow, that’s...dramatic. What do you mean, ‘we’?”

It’s only the first question, but I can already feel the sudden rush of confidence crumbling.

“Chloe...I need you to believe me. Every word I’m going to say, it’s the truth. Everything you’re going to see, it’s real. Please, I need you to trust me, I can’t take another—”

“Holy shit, Max.” she grips my shoulder and gently shakes me, boring her stare into my eyes. “I trust you one hundred percent. Whatever you say, I’ll believe you. This is obviously a huge deal, I get it, you can stop running circles around yourself. You’re not going to lose me, okay? Just...go for it, whatever this is.”

She keeps saying it. Maybe she’s right. Maybe I need to trust her, too.

“Okay...alright. I’ll just...I’ll show you.”

I pass my right arm under hers, clasping our hands together with fingers twined. Her warmth is a balm against my chilled skin.

“Please stay with me,” I ask to the universe, like casting a wish down a well.

“Always,” she answers.

I wait a moment until a car passes us by, then I reach out with my left hand. She can see the mark, alive in preternatural contrasts. Please, all the spirits that might be watching, fucked up fate weavers and dead avatars of hope—please let this work.

Please let her walk with me upon the timeline.

Rewind.

Light-wreathed vines sprout to life from blue wingtips, they coil around my wrist, they spiral into my hand. Light and warmth and pain spread in sinuous lines up my forearm, past my elbow, past my shoulder into my back and chest. They blaze bright in the black-and-white night, brighter than a simple slow rewind would warrant.

Chloe gasps. Her grip tightens.

She’s seeing it. Chloe is seeing it.

I look at her, I watch as her eyes widen, her nostrils dilate, her breath catches in her throat. Chloe is seeing what I’m seeing, because she’s traveling with me, within the bubble. My partner in time.

Our eyes meet, mine alight with hope, hers awash in awe. I tilt my head at the car on the street, and she follows my gaze.

“Oh. Oh, fuck...”

As house lights that went off come back on, as the distant sound of traffic and the sparse nightsong of birds garble backwards, the car makes its way in reverse back up the road. With mouth agape she stares at it, and looks at me, and looks at the street.

“You’re doing it. You’re doing it. Oh my god.”
Far from letting go, Chloe is gripping my hand hard enough for it to hurt. I release the power, lower my arm. The car returns to its normal speed.

“Holy shit,” she whispers, watching the lines fade. “Holy shit...”

I’ve no idea what to say. I don’t know if I could speak right now, anyway. Relief, pure elation is washing through my insides. Tears keep welling up, just marveling at the thought that maybe I don’t have to do this alone anymore. If we get past this...I won’t ever have to leave her behind, anymore.

She turns to me. Past the blinking and the processing, there’s just...astonishment. There’s wonder. No wariness. No fear.

Suddenly she twists in place so she can punch my shoulder with her free hand.

“Ow!”

“You have fucking superpowers?” Her voice climbs a few octaves up the scale. There’s a nervous laugh mixed in. “And you didn’t tell me?”

“I tried! I swear I did!”

“Holy shit, Max! Holy shit, this is too much, this is too hardcore—how long? How long have you had this, how do you have this, what...oh my god, you have to tell me everything.”

“So you believe it? You believe it’s real?”

“Fuck, I kind of have to, right? After everything I said? I mean, I just watched you do it! Fuck, man, I’m tripping balls, this is so insane—can you do it again? Please? Just so I know I’m not tripping?”

“Y-yeah. Yeah, of course.”

I try not to show off too much, but it’s an honest pleasure to see her astounded smile widen with glee as Bluewing’s mark flares ablaze, bringing the car all the way back to us.

“Look at it go!” she yells mid-rewind, jostling my shoulder, holding on to me with both hands. “Fucking superpowers, man! Holy fucking shit on a stick, this is incredible!”

Can’t help it, even now she manages to make me laugh. It’s hard not to be swept up in her profanity-ridden enthusiasm.

“Want it to go faster?”

“Okay?”

I speed up the rewind and then, before the car goes completely out of sight, I freeze us in the moment. It gets another big gasp out of her.

“Max...fuck, Max, you’re a human time machine...”

“It’s because of you,” I tell her. “I only have these powers...because of you. So they’re as much yours as they are mine.”

“Wh...what?”
“It’s a very long story. I would love to tell you, if you’ll let me.”

“There’s no fucking way you’re not telling me.” She keeps staring at the arm, mesmerized. “Does that...hurt you? Your light-tattoo-thing? It looks like it would hurt.”

“Yeah, it kinda does. But not too bad.”

“Oh, fuck. Stop, then.”

“It’s no big deal, I don’t even feel it with you here.”

“Does it, like...wear you out?”

“Not anymore. I can go for days, non-stop. For as long as I can stay awake.”

She licks her lips. “Can I...can I touch it?”

“It doesn’t scare you?”

“No, are you kidding? I mean, it’s weird, but...it’s so beautiful.”

I hesitate for a moment, then I offer her my glowing hand. Chloe carefully reaches for it, fingertips touching lightly on the path of the spiral.

She blows out an awed breath. “Oh, wow...”

“What...does it feel like? No-one’s ever touched it before.”

“It’s...it’s so warm.” She traces the paths with something close to reverence, studying the patterns closely. I have no idea why, but the burn is immediately soothed wherever she touches. “This is the coolest thing ever.”

Her eagerness is so contagious. I feel this child-like need to impress her. “You know what else we can do?”

“There’s more?”

“Let me show you, this will be awesome. It’s so awesome to share this with you. Come on, stand up with me.”

We get to our feet, careful to never unclasp our hands. Not like it matters so much, she’d just freeze for a moment until I hold on to her again. We’ll need to do a lot of science on this to see exactly how it works.

I guide her to the edge. “We’re jumping off the roof,” I tell her.

“You can fly?”

A broad grin tugs at my cheeks. I almost make the only if we think happy thoughts joke that springs to mind, but I promised earlier that everything coming out of my mouth would be true. “Just trust me. I’d never let anything hurt you.”

She fidgets in place, looks down the drop. It’s not that bad, about nine feet. “I trust you.”

“It’s a bit harder to move when we’re in the standstill. Whatever you do, don’t let go.”
“I’ll never let go, Max.”

“Ready?”

She’s breathing a bit faster. “Okay,” she says with a nervous titter.

“Jump!”

She does it. I start a bit earlier than she does, but she’s right next to me as I step off. She simply...trusted me.

“Woh—whooah!”

We’re caught in the drag of reluctant space, gently sinking toward the ground, and Chloe’s legs are kicking wildly like she’s underwater. It’s hilarious.

“What the fuuuck!” she yells, and starts laughing with me, and we keep laughing all the way to the bottom. She pulls on my hand with giddy little jumps the moment her feet touch down. “That’s so fucking cool! Let’s go again! We have to go again, can we go again?”

“Wow, you’re loving this.”

“Are you kidding me? How could I ever not love this? You’re, like, fucking Batman, Max! You’re Bat-Max! Ha!”

Boy, she’s so pleased with herself for coming up with that one.

“Okay...let’s see. Hold on. I know just the thing.”

A regular rewind won’t get us back up there, but that’s not all I can do these days. No idea if this will work. No idea how it’ll make her feel, both physically and emotionally. I’m shockingly excited to find out.

I dive deeper into the power-well for the hard rewind and reach out with my hand. The lines flare up in blinding white, and my consciousness splits—the weird “thought hover,” as I’ve started calling it in my head. Within the short reset, within the out-of-body experience, I hear Chloe gasp again.

“Oh, shit,” she breathes, right next to me. We look at each other. Our hands, entwined. Our thoughts, linked beyond time and space. We watch ourselves blink back up, again sitting because everything we did was contained in the same instant. I release by the time the car is barely just appearing down the street.

Realities rejoin into one, and we find ourselves outside my window once more. I’m used to it, I can re-enter regular timeflow without issue by now. Chloe sags next to me, panting hard, free hand bunching up my pajama pants.

“Oh god...oh my god...”

Concern lances through my gut. I let us go back to normal for good. “Are you okay? Did it hurt?”

“No...no, it was just...holy shit, so weird...”

“I took it too far, I shouldn’t have put you through that, I’m sorry.”

“Will you stop apologizing...” She pushes on my leg to get herself upright. Though her grip on my
hand has relaxed since returning to normal, she doesn’t seem in any hurry to let go. Her breaths are still like bellows working inside her chest as she looks around.

“Oh, crap, we’re back up here.” The same old car catches her eye as it rolls out of sight. She blinks at it. “Fucking nuts. Max...Max, we just traveled back in time. Right? We just did that? Tell me that’s what just happened.”

“Y-yeah. I never had a passenger before.”

Chloe is shaking her head, eyes wide. Her grin...it’s as if I just predicted a cockroach on a jukebox.

“Holy fuck, I got chills all over, this is...oh, shit, Max, it’s...”

“Amazeballs?”

She cracks up laughing again. It’s not a thing she says yet, or maybe ever. “Yes. Fucking amazeballs, wherever that came from.”

“It’s what you said the first time.”

“The first time? When...when I lost it on you, I guess?”

“No.”

Just tell her, Max. Let go of the fear and simply tell her.

“The first time ever, when I first got these powers. I’d just returned to Arcadia Bay. You were nineteen, and...we had drifted apart. Like you said friends do, sometimes.”

“I, uh...I don’t get it.” She pauses for thought. “Are you saying...”

“It was a different reality. Another timeline where...where I never came back for you, and things went horribly wrong.”

“Are you serious right now?” She realizes what she said and immediately brings a hand to my arm in an apologetic gesture, as though I could be upset that she’s expressing doubt. “Of course you’re serious, sorry.” Her eyes dart from side to side, like she’s searching for the words somewhere outside her head. Her mouth does a few false starts before the question comes.

“You’re from the future?”

I nod at her, guilt pursing my lips for every lie I’ve had to tell. “Three years into the future.”

She goes quiet. Thoughtful. This was all a lot of fun, but the mind-fuck is about to land. Settling back against the wall, she’s become downright circumspect.

“You’re a time-traveler,” she says, more to herself than anyone else. “Like...for real, a time-traveler.”

“I know it sounds crazy, you don’t have to say it. But it’s true.”

The quiet thoughts keep going for a while. I don’t blame her, but the silence is killing me.

“Today,” she finally starts, “when you stopped me from doing some tricks, or suggested I do something differently...you knew. You already knew how it would go.”
I nod again. “Yeah. I can’t handle you getting hurt, even if it was just bruises and scrapes. I swear, though—I always keep things real between us. I never take things back just to say something different, I never...I mean, if I screw up, I let it be, I say sorry instead of...you know? It was...it was one of our rules.”

She sniffs out a mirthless chuckle, still not making eye contact. “Our rules?”

“Yeah, for...f-for our relationship? Never take back arguments, never take back tears, no rewinds without consent. If I had to do it for whatever reason, I’d tell you about it later.”

She does look at me now, however briefly. “What kind of relationship are we talking about?”

Oh gosh, my face, it might have caught fire by now. Sure feels like it.

“I think the words you used were...’desperately in love.’ Even after all the shit we suffered through, what little time I spent with you was the best of my life. Just like today, every moment we’re together...” I hold on to her fingers with both hands, daring to meet her eyes and not look away.

“You are everything to me, Chloe. Everything.”

No visible reaction. Her hand is kind of...limp, in my own.

It’s too much, isn’t it. I’m unloading on her this insane, soul-crushing need I call love only for lack of a bigger word, yet what she feels at this point in our lives can’t be more than a step above a crush. How could I ever expect her to deal with this?

She’s looking at me, but she’s not actually seeing me. “Is it...is this the way you’ve felt all this time? Since...since you came back to me, since the very first day?”

Goddammit, it’s creepy as hell when she puts it like that. I give her a cringe that pretends to be a smile. “Pretty much?”

She only seems more puzzled. “And you waited for me all this time. You kept all this inside you, day after day, just...helping me through my bullshit problems, pretending to be someone else.”

She’s shaking her head, baffled to her core. “Are you out of your mind? Who does that? How could you do that?”

Oh, no, no no no, not again. “Chloe, I’m so sorry, I- I didn’t know what else to do, I tried telling you—”

“What?” She looks even more confused for a moment, then seems to understand. “I’m not mad, you dum-dumb! I’m fucking floored. You have this...this godlike power, you can do anything you want, and—and you’ve spent years of your life looking after me? You’re an actual angel, how stupid could I be, to...to push you away, to be anything but thankful!” She stirs to face me, to let go of my hand so she can grip my arm, to bring soft fingers to the curve of my neck and lightly touch me like I’m a precious treasure to be forever preserved.

“This past year I’ve felt so lucky to have you—just thinking back at the way you’d...always, always be there for me, and sometimes I’d wonder, why, why does she love me like this? I already thought you were the most amazing person ever, I just...I didn’t know the extent. But today, with you, I’ve had this feeling, this connection that just didn’t feel normal, and now—now it somehow makes sense. It makes sense, Max...”

She was grave to begin with, overwhelmed—but the more she speaks, the more her features brighten. I’m holding on to her, half to keep her steady on the slanted roof, half to make sure she’s not just a dream. “Chloe...”
“Even...even when we kissed, especially when we kissed. It was some fairytale shit, like...holy fuck, like an electric charge passing between us. My first kiss, the most amazing thing I’ve ever felt, all because of you.”

I look at her, unable to come up with words big enough for how this feels. In her eyes I find the light that my life has been missing all this time.

And that’s it. Chloe seems...enlightened.

Like she’s thinking back on everything I’ve ever said, every flippant joke and unexpected insight, and she’s realizing how everything fits. Like the veil has been pulled from her eyes and she can finally see the world in all its weird, insane glory.

“I want to know it all, Max. I want to know you, everything about you. Start from the beginning.”

Chloe cups my cheeks, fingertips gentle on the underside of my jaw. She leans in and plants a kiss on my lips, easy as breathing. Her smile plays catch with my heart.

“Tell me everything.”

“No, I didn’t even recognize you. You looked and sounded so different.”

“Do you wish I looked like that now? The tattoo sounds so badass.”

“I want you to look the way you want to look—”

There’s creaking at the door, and my dad’s groggy face is soon peeking through.

“I thought that’s what I smelled,” he grumbles, stepping in. “Are you two out of your mind? Why are you down here drinking coffee at two in the morning?”

“Hi, Pop. We’re catching up.”

“This isn’t okay, girls. I know you’re excited and all, but—”

“Dad, what if I told you that Chloe and I are in love? Like...romantically.”

Chloe’s face goes from zero to beet red in record speed. “Dude, what are you doing?”

In the meantime, my dad’s expression goes blank. He’s rubbing the sleep away, no doubt noticing our clasped hands and footsie-playing toes and huddled-together seating arrangement. Chloe’s impulse was to immediately pull away, but I held on.

“Well, honey, I would say it’s the worst kept secret in human history.”

Huh.

“What, uh...really?”

“We have eyes and we have ears, Maxine. I think your mother’s joke today was, all that’s missing is the cartoon hearts floating around your heads. You don’t need to do the whole ‘coming out’
thing, we love you both and we’ve had time to get used to the idea. Now, I won’t ground you
during this week unless you do something truly crazy, but the more stunts like this you pull, the
more hell there will be to pay later. You’ve given us no reason to be concerned about you two, and
I sure hope it stays that way. Understood? Stop drinking that stuff and try to keep it quiet, girls.”

He steps out without even waiting for a reaction. We look at each other.

“That’s, uh...good to know, I guess.”

“Fuck me,” Chloe mutters. “Was it that obvious?”

“Apparently.”

“I told you. You have the coolest parents.”

“Yeah, well. This won’t stick, I was just testing the waters. Hold on to your cup?”

“Oh, s-sure, that’s right. Still not thinking with portals.”

“Don’t worry.” I take us back to before the interruption, before we even brewed the coffee in the
first place. “You’ll get there.”

* * *

We walk through the city at night. There’s still plenty of people out, almost crowds.

“Rachel. Rachel Amber. You...you loved her, you were heartbroken when she went missing. I’m
still irrationally jealous.”

“Never even heard the name.”

“I know. You met her at Blackwell. She’ll live her life now, happily oblivious. She might not even
go there, now that Mark Jefferson isn’t luring people in.”

“Wait...your teacher at Blackwell was Mark Jefferson? The Mark Jefferson that was all over the
news?”

We cross the street within the standstill, because fuck traffic lights.

“Don’t touch the cars,” I tell her, “they’re still moving, you still get hit.”

“Oh. Groovy. Mark Jefferson, Arcadia Bay-born serial psycho?”

“The very same. He didn’t get caught in that reality. He was free to do whatever the hell he
wanted, abducting victims that idolized him for his work.”

“Oh, don’t tell me—\textit{he} took that Amber girl. Right?”

I nod gravely. “Along with one of the few friends I made, besides you. And...me, as well. After he
shot you.”

Chloe slows to a stop, pulling on my hand so I stop too. “What?”

“Yeah, you get shot more than once, it happens later in the story, we’ll get to it.”

“No, fuck the story; Max, did he...what did that fucking creep do to you? He—he was drugging
these girls, taking sick pictures and...and—”

“He didn’t touch me, Chloe. I mean...not that way. Though, honestly, the way you feel after? Whether sexual stuff happens or not is kind of splitting hairs. You still feel so gross.”

“Shit, Max...”

“It’s okay. He got what he deserved, in the end.”

“Prison? He deserved to die for that, I’m so fucking angry right now.”

“Oh, I don’t know, think about it. Prison is a special kind of hell for soft little shits like him. Pretty sure he’s someone’s bottom bitch right about now. It’s a comforting thought.”

“God, Max...” She pulls on the hand until I’m in her arms. I don’t need it, but it sure is nice. “I know I’m real late to offer, but if you need to talk about that nightmare...”

“Don’t worry. I’m over it, seriously.”

“Are you sure? ‘Cause I’d never judge you if—”

“Remember the actual details of the case? How there was this other girl that overpowered him somehow, and placed the 9-1-1 call? This...mysterious stranger, who shot off his ear, and pumped him full of venom, and then vanished without a trace? Did you ever wonder who that was?”

She pushes me out a bit so she can look at me. Her eyes are as wide as the moon.

“Revenge gets an undeserved bad rap,” I tell her, and smile ever so innocently. “It really worked for me.”

* * *

Chloe’s voice climbs over the changing room’s door. The key to the store was a large brick. We’re just browsing and trying on clothes, I swear.

“You are fucking with me right now. It was that easy?”

“It caught you totally off-guard. I’ll always remember how much you freaked out for that tiny little moment, before you played it cool again.”

“This is bullshit! Do you have any idea how hard it was to push myself earlier? And it turns out all I had to do was dare you?”

“I was so impressed, by the way. I never expected you to go for it like that.”

“Yeah, well, I did it the hard way, because apparently I just need to dare you into doing stuff, isn’t that right?”

“Maybe you should dare me again and find out for yourself.”

There’s a lovely little pause in which I imagine Chloe half-dressed in there, running scenarios through her mind, then deciding the outcome should be agreeable to all parties involved.

“I dare you to come in here and kiss me.”

* * *
The city sprawls below us. We’re still a bit winded from the climb up the final flight of stairs after the elevator ride to the top floor. The moment we looked down the crazy drop we totally chickened out from our plan of jumping off, and now we simply lean against the ledge.

“That’s so fucked up, Max. How could I be that selfish?”

“How is it selfish? You were in terrible pain all the time, and hated to see your family suffer along, knowing you were dying anyway...”

“It was selfish towards you! Did I even try to make sure you’d be okay? That my parents wouldn’t turn around and press charges? I had no clue you had these crazy powers, right?”

“No, I didn’t even try to tell you...”

“See? I didn’t give a shit, I just wanted my own thing done. I mean, what the fuck? Am I a total shithead in every reality? Are you always doomed to babysit me until I become a somewhat decent person?”

“You’re being way too harsh. You were suffering every day of your life, you just wanted it to end with a happy memory. All this stuff you’re saying didn’t even cross my mind.”

“Maybe it should have. Maybe you should call me out on my shit more often. Like, the moment I threw a fit about Rachel banging the RV dude? You should’ve simply told me to stop being a fucking baby, get my shit together and stop blaming everyone else for my problems, and maybe then you wouldn’t have had to put me out of my misery in bizarro-land. Did you ever think about that?”

“Boy, you’re so gonna regret saying all that. I’ll be reminding you of this conversation at some point in the future, you can be sure about that.”

“Ha! No, why would you ever? I’ll be the most flawless and attentive girlfriend anyone could ever have. You should count your lucky stars.”

I nuzzle up to her so she’ll drape her arms around me. She’s still a bit awkward about it. I can feel her eyes staring at my profile as I lean back and breathe deep.

“You’re doing the face again,” she says. “What’s on your mind?”

“Face? What face?”

“The thing with the lips pressed together and the bunched-up eyebrows. Like you’re waiting for the world to explode.”

“I do a face?”

“You definitely do a face.”

“When did you get so perceptive?”

“Hey, give me some credit. Like right now, you’re stalling, trying to figure out how to say whatever it is.”

Jeez. Her powers of best friendship strike again.

“I guess...” I let out a sigh. “I guess I’ve been waiting for you to ask me if I could bring your dad back.”
“Oh.”

Things get quiet. There’s only the pre-dawn traffic, far below. A very distant plane revs up its engines.

She leans her cheek against my head. “Would I forget this if you did, Max? Would every memory since you came back to me get erased?”

“Yeah, that’s what happens—but they’d be replaced by better ones, I’d hope. Though I don’t even know how it would work coupled with the big reset. It’s hard to wrap my mind around it. But I could always try, if you asked me to.”

Another stretch of silence.

“Would you have to go through yet another horrible ordeal? Please be honest.”

I think about it.

“Probably. I don’t actually know, I would come into a new reality and have to figure it out. Maybe redo… certain things I haven’t mentioned yet. Maybe risk having huge problems later on.”

“And you’d still do it?”

“Yeah. If you asked me to. If you told me it would make you happy.”

Would she even fall in love with me, if I didn’t come back into her life at a time of need?

I’d like to think that she would.

Chloe holds me close to her chest and kisses the side of my head. “I’m good, Max. Don’t worry about it.”

“Oh. Really?”

Her lips softly touch the tip of my ear. “Mm-hmm.”

Wrapped in each other’s warmth, we watch as the first rays of sunshine crack over the mountains. Her whisper is a bliss-bound breeze on my skin.

“I’m happier now than I’ve ever been.”

* * *

Staying up all night makes me ravenous. It happens every time. There’s this sandwich shop on First Avenue that’s my absolute favorite, a lot of stuff that’s Two-Whales-Burger good. Judging by Chloe’s delighted groans as we sit in the cute little terrace area, she’s feeling it too.

It’s quite the dissonance with the current subject matter.

“Well, I’m hella confused,” she says while licking her fingers. “We’re back in the psycho chair, because… why?”

“Tearing the photo created a timeline where Jefferson burned my diary. He got pissed that I was ‘wasting my potential,’ or whatever. Without my diary, I couldn’t use the pictures to escape. So the whole reporting him to David, winning the contest thing got erased, it never happened.”
“But...you’d already escaped, because you used the pictures, and you remember it—but then the pictures burned, which means you could have never escaped, which means your memories shouldn’t exist...isn’t this a horrible paradox? Am I missing something, here?”

“Not really, you’re just thinking from outside the experience. You’re right, from an official standpoint, all that exists is the final timeline, and all these other things never actually happen—but my consciousness somehow persists outside of it, I keep all the memories. And, I guess...our consciousness, now. As long as we stick together.”

“How are you not completely insane by now, dealing with all this mind-bending bullshit?”

“I think I might be, I just hide it well.”

“Or, you know, you’re a real tough chick disguised in a hipster waif outfit, I think that’s more like it.” She stuffs her face with her last bite. “How you ghed ough?”

“That’s it, there was no way out.” I take a good while chewing, building up the dramatic tension. “He would have outright killed me if someone hadn’t busted in and saved me at just the right time. Take a wild guess at who it was.”

She swallows. “Uh...White Knight Warren? He stalked you there?”

“Oh Lord, no way. That’s a joke, right?”

“Hey, he beat up the Prescott kid!”

“Yeah, I guess he did. No, it was actually David Madsen.”

“Oh, shit. Step-soldier? Really?”

“He stormed in, knocked the crap out of Jefferson and saved my life.”

Yeah, I’ll leave out the part where David miserably failed to do just that until I managed to create a good enough distraction. It’s been two years since it happened, can’t expect me to remember every single detail.

Chloe’s shock has transitioned to a despondent roll of the eyes. “Goddammit.”

“What?”

“What do you think? I fucking owe the guy now, big time. This is bullshit. No wonder you’ve had such a boner for him all this time.”

“Suggesting that you give him a chance is ‘having a boner’ now? Which you’ve barely tried to do, by the way...”

“Hey, it’s not just me, okay? I’m honest here, he’s kind of a huge dick. He’s got problems.”

“What was that you said earlier, about calling you out and telling you to stop blaming—”

“Oh, fuck off, Caulfield.”

“David loves you, whether you believe it or not. And it’s true, he’s got issues for sure, it’s not just you. But it starts somewhere, you know? And I guarantee you, I promise you, he’ll come around. Just talk to him like he’s a human being. It’ll take some time, but you’ll see.”
“Listen to the know-it-all time-traveling oracle over here. It’s going to be a real bitch to argue with anything you say, isn’t it.”

“I’m a reasonable Time Master, I’ll keep the patronizing to a minimum.”

“Uh-huh. Just get on with your damn story...”

* * *

The park is a different place at night. Somewhat scary—or it would be, if I couldn’t utterly dominate any punk trying to mess with us.

We’re hanging out off the walking trails, on the rocks above the cool little pond. We went back to night-time mostly so my parents wouldn’t find an empty bedroom and worry themselves sick...but we also did it simply because we can.

I’m by the water, tossing pebbles. Chloe sits close by, and she’s been holding her head in her hands for a while. Finally she looks up at me.

“What kind of fucked up choice is that?”

“It’s just what we ended up with.”

“Destroy our town or watch me die? That’s some sadistic shit, Max...”

“Trials by fire.”

“What?”

“It’s what you said to me, much later. Every choice and hardship was a trial by fire, preparing us for the big bad at the end of the story. You were kind of right, but it turned out a bit more complicated than that. We had no idea yet about all the spirit stuff.”

“Spirit stuff,” she mutters, and shakes her head. Of all the things I’m telling her, accepting the idea of a magical pantheon is what’s giving her the most trouble. She’s always been way more into sci-fi than straight-up supernatural.

“So...I guess you didn’t risk going back? If I was still around later to say that?”

“No, I did go back. I had to—I mean, you didn’t ask me to, but I knew it’s what you felt was right, to give up your life to save everyone. So I sat there in the bathroom, and did nothing, and...the tornado never came. Your sacrifice spared Arcadia Bay, it worked. The problem was, I...I just couldn’t cope with it.”

She’s obviously confused, but compassion shows above all else. “Of course you couldn’t, Max. I’d be completely broken if I had to do that.”

“I really tried, you know? For nearly half a year. I tried to make it work, but it got worse and worse. I just...I needed you. If that time taught me anything, it’s that I could no longer live without you. So I did the selfish thing. I used the butterfly photo and went back to that fucking bathroom, and left myself a note so I’d keep you alive no matter what. I knew full well what would happen, and I did it anyway.”

She comes over to my side. Her arms wrap around my lower back, pulling me close at the hip. “I can’t imagine what it was like...”
I easily sink into her. Her forehead leans on my temple, but soon lifts with a sudden realization.

“Wait. Wait, so you kept your powers, but the storm didn’t happen? I thought getting them was the whole reason for all the reality warping madness, because of the...thing. The spirit-touch rift thing?”

“Right. The powers were gone, yeah. Temporarily. I, uh...I got them back, after...”

Now entering Cringe Ville, population: Max Caulfield.

“I might have ended up throwing myself off the lighthouse?”

Chloe tilts her head at me. She blinks in a way that’s too familiar by now, looking like...well, like I just told her I jumped from a very high place so I could maybe get my superpowers back.

“Y’know what?” She lays a hand atop my head like I’m a spunky little tyke. “I’ll bet Other Chloe already gave you a ton of shit about this, so I’m just going to do you a favor and let you keep talking. Okay?”

She brings me back into her arms. “Tell me all about how much you missed me, Juliet.”

* * *

Being able to cuddle up to her again still feels like a dream bubble that’s about to pop. We’re nestled at the top of the slide tower, hidden among toy ramparts. I half-expected to find a homeless person sleeping up here, but it’s surprisingly clean.

Chloe’s gone stiff next to me.

“Sean Prescott.”

The name comes as a breathy whisper, equal parts awe and alarm. I can feel her swallow, gathering her thoughts. “Shit, Max. Is this going where I think it’s going?”

Just by the tone in her voice I can tell exactly what she means. “ Probably. Where do you think it’s going?”

“The Prescotts were murdered. Sean Prescott shot in the head, they called it flat-out assassination, and no-one could figure out who did it, or why, or even how, exactly. Their whole mansion burned down to the ground the very same day with Dianne Prescott still inside, and they found it was obviously arson. Pretty sure I bitched about it to you, how you couldn’t turn on the TV without getting bombarded with it.”

“Yeah. You did.”

The flames are seared into my mind still. I could smell the gasoline on my fingers for a whole week. When I walked away, only cinders remained of the Art Room.

“But they’re alive in your timeline, years later. And they go after us. So...yeah.”

“It was me, Chloe. I did it, it was the first thing I did after the reset. I had to, they...I really had no choice with them. I was a total wreck after I was done.”

I keep expecting to drop the bomb that will take things too far for her, but there isn’t much of a reaction. Her breathing remains steady. Her cheek, leaning on my head, doesn’t even shift. She stays somewhat tense, but even that eases before long. If anything, she’s holding on to me a bit
tighter.

Chloe is once more quietly readjusting the lens through which she sees the world.

“You didn’t kill Jefferson,” she finally says, “even with all the twisted shit he did. If you’d have offed him, he would have deserved it.”

“I know.”

“But...you killed them.”

“Not just that. What I did destroyed their family. With his parents dead, Nathan Prescott completely lost it and ended up institutionalized. Kristine Prescott eventually left the country and all of their wealth behind. Their holdings became property of the state, their company divvied up and sold piecemeal. Everything the Prescotts ever worked for is now gone or in ruins.”

There’s no fire to the words. No shame, either. They’re just...facts. The immutable end result of a long, convoluted chain of events.

Chloe is pulling me closer.

“What did those fuckers do to you, Max?”

“All this really doesn’t put you off?”

“It’s real heavy, but...I said I’m here for you, no matter what. I meant every word. If you of all people were pushed to do what you did, there’s going to be a damn good reason. I mean, if I’d killed somebody, would you push me away? Or would you immediately believe that I didn’t have any other choice?”

I stay quiet for a moment, my hands idly caressing the arm she’s got loosely draped across my lap. “I’d sooner stab myself with a fork than push you away.”

“Hah. That’s right.” She buries her nose in my hair. “This is real, Max. I’m real, I’m with you. You’ve gone through all these realities, lost me so many times—I don’t blame you for doubting, but...you can stop being afraid now.”

Chloe’s love. The reason for every sacrifice. Home at journey’s end. Can I let myself believe I’ve arrived at last? Might this truly be the last time we catch up to one another?

“You’re right. I’m still afraid. I need to just...trust you.”

“I’m here for you forever. I mean it.”

I nod slowly. “I believe you.”

“Good.” Her lips press on my neck to seal the deal. The sweet tingle sends a shiver down my spine. “So what did those fucking assholes do to earn the Maxster’s Wrath?”

“Well...that comes after. First, there’s the sad chronicle of BetaMax.”

* * *

Walking back toward my house, I have to pull us into the standstill so people won’t hear. Yes, I know, it’s getting rewound anyway, I don’t care. My cheeks could probably light up the street all on their own, no need for streetlamps.
“You’re being such a pest about this, you’re unbelievable.”

Chloe laughs again. She’s finding all this terribly amusing. “Come on, you’re really not gonna tell me about it?”

“It’s just weird, okay? We’re, like...kids now, kind of. I feel like a pervert.”

“Um, you do know I have access to the internet, right? I’ve watched so much filth, you literally cannot shock me with this kind of stuff.”

“It’s not the same, though! It’s personal, it’s intimate ‘you and me’ stuff...”

“Fine, just say yes or no, then. Can you at least tell me that? I already know the answer, anyway. There’s no way we didn’t.”

“Oh, yeah? And how do you know, exactly?”

“Um, I’m crazy into you and there’s no way I’d have kept my hands to myself?”

“Well, for your information, I consistently had to make the first move. So there.”

“So you did make a move, huh? Tell me more about this ‘first move’ of yours.”

“Will you stop? It’s not even relevant to the story! I don’t think about it, anyway. It drives me crazy.”

“Dude, there’s no way you don’t think about it. Fuck, I think about it all the time and I don’t even have the memories to begin with.”

“Gosh, Chloe, stop!”

“Why? It’s what people in love do, you know? It’s totally okay to talk about it. Jesus, were you always this much of a prude?”

“It’s not about that, it’s just, I don’t know, inappropriate! Time travel really fucked me with this one, by the way. All this time I’ve had these fully legitimate, grown-up feelings for you, made way worse by the fucking hormones, and all the while I’ve felt like a total creep because, hello, not even legal age of consent anymore. I’m stuck in this weird twilight zone where I’m older and younger than you, it’s total bullshit. Wish this had all happened in our twenties.”

“Aw, poor Max, she so horny! I shudder to imagine how often you go finger-painting...”

“Oh my god, can we please move on to all the terrible things I still need to tell you?”

* * *

Pre-dawn ice-cream in the yard bench under the sparse city-sky stars, because why the fuck not.

“Oh, shit. Max, I just realized...aren’t these tornadoes still gonna happen? Nothing’s really changed, right?”

“I honestly don’t know. We’ll be ready, one way or another.”

“I guess you haven’t gone through any more visions?”

“No. There’s been nothing since the reset. I don’t think I can have them yet, I guess they develop
after I’m eighteen.”

“But, uh...you have all these powers right now, though.” She puts a big spoonful of chocolate into her mouth. “Ah don geddit.”

“Seriously, how do you do that without getting brain freeze?”

She shrugs. “Thick skull I guess.”

“T ook the joke right off my lips...”

She licks her spoon. “I know. Did you know that the scientific term for brain freeze is sphenopalatine ganglioneuralgia?”

“Oh, my god. You’re the biggest nerd, how could you possibly know that off the top of your head?”

“I looked it up the other day, actually! And I thought it was cool, so I memorized it. Sphenopalatine ganglioneuralgia, bitches!”

“That’s...an awesome battlecry, Chloe.”

“I know! It should be a thing. Your visions, though?”

I’m shaking my head. Conversations suffer from constant derailment syndrome with her. “Yeah, right, um...the visions are its own thing, apparently. I’d have them without all the butterfly meddling stuff. They’re part of the reason for the spirit meddling, people out there just have these weird talents, if you want to call them that.”

“So...you’re also a mutant, is what you’re telling me.”

“Jeez, thanks.”

“Hey, it’s not bad thing! I can call you Kitty Pryde from now on.”

“Please don’t.”

“Too late now, Kitty. So then I guess we won’t know about the twisters until it’s close to happening. We’re gonna prepare, though. Right?”

“Of course.” She’s all done with her ice-cream, so I trade bowls with her. I like watching her eat. “And believe it or not, I think it’s actually better if the storms happen. There’s something much worse coming after, and people will be more willing to listen and get the fuck out if a couple tornadoes wreck the town.”

“Something...worse?”

She seems concerned, but not that concerned. She isn’t precisely in love with our home town. Pretty sure she’d rather no innocent people died, though. I don’t know if I’ll be able to save every single person, but one thing is crystal-clear in my mind.

Joyce, Kate and Pompidou are all living long, happy lives in this reality.

“Arcadia Bay is doomed, Chloe. It’ll get completely wiped out. I was about to tell you why.”

***
Outside my bedroom window, as the dawn’s sunlight shines its first rays upon us for a second time, Chloe weeps for me. She holds me, and listens as the words come out, and quietly sobs.

She asked me not to hold anything back. I lied to her and said that I wouldn’t. What good would it do, for her to know every single detail? She doesn’t need that kind of shit in her life. No-one does.

But...I started. And the more I talked, the more everything snowballed out of me. I remembered things I’d forgotten, I found things I’d lost, all ugly, all terrible. I’ve kept it piled up and hidden for so long, I didn’t realize how much it ached for release. For someone to listen to it, and believe it, and tell me it’s completely fucked up that I had to go through it.

She does all of those things. Chloe is the only one in the world who could. And I won’t stop talking, I’m so fucking selfish that way. I talk through her gasping and sniffing and her desperate grip around my waist, through her eyes squeezed shut and the quivering hand with which she covers her mouth.

My eyes are damp and my cheeks are wet, because there is no world in which I can listen to her cry and not shed my own tears. But I keep at it. I keep telling her everything. This is what catharsis must be like.

The days blurring together, the forced training sessions and pain measured on a scale. I tell her.

Tendrils in my thoughts and my mind turned against me, a descent to desperation and my last resort to escape. I tell her.

Blue Price and the choice that wasn’t, love strong enough to move the universe, a web-wrought fate undone by my hand. I tell her.

A promise fulfilled by bullets caught in the folds of time. A gut wound that tore our prison apart. The time I spent mourning the woman I no longer could be, the ache that rent my heart at her doorstep.

I tell her everything. Chloe holds me, and with tear-sodden hands she lifts this burden from my shoulders so that we may carry it together. With fire on her tongue she tells me I was too forgiving. Their deaths happened too damn fast, they deserved far worse. Don’t ever dare feel guilty.

We grow quiet under the nascent light, content to let the burdens settle, feeling warmth blossom within and without. There’s a new bond between us, different than the one we had—it’s not tempered in an ordeal we endured together, but it feels just as strong. It feels as only the beginning.

And a while later, when she whispers in my ear that she’ll never let me go...

I believe her.

* * *

We face each other, cuddled up in my bed. It’s some time after eleven, yesterday night. We fight to keep our eyes open even if we are as tired as can be.

We don’t speak. I’m softly running my fingers through her hair, just listening to her breathe. The back of her hand strokes my cheek in a slow, adoring caress.

I would do everything all over again, just to be in this moment.

Our bodies shift in unison, leaning closer. It’s as natural as a heartbeat when we kiss. I could spend
a lifetime right here, right now. She tastes better than a memory, sweeter than a promise.

Our lips part, but we stay within a hairbreadth of each other. She’s breathing me in, the way she used to. The way she often will. Our foreheads leaning together, we take in the air in each other’s lungs, minty from the toothbrush we shared.

“So, Max,” she whispers.

“Yeah?”

“What comes next?”

I’ve tried to make plans in my head, but I really have no idea. We should at least graduate high school this time around, it’s a matter of principle by now. My parents are still there, fragile and hopeful for their harmless young daughter. Arcadia Bay’s destruction looms in the not-so-distant future. A world of superpowered weirdos will have to be dealt with, one way or another. I’m still not legally allowed to drive.

There is so much joy in my heart right now, I honestly don’t care about any of it. I give her the sweetest smile I can muster.

“Next comes whatever the hell we want, my love.”

She grins at me, bright and hopeful. Oh, my gorgeous Chloe...

I’m not worried about the future. We’ll figure something out—and if we don’t, we can always go back and try again. We’ll find the right path.

Together.
Epilogue - Seasons to Come

My steps soft and damp on the leaf-covered path, I walk past the sparse trees and waist-height shrubs. The place is familiar, the path one I’ve tread before. Above me looms a sky that’s one huge raincloud, ready to unleash an end-times flood.

There is a roaring thrum in the background, like that of a far-off jet engine. Not one leaf is moving. Everything around me is in perfect stillness.

I move up to the cliffside and peer at the view below. Arcadia Bay, dead in the black of night. Instead of a lighthouse atop the distant cliff across from us, there is only the jagged remains of battered rock. A few abandoned ships are foundered on sand and seabed, now that the water is all gone a mile into the ocean.

Beyond, in the thundering distance, a presence curves the horizon. It’s growing, swelling, fast approaching. That’s what we came here for. To watch it happen.

Chloe steps up beside me, always there, always with me when I need her. She takes my hand, because there is no burden she won’t shoulder alongside me.

“I wish you’d stop punishing yourself like this. You don’t have to see it again, Max.”

“Yes. I do.”

A wall of water as tall as a mountain; a leviathan, roaring with its abyssal maw, come to crash upon the shore and obliterate everything in its path.

“You keep coming here like it’s your damn fault.”

“It isn’t? I had the choice to stop it.”

“And then what, die? Let me die? It was no choice at all. Stop killing yourself over it.” Her arms wrap around me. “We really did everything we could, there’s nothing else. This better be the last time.”

“It is. Thank you, Chloe.”

“For what? This is what we do.”

“For keeping me sane all these years.”

She snorts. “Somewhat sane...”

Our hands nestled together over my chest, we watch the ocean swallow the deserted husk that is Arcadia Bay. We watch through the night, until dawn breaks beyond the mountains.

Eventually she pulls me away from the cliff.

“It’s time to go home, Max.”

“What? No, there’s so much work to do still, we haven’t even—”

“I’m sorry, did that sound like a suggestion? I’m not asking, I’m telling. You’re going to let me take you home, and then you’re going to get your butt on the couch, let Bongo on your lap and
take a nap while I cook something delicious for us.”

I was frowning until the “cook” part came up. “What kind of something?”

“Aren’t you excited to find out? Come on, it’s all still going to be here when we get back. I know how you get, I’m not letting you work yourself to near death this time.”

“Like I’m the only one. You were like that with Sam’s disaster too, until we figured it out.”

She lets out a bitter laugh. “That girl’s fucking insane. I’m gonna be pissed if she ever goes loose cannon again.”

“Give her a break, it wasn’t even her fault. Blame Kristine and all her underhanded bullshit. She can be such a bitch sometimes.”

“Well, Max, I know they deserved it an’ all, but you did kill her parents.”

I press my lips together. “Thanks for the reminder, I’d forgotten all about it.”

“Well, excuse me for not wanting to get sucked out into space.”

“It wasn’t even close, I sealed it up right away!”

“Yeah, after half the house got torn apart. I’d rather it didn’t happen again.”

She rolls her eyes, even while offering me her hand. “Whatever, it wasn’t that bad...”

I take it. “I admit you’ve gotten way better.”

“Ooh, begrudging praise, my favorite kind.” She raises her right hand. “Shush now.”

“Wait...” I reach over and fix the creased collar on her blouse, smoothing it nicely. She’s been rocking this awesome formal-punk look lately, with her piercings and fire-colored undercut clashing with pantsuits and fancy shirts. She makes it work like only Chloe can. “There you go.”

“Gotta look sharp for the camera, right?”

“Your every moment is a photo op, gorgeous.”
“Don’t I know it.”

Can’t help it, oogling Chloe is my favorite pastime, never gets old. It just lasts longer if I take pictures.

She reaches out again. Her fingertips drum and prod at an invisible mesh only she can see. The stylized dragonfly imprinted on the back of her hand starts to glow.

“Brace for it,” she warns me.

“Go, I’m ready.”

Her hand sinks into the space before us, disappearing for a moment; iridescent colors burst down her arm in an explosion of lightning-wrought vines that tangle with her full-sleeve tattoo. The sudden charge spreading through her hits me in an uncomfortable shock to the senses, but I’m used to it by now. Sparks and wispy shreds of space-time rain upon us as she starts pulling the hand out. The sound is like a hundred sheets of paper ripping in unison.

Chloe shifts for more leverage and pulls down hard, like tearing down a heavy curtain. The way forward opens with sparks flying all over the place. Her arm becomes a beacon of shape-shifting colors as she tears a hole to another universe.

Alright, it’s actually to a hidden nook at the foot of the Alps, but that doesn’t sound nearly as cool. She staggers a bit, and I hurry to hold her steady. Her chest is heaving, her brow glistens with perspiration. She looks into the rift.

“Awesome,” she says between pants. “First try.”

The rift makes a wobbly arc eating into the soil before us, its borders alive with dancing lightning and molten gold. As always, the smell is this pungent, humid thing, always reminding me of steam rising from sun-baked asphalt after a brief flash of rain.

On the other side of the portal, the late afternoon sun shines upon beautiful ceramic roof tiles and pristine white walls. Above the lovely set of metal doors guarding the outer fence, a curved wooden sign etched in black hangs from an overhead arch. Each letter is hand-carved with slow, patient care.

*The House at the End of Time.*

It always warms my heart to see it. There are times when nostalgia strikes and I’ll miss the old road trip days with her, before the whole dragonfly saga threw our lives upside-down all over again...

And then I’ll remember what it was actually like. I don’t think my ass will ever stop being sore.

“You’re so right, love.” I nuzzle up to her and kiss the underside of her jaw. “It’s good to go home for a while.”

Chloe smiles and drapes her arm around my waist. The rift crackles around us as we step through. It’s been a busy twelve years, and we don’t foresee it slowing down any time soon.
Some people say it’s impossible to have a perfect world, and that we should learn to the best of our ability to live with the cards we’re dealt. They’ll tell you that we should accept tragedy and loss. That we should move forward and learn from the grief that befalls us.

It’s good advice. There is much wisdom in those words. I believed them, once.

The people that say these things are not time travelers.

Our question isn’t how much can we do with what we have. Our question is when do we stop. We have our life together, first and always. We did everything we could to look after the people of Arcadia Bay, it was our responsibility. We checked up on Jefferson’s victims and made sure the man stays in the shithole where he belongs. We’ll take good care of our parents, even if they don’t ever fully understand what their daughters have become.

Harmony among the horrid mess that is the magical pantheon? We’re trying. We have an actual team going on. Some are more willing than others.

Stopping other insane criminals before they even act? It’s kind of become routine. No tears shed for their sad little lives.

Preventing eco-disasters? Disaster relief in general? We can do a lot about that, now that we got the right ears to listen.

What about terrorism?

What about redistribution of wealth?

We could do something about pretty much anything. When do we stop?

We could do everything. When do we stop?

Where lies the line between “we can” and “we should”? When does “doing a lot” become “doing enough”?

I don’t know. Maybe we’ll get there soon. Maybe we won’t ever get there.

Chloe and I will tell you when we find out.
Chapter Summary

It felt a bit dry to just have the story end without comment, so here is some navel gazing, sausage-making notes and a bit of a self-plug in case you enjoyed the writing.

This story started as a distraction back in January of this year, while waiting for an editor to get back to me on the novel I was working on at the time. Better Then went on to consume my thoughts for the next eight months. I’d love to tell you that it was all planned from the beginning, but it really wasn’t. I had a premise and a few cool scenes that I couldn’t stop thinking about, like Max getting shot at and jumping off a building with her rewind as parachute, and fending off a raid while teleporting all over the place, and steamy sexytimes in a luxury RV. I also had a final state of affairs in mind, which is Max’s last speech in the epilogue. Most everything else was figured out at different stages of writing the story. That being said, the chapters being posted as they were completed meant planning out a lot of stuff ahead of time. Going back for revisions was only a last resort, and I think I did it once or twice for minor details, but it’s all mostly unchanged from the day it was first posted. There were several spots where I really thought I’d painted myself into a corner, but hopefully it doesn’t show. A few things could use some tweaking now that it’s all done, but I think I’d rather leave it be. It was a really cool experience, to click that “post” button every chapter knowing that I couldn’t (shouldn’t) take it back.

I didn’t really want to start writing this story, back then. I tried to get it off my mind and focus on other things, but it just kept coming back and I gave up fighting it. I’m sure you’re aware that fanfiction has a bit of a stigma attached to it. “Real authors” are not supposed to “waste their time” with it. Well, it’s been a guilty pleasure for sure, but looking back now I don’t regret it in the slightest. I’m proud of a lot of stuff in here. I was really trying hard to make it the best I could, and I honestly feel it’s my best writing to date. I feel I’m better at the whole writing thing now, and that’s really what matters, in the end.

There wasn’t even a whole lot of waste, maybe about three pages of deleted scenes and unused material that I couldn’t fit anywhere. Also, researching what drugs might Jefferson have been using, I learned that such effective drug use is purely artistic license, and a drug that works the way it’s depicted in Jefferson’s injections or a show like Dexter simply does not exist, particularly delivered the way it is in the game. It’s funny how something can be so ubiquitous in media that you simply accept it as a Thing That Can Happen. But the drugs are canon in Life is Strange, so they’re totally fair game for the story as well, ha!

Anyway, if you are into all’a this over here, I invite you to pore over the other stuff I do. I don’t have any more plans for Life is Strange or fanfiction in general, but writing is gonna be a thing ‘til the day I die. I wrote a novel that you might enjoy, it’s also weird, nerdy and romantic like what you just read. (In fact, I think that might be the best way to describe the kind of stories I like to write: weird, nerdy and romantic.) Also, every day I post a new gameplay plus commentary video on my Youtube channel, because I truly am a huge fucking nerd. I’ll occasionally do strange stuff
there as well, whenever the fancy strikes. Notably, this tongue-in-cheek merge of the Life is Strange endings into one fat narrative. Look at it!

Thank you all for the kind comments and appreciation. It’s the best feeling there is, I’m grossly addicted to it. I’ve always wanted to write stuff that might mean to others what my favorite stories meant to me, so hopefully I achieved a little bit of that with this one.

May this particular Max and Chloe sometimes pop up in your thoughts, and out of nowhere bring a wistful smile to your lips.

Chillin’ in the House at the End of Time,

- Israel
Chapter Summary

Not a paid DLC

The Better Then Project over on Youtube is adapting this story into an animated audio drama. The results are stunning so far and I wholeheartedly recommend it, do go and subscribe to them so you don't miss an episode:

Better Then Project

A big thank you to everyone involved. It's surreal to see Better Then come to life thanks to this team of talented people. I hope everyone who's read this story goes and enjoys it, and if you do, don't forget to let them know in the comments!
So, how about that LiS2? It’s, uh. It’s something, alright.

What’s that? It’s not really what you were hoping for? Yeah, I hear you. I mean, all we want is to be properly stabbed in the heart. Is it that complicated?

Well, I might have what you’ve been looking for. I just finished a new novel: The Last of the Wicked, the story of an incompetent witch struggling to make ends meet. This is the cover, I painted it!

Please don’t make a fuss about Janette’s lazy eye, she’s very self-conscious about it.
I felt a bit reluctant about aping Better Then to promote the new book, but then I thought: if Notoriousjae (Eternal Return’s author, my all-time favorite LiS story) wrote a novel, I sure would appreciate to be notified just like this.

The book went through an IndieGoGo campaign that is now wholly fulfilled to everyone's delight. I'm leaving this here in anticipation of the retail release, so this is very awkward and I hope to see you soon! In the meantime, if you're curious you can read the first half [RIGHT HERE](#). it's website format for maximum accessibility, so it's a little janky, but it'll do.

What what, in the butt.

--

Works inspired by this one
Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!